

# *A Closer Look*

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# THE Elephant Man

by Bernard Pomerance

Presented by the  
Commonweal Theatre Company  
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## ESSENTIALS

### The Plot

**PRECIS:** Due to a rare, disfiguring genetic disorder, John Merrick, known as The Elephant Man, takes a life journey from being freak show attraction to medical wonder to society intellectual to spiritual inspiration.

**OUTLINE:** In 1884, Dr. Treves is hired at the London Hospital as a new lecturer in anatomy by the administrator, Carr Gomm. In the next scene, Treves happens to see Ross promoting "The Elephant Man," a freak of nature. Treves views the man and pays Ross in order to study his anatomy for a day. Treves delivers a lecture on the man, named John Merrick, describing his deformities in a clinical fashion to an assembly of physicians.

After the lecture, Merrick is returned to the freak show and Ross tries to promote him on the continent, in Brussels. But the police there stop the show for "public indecency." Ross now considers Merrick a liability and sends him back to England, alone, after pocketing most of the money Merrick had earned. The police escort Merrick away as he tries to explain that he had been "robbed." As Merrick's train arrives at

Liverpool Street Station, the police protect him from a horrified mob. They find Treves' card in his coat pocket and contact the doctor. Treves arranges for temporary care for Merrick at the London Hospital. He interviews

Nurse Sandwich as Merrick's caretaker but she, like many other nurses, is too horrified by his appearance to take the job.

Bishop How, however, feels it is his Christian duty to help Merrick by providing religious instruction. Funds are raised to secure a permanent home for Merrick in the London Hospital. Treves invites an actress named Mrs. Kendal to visit Merrick, hoping that her acting training will allow her to hide her repulsion. She discusses *Romeo and Juliet* with

him and finds Merrick to be an intellectual man capable of deep feeling. She shakes his hand as she leaves; Merrick sobs because it is the first time a woman has touched him. Merrick begins work on a paper model of a cathedral. He receives gifts and visits from members of high society and the royal family, each of whom sees traits of themselves within





Merrick. During one of Mrs. Kendal's visits, Merrick explains that he has never seen a woman's body. She matter-of-factly reveals herself, but Treves interrupts and sends her away with accusations of "indecency." Ross visits Merrick, hoping to engage him in more exhibition work; Merrick rejects him. Hurt by the loss of his friend Mrs. Kendal, Merrick questions Treves about morality and decency.

## The Playwright – Bernard Pomerance

Bernard Pomerance was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1940. He was inspired to write after seeing a production of Eugene O'Neill's original production of *A Long Day's Journey Into Night*.

He studied at the University of Chicago, then moved to London in the early 1970's where he became involved with several small, innovative theater companies. In 1972, he partnered with Director Roland Rees to create the Foco Novo theatre group.

The purpose of Foco Novo was to promote works by new playwrights, particularly those by black writers. Foco Novo premiered *The Elephant Man* in 1977, as well as

Later, Treves has troubling dreams in which he trades places with Merrick. Treves becomes more and more troubled, until he breaks down weeping, just as Merrick finishes his model of the cathedral. One afternoon, Merrick goes to take his nap sitting upright, as usual (to prevent the weight of his head from choking him), but then decides to attempt to sleep lying down. He does not rise again.

Pomerance's *Foco Novo*, *Quantrill in Lawrence*, *A Man's Man* (adaptation of Brecht's play) and *Melons*. Many of Pomerance's plays take a politically-charged view of American history.

*The Elephant Man* was performed at London's National Theatre and several times on and off Broadway. The play won the Tony Award for Best Play in 1979. The movie, directed by David Lynch, was not an adaptation of the play, as many people assumed, and Pomerance successfully sued the movie studio for creative infringement.

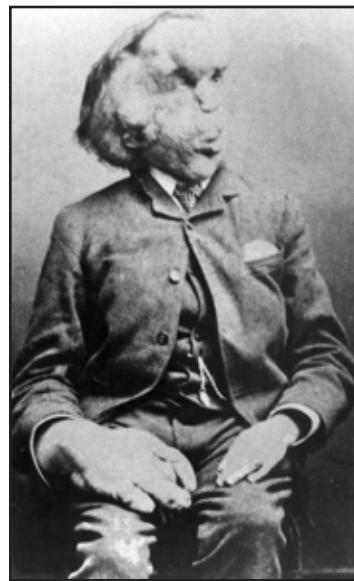
Pomerance is a very private man, and therefore very little is known about his personal life or childhood.

## The Real Merrick

Pomerance's play is based on the true story of a man named Joseph Merrick. While many of the details in the play reflect real-life events, Pomerance took some artistic license in creating his play.

Joseph Carey Merrick was born on August 5, 1862, in the working-class neighborhood of Leicester. Although his mother, Mary Jane, was reported to have a physical disability of her own, Joseph was born without any sign of abnormality. The Merricks had two other children, a son who died of scarlet fever in 1866, and a daughter who was born with physical disabilities in 1867, and died in 1891.

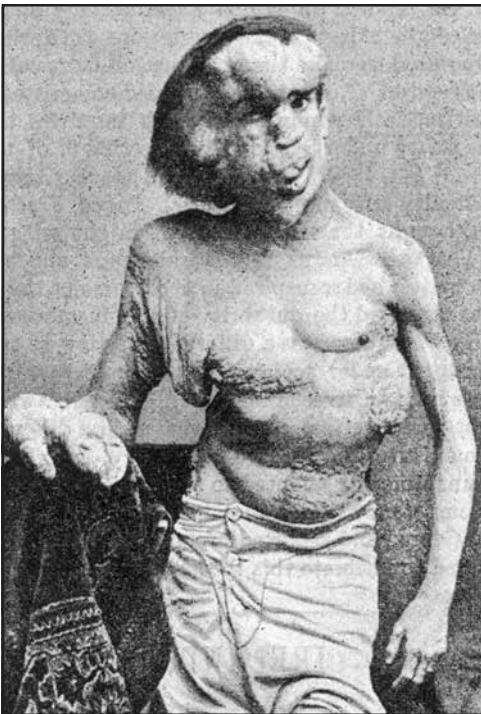
Merrick began to display symptoms of his disorder around age two. He developed a lump on his lips, followed by a bony lump on his forehead. By age five, his skin turned thick and lumpy and began to loosen from his frame in some places. Over



Joseph Carey Merrick, c. 1889.

time his limbs enlarged tremendously, with the exception of his left arm which remained normal. At some point during childhood his left hip was injured in a fall, forcing him to walk with a stick from that point on.

Merrick's family, including Merrick himself, believed his condition to be the result of his mother being frightened and knocked down by an elephant during



*Merrick's deformities worsened over the entire course of his life.*

her pregnancy. During that time, it was a common belief that the emotional experiences of the mother could affect their unborn children.

Despite his deformities, Merrick attended regular school and had a close relationship with his mother who was a devout Baptist and Sunday school teacher. Unfortunately, she died in 1873; his father remarried the next year. Merrick left school at age 13 to find work, which was common for boys during that time. But the increasing severity of his deformities made it more and more difficult for him to work. His father and stepmother accused him of being a financial burden and after being severely beaten by his father, he left home in 1877.

After several failed attempts at finding work, Merrick admitted himself to the Leicester Union Workhouse at age 17. After about four years, he decided that he might be able to find work as an human novelty exhibition. He contacted a popular showman named Sam Torr, who decided to present him in a traveling show as "Half-a-Man and Half-an-Elephant." The show toured in and around London for a while and was finally taken over by Tom Norman. Norman opened a permanent exhibition on Whitechapel Road in which onlookers could pay to have an up-

close look at The Elephant Man. Although Norman was concerned that Merrick's appearance might be too horrifying for even the freak show audiences, the show was moderately successful and Merrick was even able to save some money of his own.

Because the Whitechapel shop was across the street from the London Hospital, several medical professionals, including Dr. Frederick Treves, started to take an interest in Merrick's condition. Treves asked for Norman's permission to do a complete examination of Merrick. However, Merrick complained that he "felt like an animal in a cattle market" under the examination of the hospital staff.

Merrick traveled around Europe with the freak show under a new manager, but was eventually abandoned in Brussels because he was deemed too horrifying. He returned penniless to London and the police sent him to Treves after discovering his card in Merrick's pocket.

Merrick remained at the London Hospital with donated support from the community at large. He and Treves became friends, although there were many aspects of Merrick's



*The London Hospital, Whitechapel, near the turn of the last century.*

life that he chose not to share with the doctor. Treves eventually learned that Merrick was not intellectually impaired, as he had first assumed.

Merrick told Treves that he wished to live in a home for the blind where he might be able to meet a woman who could not see his deformities.

Eventually, Treves introduced Merrick to Mrs. Leila Maturin, a young widow, who stayed in contact with Merrick until the end of his life. A young actress named Madge



Kendal also took note of Merrick's situation and although she never met him, she helped raise funds for his care. Several members of royalty and high society came to visit Merrick or sent him gifts. He took three trips to the countryside to visit the estate of Lady Louisa Knightly. One of the highlights of Merrick's life was attending the Theatre Royal in London.

After four years in London Hospital, Merrick's condition worsened. He was found

dead on April 11, 1890, at the age of 27. The cause of death was determined to be a broken neck caused by lying down in his bed. Throughout his life, Merrick had found it necessary to sleep in a sitting position with his head resting on his knees.

London Hospital kept a plaster cast of Merrick's skeleton and many of his personal effects, including the model of a church he built during his residence at the hospital.

## CONTEXT

### Victorian England—1837 to 1901

The Victorian Era began when Queen Victoria was crowned in 1837 and lasted until her death in 1901. The era is known for its strict social etiquette and advancements in industry, technology and medicine. As living standards improved, birth rates increased dramatically and people began to live longer. The population of England nearly tripled from 13.9 million people in 1831 to 32.5 million by 1901.

Poor and middle-class people crowded into urban areas to look for work at new industrial facilities such as coal mines, textile mills and steel production sites. Their labor added



Queen Victoria, 1882.

to the wealth of the upper class and created a class of *nouveau riche* people whose wealth grew by starting their own enterprises. The large wealth division between the upper and lower classes fueled the creation of social welfare programs and fair labor laws.

Despite the daily struggles and technological advancements, the pervasive outlook in art and culture embraced Romanticism and mysticism. Artists, writers, musicians—even scientists and historians—were interested in the mysteries of nature, the strengths of human emotion and the exotic unknown.

### Imperialism and Colonialism

*Colonialism* is defined as implanting settlements in a distant territory. The American colonies, for example, were created by English and other European settlers arriving in North America and creating homes of their own.

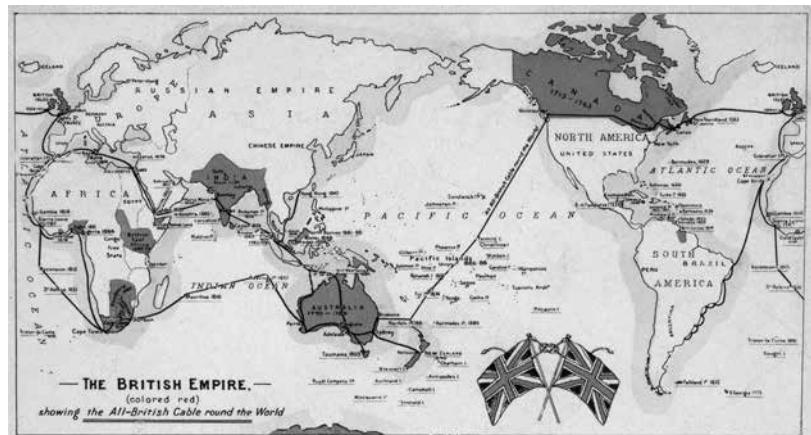
While England certainly engaged in colonialism during the Victorian Era, it also sought to expand its empire through *imperialism*, which differs from colonialism in that the goal is to assume power over an existing nation or established territory. Imperialism is associated with spreading ideological and social policies via governance from a central location.

During 1814-1922, England increased its imperialistic efforts dramatically, resulting in approximately 400 million people being added to the British Empire. The English people justified these takeovers with their pervasive feeling that many of the territories taken under English control were “uncivilized” and in need of moral and social improvement.

As England took control of India and the eastern coast of Africa, for example, missionaries and doctors felt it was their civic duty to help the “poor, unenlightened natives” through religious instruction and medi-



cal assistance. But, of course, England also enjoyed enormous financial gains from the acquisition of resources and raw materials such as cotton, rubber, copper, palm oil, diamonds, tea and tin.



A map of the British Empire, c. 1903.

## Victorian Etiquette & Fashion

Upper class members of Victorian society were obsessed with social etiquette. There was a long list of do's and don'ts that covered even the tiniest details of everyday life. Proper introductions needed to be made before one person could speak to another, and then it was very important to use the appropriate title. Young women had to be constantly chaperoned and if they were caught alone with a gentleman, they could be ostracized by the family and social circle. A young woman's worst fear was being the subject of negative gossip! Women were expected to act gracefully at all times. They were not encouraged to participate in any activity that might be considered rigorous or cause them to sweat. The fashion for women included tight corsets which gave the illusion of having a very tiny waist. But the corsets caused women to faint and in some cases damaged internal organs.

Wealthy gentlemen were equally concerned with social rules and fashion. They needed to know when to tip their hat, when they were allowed to smoke or drink (rarely



A device for fitting ladies' shoes discreetly. For real.

in front of a lady) and which coat jacket was appropriate for every occasion. Top hats signified a very wealthy man, while a bowler hat was worn by the middle or lower classes.

Both ladies and gentlemen dedicated a tremendous amount of time and effort to maintaining their social connections. Parties, dances, attending the theater, making social calls to others' homes and being seen at the finest dressmakers were all an important part of daily living. Every person had a calling card which they'd leave behind at each event to be sure that the host knew of their attendance. Newspapers published social columns that reviewed the week's events and cited opinions about those who attended. Sometimes these reports cast scathing judgments on a person's clothing or behavior, causing devastating embarrassment.



It's so forking hard to get this right.



## Victorian Art and Culture



The Palace of Westminster, which contains the Houses of Parliament, was rebuilt after an 1834 fire. Architect Charles Barry used the Gothic Revival style to expand the previous Westminster Abbey site.

Theater was a popular pastime for Victorian people. The upper classes attended performances in fine theaters featuring the internationally famous actress Sarah Bernhardt. They



Actress Sarah Bernhardt.

also enjoyed comic operettas that poked fun at English society, such as *The Mikado*, *The Pirates of Penzance* and *H.M.S. Pinafore* by the British duo Sir William S.

Gilbert and Sir Arthur Sullivan. The lower classes attended variety shows or “vaude-villes” at dance halls, which featured popular songs, skits, dances, animal tricks and comedy acts. These were noisy, smoke-filled places where drunken audience members might shout, cheer and hiss at the performers.

Music was central to the lives of the wealthy. Young children, especially girls, were trained to play an instrument, and social visits often included parlor music. All the guests would gather around the parlor piano to listen to each other play and everyone would sing popular songs together.

Charles Dickens' books, including *Great Expectations* and *A Tale of Two Cities*, were popular because they brought to light many issues of social inequity that faced Victorian society. As

the world started to make tremendous strides in technology, the science fiction of H. G. Wells captured the public's imagination. His novels *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Doctor Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*, *The War of the Worlds* and *The First Men in the Moon* predicted new technologies long before their time.

The Victorian era covers the artistic periods of Classicism, Romanticism, Impressionism and Post-Impressionism. Classicism strove toward accurate, objective depiction of the world, while Romantic paintings focused on the expression of emotion over reason. Impressionism developed in the late 19th century and was characterized by the changing effects of light and color. Post-Impressionism was developed as a reaction to the limitations of Impressionism. Late Victorian art also included contributions made possible by a new technology—photography.



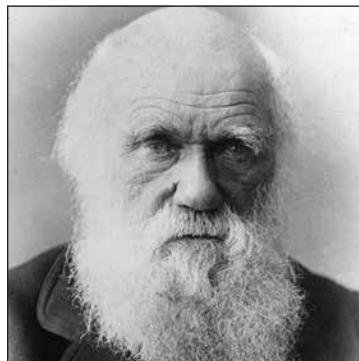
Impressionist painting *Impression, Sunrise* by Claude Monet, 1872.  
You really have to see it in color, trust me.



## Victorian Religion

When Queen Victoria took the throne, the protestant Anglican Church became a powerful force. The Church ran influential universities and high-ranking church members also held positions in the House of Lords. Children were expected to have a complete education of the Bible, which was the primary reading text in schools. It was widely accepted that if everyone embraced the teachings of the church, there would be an end to crime and immorality. Among members of the elite class, going to church was essential to maintaining respectability.

But there was strong dissent against the church as well. Many saw the Anglican Church as serving only the needs of the wealthy, while ignoring the genuine needs of



Charles Darwin.

the poor. Several new protestant sects developed out of this discontent, including Methodists, Congregationalists, The Society of Friends (Quakers) and Presbyterians.

In 1859, Charles Darwin published his theory of evolution, *On the Origin of Species*, causing a crisis of faith throughout the world. People began to question the foundations of religious belief and Victorian morals. There was a new emphasis on the individual's duty to society, in addition to one's duty to God. The combination of groundbreaking scientific discoveries and the general unease with the role of the church in society caused many people to rethink their interpretation of religious texts.

## Victorian Medicine



Louis Pasteur.

There were huge advancements in medicine during the Victorian Era. Thanks to research by French scientist Louis Pasteur and improvements in microscopes, it was discovered that fungus and bacteria cause infection, as opposed to "bad air." So for the first time, doctors began to boil and scrub their surgical instruments before and after each use to kill bacteria. This discovery also prompted doctors to simply clean wounds with antiseptics, rather than immediately amputating the injured limb as they had done up to that point to avoid gangrene.

Cholera was one of the most feared diseases of the Victorian Era. The disease slows blood circulation, causing the skin to

turn blue, and eventually results in death. Many people believed cholera to be the result of too much sun, too much oxygen in the air, comets or bad fruits and vegetables. But scientists realized that contaminated water was to blame, so people began to boil their water and the disease fell off sharply.



A Victorian surgery, c. 1896.

Common medical treatments included homemade herbal remedies and poultices made from household items such as bread, milk, herbs or horse manure. Doctors might



recommend bleeding to cure high blood pressure or purging with laxatives to expel toxins from the body. Opium, morphine and ether were used to lesson pain during surgery or painful procedures such as child birth.

Despite the advancements in science, superstitions and social views played a large role in many people's understanding of health and medicine. It was a common belief that a person's own spiritual or moral failing could cause disease or physical deformity.

Victorian hospitals were largely viewed as the places people went to die because the spread of germs caused patients to encounter more illness in the hospital than they had

arrived with. Therefore, the wealthy paid for doctors to care for them at home, while the hospitals took in the poor. These facilities were often overcrowded and it was difficult to find high quality doctors to work there. Because the conditions at many of these hospitals were so horrific, several laws were passed in the late 1800s to ensure all patients received high quality medical care.



*Wilhelm Röntgen's first X-ray image: his wife's hand, 1895.*

## Life in the Workhouse



*Leicester Union Workhouse, c. 1880.*

Joseph Merrick entered the Leicester Union Workhouse when he was seventeen years old because his physical condition

prevented him from maintaining a job. Workhouses were established to provide shelter and basic necessities to the unemployed, ill or elderly. People were free to enter or leave the workhouse whenever they wished, but the conditions within the houses were so harsh that only those who were truly desperate chose to live there.

From <http://www.workhouses.org.uk>: "Life inside the workhouse was intended to be as off-putting as possible. Men, women, children, the infirm and the able-bodied were housed separately and given very basic and

monotonous food such as watery porridge, called gruel, or bread and cheese. All inmates had to wear the rough workhouse uniform and sleep in communal dormitories. Supervised baths were given once a week. The able-bodied were given hard work such as stone-breaking or picking apart old ropes to make oakum. The elderly and infirm sat around in the day-rooms or sick-wards with little opportunity for visitors. Parents were only allowed limited contact with their children—perhaps for an hour a week on Sunday afternoon.

By the 1850s, the majority of those forced into the workhouse were not the work-shy, but the old, the infirm, the orphaned, unmarried mothers, and the physically or mentally ill. For the next century, the Union Workhouse was in many localities one of the largest and most significant buildings in the area, the largest ones accommodating more than a thousand inmates. Entering its harsh regime and spartan conditions was considered the ultimate degradation."

## WHITECHAPEL MURDERS

A series of gruesome murders in London's poverty-stricken Whitechapel district (the same district housing Merrick's freak show and the London Hospital) captured London's—and the world's—imagination in 1888.

Between August 31st and November 9th, five women were found brutally murdered by gashes across the throat

and abdomen. People began to call the murderer "The Whitechapel Murderer" or "Jack the Ripper." There have been many theories about the killer's true identity, but the case remains unsolved to this day.

Although the crimes were committed on well-traveled streets, the thick soot in the air allowed the murderer to escape down the winding alleys unseen. When the bodies were discovered, the police

immediately washed the crime scenes, destroying all evidence.

Because all the victims were prostitutes, the case called attention to the social problems in London's slums. Buildings were severely overcrowded, alcoholism was rampant and criminals were largely in control. In order to survive this poverty, thousands of women turned to prostitution rather than entering the workhouses.



## A Victorian Timeline of Events

- |      |  |      |  |
|------|--|------|--|
| 1843 | The first Christmas cards are designed by artist John Callcott Horsley.  | 1859 | Charles Darwin publishes his theory of evolution, <i>On the Origin of Species</i> .                              |
| 1845 | The Irish Famine begins and becomes the worst humanitarian disaster in the history of the UK. Ireland loses over half its population due to starvation or emigration.                    | 1859 | The famous London clock tower “Big Ben” is built.  |
| 1848 | Karl Marx publishes <i>The Communist Manifesto</i> .   | 1862 | The London Underground (also called “The Tube”) becomes the first underground subway system in the world.        |
| 1851 | The Great Exhibition of 1851, the first World’s Fair, and is held in the Crystal Palace in London. It showcases the world’s first voting machine and a precursor to today’s fax machine. | 1865 | <i>Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland</i> by Lewis Carroll is published.   |
|      |  | 1870 | The Elementary Education Act mandates that Basic State Education will be free for children under the age of ten. |
|      |  | 1899 | Sigmund Freud publishes <i>The Interpretation of Dreams</i> .  |

## A Glossary

<b>APOTHEOSIS</b>	the elevation of a person or idea to the rank of a god; a climax in development	<b>GORDON AT KHARTOUM</b>	British Major-General Charles George Gordon, a popular British hero; was appointed Governor-General of Sudan, but was killed in the city of Khartoum by Muslim rebels after a year-long siege in a dying state, near death
<b>BANAL</b>	without originality, trite	<b>MORIBUND</b>	an unskilled manual laborer
<b>BENEFICE</b>	a church appointment, as a vicar or rector, that guarantees a fixed income or property	<b>NAVY</b>	country in western Africa, once a British colony
<b>CEYLON</b>	country located off the southeastern coast of India, now known as Sri Lanka, formerly under British rule	<b>NIGER</b>	closed or shut
<b>the CONTINENT</b>	the European mainland, as opposed to the British Isles	<b>OCCLUDED</b>	composed of, containing or resembling bones; bony
<b>DEMI-URGE</b>	in some belief systems, the deity responsible for the creation of the physical world	<b>OSSEOUS</b>	a substance made of pulpy paper and glue, used for molding or sculpting
<b>DEWLAP</b>	a fold of skin under the chin of some animals such as a cow, turkey or lizard	<b>PAPIER MACHE</b>	wart-like, characterized by bumpiness caused by or involving disease; evidencing a mentally disturbed condition
<b>DORSET</b>	a wealthy neighborhood in London associated with easy living	<b>PAPILLOMATOUS</b>	story that teaches a moral lesson
<b>DOSSHOUSE</b>	flophouse, cheap lodging	<b>PATHOLOGICAL</b>	walk about or stroll
<b>DROPSICAL</b>	of, like or affected with dropsy	<b>PARABLE</b>	fashionable elite
<b>DROPSY</b>	an antiquated term for edema, or swelling of tissues	<b>PERAMBULATE</b>	a method of pruning trees in which they are cut back to the main branches
<b>ELEPHANTIASIS</b>	a chronic condition resulting from infection by parasites that causes obstruction of the lymphatic vessels, leading to grossly swollen limbs	<b>PICCADILLY EXQUISITE</b>	a torture device used to stretch people beyond their limits
<b>F. R. S.</b>	Fellow of the Royal Society	<b>POLLARDED</b>	a tuberculosis infection of the lymph nodes in the neck region
		<b>the RACK</b>	
		<b>SCROFULA</b>	



## Joseph Carey Merrick

August 5, 1862 - April 11, 1890

“ I built it with one hand, they all say. I did not begin to build at first. Not till I saw what St. Phillip’s really was. It is not stone and steel and glass; it is an imitation of grace flying up and up from the mud. So I make my imitation of an imitation. But even in that is heaven to me.”



*A photo of a surviving church model Merrick built. He made several, and gave them as gifts to his friends. This one is displayed at the Royal London Hospital.*