

Joseph Merrick facts for kids

Kids Encyclopedia Facts

Quick facts for kids	
Joseph Merrick	
	Merrick c. 1889
Born	Joseph Carey Merrick 5 August 1862 Leicester , England
Died	11 April 1890 (aged 27) Whitechapel , London, England
Cause of death	Asphyxia
Resting place	Skeleton on display in Royal London Hospital
Other names	The Elephant Man John Merrick
Height	5 ft 2 in (1.57 m)
Parents	Joseph Rockley Merrick (father) Mary Jane Merrick (née Potterton) (mother)

Joseph Carey Merrick (5 August 1862 – 11 April 1890), often incorrectly called **John Merrick**, was an English man with very severe face and body deformities who was first exhibited at a freak show as the "**Elephant Man**", and then went to live at the London Hospital after he met Dr. Frederick Treves, subsequently becoming well known in London society.

Merrick was born in [Leicester](#), and began to develop abnormally during the first few years of his life: his skin appeared thick and lumpy, he developed enlarged lips, a bony lump grew on his forehead, one of his arms and both of his feet became enlarged and at some point during his childhood he fell and damaged his hip, resulting in permanent lameness. When he was 11, his mother died from [bronchopneumonia](#), and his father soon remarried. Merrick left school at the age of 13 and gained employment at Freemans Cigar Factory in Leicester. Rejected by his father and stepmother, he left home and went to live with his Uncle Charles Merrick a hairdresser. In December 1879, Merrick, aged 17, entered the Leicester Union [Workhouse](#).

In 1884, after four years in the workhouse, Merrick contacted a showman named Sam Torr and proposed that Torr should exhibit him. Torr agreed and arranged for a group of men to manage Merrick, whom they named the Elephant Man. After touring the [East Midlands](#), Merrick travelled to London to be exhibited in a penny gaff shop on Whitechapel Road which was rented by showman Tom Norman. Norman's shop, directly across the street from the London Hospital, was visited by a surgeon named Frederick Treves, who invited Merrick to be examined and photographed. After that Merrick went to travel with Sam Roper's circus and finally toured Europe.

In [Belgium](#), Merrick was robbed by his road manager and abandoned in [Brussels](#). He eventually made his way back to London; and found himself at the doors of the London Hospital. Frederick Treves was in the hospital and Joseph was given a temporary bed in the hospital. Although his condition was incurable, Merrick was allowed to stay at the hospital for the remainder of his life. Treves visited him daily, and the pair developed quite a close friendship. Merrick also got visits from the wealthy ladies and gentlemen of London society, including [Alexandra, Princess of Wales](#).

Merrick died on 11 April 1890, aged 27. Although the official cause of his death was [asphyxia](#), Treves, who performed the autopsy on the body, said that Merrick had died of a dislocated neck. Joseph was found at 3pm by Doctor Sidney Hodges. Joseph was found stretched across his bed which indicated he was awake and trying to get up when he suffered an event which caused his death.

In absence of the possibility of genetic tests, the exact cause of Merrick's deformities has long been unclear, so that throughout much of the 20th century it was speculated that Merrick had been affected by other neurological syndromes. Only in 1986 was it presumed that he had Proteus syndrome, a very rare congenital disorder also known as Wiedemann syndrome. DNA tests on his hair and bones in 2003 in a study were inconclusive.

Merrick's life was depicted in a 1979 play by Bernard Pomerance and a [David Lynch](#) film in 1980, both titled *The Elephant Man*. In late 2014 and early 2015, [Bradley Cooper](#) starred in a Broadway revival of *The Elephant Man*.

Top 10 Interesting Facts About The Elephant Man



THETA O'NEAL

Joseph Merrick, also known as [The Elephant Man](#), is widely known as a medical oddity. His perplexing ailment led him to a life in the limelight, which was not always grand. Going from oddity show to oddity show, The Elephant Man faced many hardships until he finally found solace at the London Hospital.

Though many people simply view him as a being to be studied, he was more than that. The Elephant Man was a human who had a life and a history that goes beyond the sideshow. Though his life is not one of glamour, there are many interesting facts that make this Victorian man extraordinary.

Joseph Merrick was born August 5, 1862, in [Leicester](#), England, to Mary Jane and Joseph Merrick. When young Joseph was born, he was a completely normal child—healthy, well-formed, and with no medical abnormalities.

However at age five, Merrick's physical form began changing rapidly. He developed abnormal growths on his bones, causing huge deformations on his [skin](#). His cranial structure also changed, and large swaths of skin hung from the back of his skull and in front of his face.

His right arm became twisted, and his hand contorted into a flipper-like appendage. His legs suffered the same fate as his arm, causing impairments when he walked and requiring him to use a cane.^[1] Though Merrick became increasingly handicapped as he aged, he successfully attended school until age 11 when his malformations prevented him from making it to his classes.

Shocked by what they were witnessing, his parents were convinced that Merrick's condition must be related to the trauma his mother had experienced when she was pregnant. She had been kicked over by an elephant on a trip to the fairground. The Merricks thought it could be the only explanation for their son's malady.

9 Merrick Most Likely Suffered From Proteus Syndrome

During Merrick's time, medicine was not up to the scientific standard of today. So seeing a person with an ailment like Merrick's was a **shock**. Back then, many doctors determined that Merrick was suffering from a severe case of neurofibromatosis. This is a genetic disorder that causes tumors to develop on a person's nervous system.

Luckily, medicine has advanced in many ways since then. Through the study of Merrick's remains, it was determined that **neurofibromatosis** was a misdiagnosis. Merrick's ailments were not on the nervous system level. Studies have shown that he was most likely suffering from an incredibly rare disease known as Proteus syndrome. Causing extreme overgrowth in the bones, skin, and other organs, Proteus syndrome is characterized by asymmetrical growth which often affects one side of the body more than the other—just like in Merrick's case.^[2]

Sadly, Merrick's parents would have never known that young Joseph would have Proteus syndrome upon his birth. The disease shows no physical symptoms until the afflicted child reaches at least six months old.

8 Merrick Had Three Siblings Who All Died Tragically

Merrick wasn't an only child. But his **siblings** did not fare much better in their lives as they all died due to illnesses and debilitations. Merrick's brother, John, was born April 21, 1864, and only lived about three months. The child succumbed to smallpox, which was a common illness at the time.

Merrick's second brother, William, was born in January 1866 and lived almost five years before he, too, succumbed to illness. William died after he came down with **scarlet fever**.

Marion, Merrick's only sister, was born September 28, 1867. She also endured physical problems such as myelitis, seizures, and other impairments.^[3] She died in 1891, a year after Merrick passed away.

7 Merrick Worked For His Dad For A Short Time

Merrick's mother died when he was a mere 11 years old, and his father quickly remarried. To help bring in extra money, Merrick left school and began working by rolling [cigars](#). However, he had to stop a few years later when debilitating growths overtook his right arm.

He was then employed directly in his father's haberdashery which sold notions, men's clothing, and accessories. Merrick was given the job of door-to-door [salesman](#), which he found very dispiriting. Due to the growths on his legs and hips, he had trouble walking, which made trekking from home to home a burden.

By this point in his life, his facial deformities had left him incredibly disfigured. They also limited his ability to speak when trying to sell his father's goods. People would open their doors, surprised to see this poor soul in front of them. But they could not understand his speech, and many were frightened by his appearance.

Despite his efforts, the money was not coming in fast enough. Merrick's father beat him severely for not making enough sales and kicked him out on the street at age 17.^[4]

6 Merrick Was Once Displayed In A Shop Window

Photo via [Wikimedia](#)

Sideshowes, or human oddity shows, were common during the time in which Merrick lived. Due to his condition, he was found by Tom Norman, who immediately added Merrick to his famous exhibits. With his graying, bulbous skin, Merrick was described as "half a man and half an [elephant](#)." Norman claimed that Merrick was treated with respect and earned plenty of money while he was with Norman's freak show.^[5] Although Merrick was in a better position than living life on the street, Norman still profited more by keeping Merrick in the show.

It wasn't long before people began to lose interest in Norman's show, and the police closed it down shortly afterward due to public decency and disruption concerns. Unable to find income, Merrick traveled to [Belgium](#) to find work in a show there, which turned out to be a disaster.

5 Merrick Was Stranded In Europe For A Year

When Merrick arrived in Belgium, he was met by a new promoter and a less than enthusiastic crowd. Merrick gained only mediocre success in the traveling shows, and his Austrian promoter was a true [monster](#). After the failure of the Belgium shows, the Austrian robbed Merrick of his life savings, beat him, and ultimately abandoned him.^[6] Stranded and alone, Merrick wanted to get back to England. He finally found passage on a ship and made his way back to England in 1886.

During the voyage from Belgium, Merrick had contracted a bronchial infection. When he arrived at the Liverpool Street Station, people mobbed him due to his strangeness. With his speech unintelligible, Merrick was arrested and taken into custody by the [police](#).

4 Merrick Enjoyed Writing

In his sideshow days, Merrick wrote a short [autobiography](#) that was published as a pamphlet given out at the shows. This three-page autobiography was meticulously constructed with Merrick giving specific details about himself and his condition.

Merrick was an excellent writer and enjoyed the process. Upon his return to [London](#) from Europe, he took up permanent residence in London Hospital thanks to the efforts of Dr. Frederick Treves.

Once provided a safe room, Merrick's love of writing blossomed. He found that writing gave him some sense of comfort in a life that had been so tragic. He wrote prose and poetry and loved writing letters.

His letters often concluded with a poem called "False Greatness" by Isaac Watts, which had particular relevance to Merrick:

*'Tis true my form is something odd,
But blaming me is blaming God;*

*Could I create myself anew
I would not fail in pleasing you.
If I could reach from pole to pole
Or grasp the ocean with a span,
I would be measured by the soul;
The mind's the standard of the man.*^[7]

Though it's been many years since Merrick's death, the United Kingdom National Archives still has a collection of some letters written by him.

3 Merrick's Own Head Killed Him

Photo credit: taringa.net

Merrick's abnormal skin and bone growth did much damage to his body, including his head. The giant skin folds had made his head so heavy that Merrick was forced to [sleep](#) in a chair. Lying down while sleeping posed many threats—the greatest of those was dying in his sleep.

Sadly, this is exactly what happened to Merrick. On the night of his death, he had decided to lie down in his bed to sleep in an attempt to “be like other people.” During the night, Merrick passed in his sleep.

Dr. Treves, who had worked so hard to give Merrick a nice life in the hospital, did the [autopsy](#) and believed that Merrick had died of asphyxiation. Over 100 years later, a newer theory suggested that Merrick's neck had dislocated under the weight of his own head, crushing his spinal column.^[8]

2 Merrick's Skeleton Was On Display In London



Photo credit: [BBC](#)

After the autopsy, Merrick's skeleton was given to the Queen Mary University of London. For many years, people could come and view the actual skeleton. Today, Merrick's [bones](#) are kept in a private room that requires special access to view them.^[9]

However, those wishing to see the skeleton can venture to Royal London Hospital where Merrick's skeleton has been recreated in great detail using 3-D scanning. This skeleton can be viewed alongside many of his other personal items, including his hat and mask, [photos](#), and the model of a church he made while living in London Hospital.

1 Merrick Made It To The Big Screen

Photo credit: [cinematographecinemafilmes.wordpress.com](#)

Merrick's life was made into a movie in 1980. Based on the writings of Dr. Frederick Treves and Ashley Montagu's book, *The Elephant Man: A Story in Human Dignity*, director [David Lynch](#) (*Eraserhead*, *Mulholland Drive*) decided to take the story of The Elephant Man and adapt it for the big screen. In a

film starring Anthony Hopkins and John Hurt, Lynch recreated the heart-wrenching life of Merrick in black-and-white.^[10]

To ensure that Merrick's appearance was as accurate as possible, Lynch received help from makeup specialist Chris Tucker, who used the actual casts of Merrick's body to create an incredibly accurate depiction. Ninety years after his death, Joseph Merrick still had the ability to draw an audience.