ANDREW COMBE (1797–1847): EDINBURGH PHYSICIAN AND PHRENOLOGIST

E. M. Walker, J. P. Shaw and M. H. Kaufman,* Department of Anatomy, University of Edinburgh Medical School

Andrew Combe (1797–1847) was the last but one of the fifteen Fellows of the College who were appointed Physicians-in-Ordinary to the Crown between 1670 and 1853. His portrait hangs in the Great Hall of the College (Fig 1). He is best known, however, as a pioneer advocate of phrenology in Scotland.

![Andrew Combe portrait](image)

**Figure 1**

Andrew Combe. Portrait by John Partridge (1790–1872), a Glasgow artist who exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy and was Portrait Painter Extraordinary to Queen Victoria.

Phrenology arose from the idea of a Viennese doctor, Franz Joseph Gall (1758–1828) that the physical characteristics of the skull were related to the capacities of the underlying portion of the brain. They thus reflected aspects of an individual’s personality such as benevolence, self esteem, spirituality, conjugality and amativeness. Phrenology was a vogue that attracted large numbers of the public and not a few physicians during the middle years of the nineteenth century.

*Museum of the Phrenological Society*

Our interest in Combe arose because the department of anatomy in the University of Edinburgh now possesses the original collection of the Edinburgh Phrenological Society. Combe was a leading figure in the Society and in the building up of its collection of 19th century death masks and life masks of famous and infamous individuals. The anatomy museum now has an enviable collection of these items. From 1822 until 1886, this collection was displayed in a number of premises. It was for nearly 30 years housed in a room in Clyde Street, Edinburgh, where it could be examined by members of the Society on Saturdays, although the Society’s educational meetings were held on Thursdays. In 1849, because of the increasing size of the collection, the Henderson Trust (see below) purchased on behalf of the Society the anatomy theatre formerly used by professors John Lizards and John Hughes Bennett (who taught anatomy and surgery, and histology, pathology and physiology, respectively) situated in a house at No. 1 Surgeons’ Square. This was a four-storey house and shared with surgeons and their patients following the purchase of the property by the managers of the Royal Infirmary in 1850; it is not known exactly where in the building the Phrenological Museum was situated, but there are references in street directories from 1859 to 1875 to a Phrenological Museum at No. 1 Surgeons’ Square.

In December 1855, the museum collection became the property of the Henderson Trust, and it remained in Surgeons’ Square until it was moved to a new museum in Chambers Street during the first half of 1877. These premises were sold in 1886 to the Heriot Trust, and then the Henderson Trustees initiated discussions with Sir William Turner, professor of anatomy at the University who ‘intimated a willingness to accept the whole collection on deposit’. The collection at that time numbered around 2,500 items, plus many hundreds of animal skulls. In March 1887, an agreement was drawn up between the Henderson Trustees and Sir William Turner, and by November of that year, the collection had been moved into the department of anatomy, which since 1880 had spacious accommodation in the new Medical School in Teviot Place.

One of the death masks in the collection is that of Dr Andrew Combe, the Edinburgh physician and phrenologist (Fig 2). In addition, his skull (Fig 3) and a cast of his brain (Fig 4) are on display in the department. The presence of this trio of items prompted investigation into the life, and in particular the circumstances surrounding the death, of Andrew Combe.

A biography *The Life and Correspondence of Andrew Combe M.D.*, written by his brother, George Combe, possibly the first, but without question the most influential British phrenologist, was consulted, as was his entry in the Dictionary of National Biography. The former volume would have been an unremarkable reference, but for the fact that, in addition to providing information on his activities and interests, it also contains a detailed report of Andrew Combe’s post-mortem examination, an unusual ending to a biography.

*Early life*

Andrew Combe was born on the 27th October 1797, the fifteenth child (out of a total of seventeen) and seventh son of George Combe (without an ‘e’), an Edinburgh brewer, and his wife Marion Newton. It was decided that he should become a doctor, and so at the age of 15 he was apprenticed to Mr Henry Johnston, a general practitioner, to gain the necessary experience required for membership of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh. He was apparently so reluctant to take up his apprenticeship that his father and older brother, George, had to carry him there on his first day.

Throughout Andrew’s life, his brother George, 9 years his senior, had a profound influence on him. George, after studying law at the University of
Edinburgh, became a Writer to the Signet in 1812, and set up a law practice in Edinburgh. Having always been fascinated by the structure and function of the human body, he attended the classes of Dr John Barclay, one of the great extra-mural teachers of anatomy in Edinburgh at that time. His first introduction to phrenology came in June 1815 when the *Edinburgh Review* published an article by Dr John Gordon, another extra-mural teacher of anatomy in Edinburgh, on 'the Doctrines of Gall and Spurzheim'. The article served to ridicule the work of these two men, and George joined with the general feeling of scorn towards these advocates of the 'science' of phrenology. However, later that year, he attended a demonstration of the brain given by Spurzheim, a disciple of Gall, who was in Edinburgh on a lecture tour. He dissected a brain, and commented on how its individual features had influenced the late owner. Combe was so impressed by what he saw that he became a firm believer in phrenology, publishing his first essay on phrenology in *The Scots Magazine* in 1817.

Andrew received his diploma of Licentiate of the Royal College of Surgeons in 1817, and went to Paris to study under the famous Dupuytren, chief-surgeon to the Hotel-Dieu Hospital. There, at the request of his brother, George, he became acquainted with Dr Johann Gaspar Spurzheim who was in Paris between 1817–1825, and lectured extensively on the anatomy and pathology of the brain. This meeting with Spurzheim stimulated Andrew's interest in phrenology and, during 1818–19, also provided him with the opportunity to gain skill in the dissection of the brain. On Spurzheim's advice, he also studied under Esquirol, an international authority on insanity, at the Salpêtrière.

After a visit to Switzerland, he returned to Edinburgh in 1819, and lived with his brother George in Stockbridge. Shortly afterwards, he became ill with a lung
disease believed to be consumption (pulmonary tuberculosis), which was to handicap him throughout his life, and he was unable to pursue his medical career until later.

Together with his brother George, James Brownlee, advocate, the Reverend David Welsh of Crossmichael, Lindsay Mackersy, accountant, and William Waddell, Writer to the Signet, Andrew established the Edinburgh Phrenological Society on 22nd February 1820, and by the end of that year there were 31 members. It eventually had over 600 members, of whom about 100 were from the medical profession.

In 1823 Andrew and George Combe with William Scott, James Simpson and Richard Poole M.D. established the Phrenological Journal and Miscellany (later The Phrenological Journal and Magazine of Moral Science—New Series 1838–1847). Andrew contributed to the journal until his death in 1847, after which publication ceased. Both the Edinburgh Phrenology Society and the Phrenological Journal were financially supported by William Ramsay Henderson during his life and, after his death, by the Henderson Trust. Henderson was born in 1801, the only son of an Edinburgh banker, and had developed a keen interest in phrenology under the guidance of George and Andrew Combe. Three years before his early death in 1831, he made a will appointing trustees to administer his funds for ‘the advancement and diffusion of the science of phrenology’.8

Andrew Combe’s health gradually improved, and he was able to resume his career in 1823, becoming a medical practitioner in Edinburgh. Later that year, he became a member of the Royal Medical Society, and prepared a paper that, on the 21st November, was read on his behalf by the Society’s President, since he himself was ill at the time. His address to the Society was in response to the committee’s question ‘Does Phrenology afford a satisfactory explanation of the Moral and Intellectual Faculties of Man?’. The ensuing debate was prolonged and not adjourned until 2 am; it was resumed the following Tuesday at 7.30 pm, and continued until nearly 4 am on Wednesday. Because the Society’s Hall was inadequate to contain more than half of those assembled for admission, Dr Andrew Duncan junior lent his classroom in the ‘Old’ College, University of Edinburgh, and it was estimated that at least four hundred persons were present.4 Combe petitioned the Society to be allowed to publish his dissertation in the Phrenological Journal, and this request was granted.9 It would appear that the Society did not have a formal vote on the debate, although according to Conmrie10 the Society finally decided against the admissibility of this method of regarding the mental faculties.11 Andrew was elected President of the Phrenological Society in 1827.

In 1825, Andrew Combe graduated MD from the University of Edinburgh. Despite frequent periods of ill health, necessitating spending much time abroad, he was able to continue to practice. During his absences his friend Dr John Scott (Table 1) attended his patients. He was elected to a Fellowship of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in 1832. A fine half-length portrait of him at the time of his election to the Fellowship hangs in the College’s Hall in Queen Street, and a lithograph of him at a similar age appears as the frontispiece to his biography.4

Andrew Combe had never married owing to his poor health. George Combe pointed out that this must have been a great sacrifice when one saw the large development of the organs of the ‘domestic affections’ (see below). However, Andrew’s life from 1831 until his death was not without constant (presumably platonic) female companionship. During that year he caught a chill, believed to be the result of sleeping in a damp bed in Tours. As soon as he was well enough, he returned to Paris where he consulted Dr Spurzheim, who advised him to spend the winter in Italy. Combe then wrote to Miss Cox, his niece, requesting that she act as his companion on his travels. She shortly afterwards joined him in Paris, and together they travelled to Naples. From that time, to the day of his death, she was his constant companion and, during periods of sickness, acted as his nurse. After George’s marriage to Miss Cecilia Siddons in September 1833, they moved to Charlotte Square, leaving Andrew and Miss Cox in possession of the house in Northumberland Street in which the two brothers and Miss Cox had previously lived together.

While many of Andrew’s letters are published in full in his biography, it is of interest that his ‘numerous warm expressions of gratitude to his niece for her invaluable services, and untiring devotion to his welfare’ were suppressed ‘in deference to what are known to be her feelings’.4 In 1841, he wrote that ‘few things could have added so much to my enjoyment, as having a good wife and children’. His impaired health, however, ‘rendered these “forbidden fruits” to me, and although I felt the deprivation, it is now a comfort to me to reflect that no one is involved in my fate except myself’.

The ‘strong religious emotions’ of Andrew and his ‘sound and acute moral perceptions’ were explained by large organs of ‘Veneration, Hope, Wonder, Benevolence and Conscientiousness’ disclosed at post-mortem. George Combe noted that ‘the plump appearance of the brain contrasted strongly with the emaciation of the body at large’.

**Table 1**

Notes on doctors associated with Andrew Combe.

1. Dr John Scott MD was probably the same John Scott who became a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians in 1827. He had a large consulting practice in Edinburgh and became Physician-in-Ordinary in 1827. He died at Rutland Square, Edinburgh, on 3rd May 1853, aged 49.
2. Sir James Clerk was born in Colles, Banffshire, in 1788, and graduated with an MA from the University of Aberdeen before becoming a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh in 1809. He served for 6 years as an assistant surgeon in the Navy, and graduated MD from the University of Edinburgh in 1817. He travelled widely in Europe and became Physician to the King of the Belgians. In 1826 he settled in London, and subsequently was appointed Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria. He was created a baronet in 1837, made a KCB in 1866 and died in 1870.
3. Dr Peter D. Handside studied medicine at the University of Edinburgh, graduating MD in 1831, and from about 1834 was a teacher of anatomy at Surgeons’ Square. In 1840, he was appointed surgeon to the Royal Infirmary, though he continued to lecture on anatomy throughout his life.17
4. James Cox was born in Edinburgh in 1811. His father died when he was young, and during his early career he was guided by his uncle George and Andrew Combe. He graduated in medicine from the University of Edinburgh in 1835, and was elected a Fellow of the Royal College of Physicians of Edinburgh in 1837. He was appointed a member of the Royal Commission into the management of the insane in Scotland in 1855, becoming the Report’s main author. Following the Lunacy Act of 1857, he became one of Her Majesty’s Commissioners in Lunacy, and was knighted in 1863.
Andrew Combe was a prolific writer. In addition to his work for the Phrenological Journal, his publications included Observations on Mental Derangement, and Principles of Physiology applied to Health and Education. The latter was a popular work; the fourth impression of the twelfth edition appeared in 1843. At the time of his death 28,000 copies had been sold in this country, besides numerous editions in the United States over which he had no control, and from which he received no recompense from the sales. He also published The Physiology of Digestion, which reached a ninth edition in 1849 edited by James Cox, and The Physiological and Moral Management of Infancy (1840, the sixth edition in 1847). The popularity of his books is attributed to his simple writing and their practical good sense. Moreover, he spent an enormous amount of time and effort researching his material, and in updating succeeding editions. Indeed, this was almost a continuous task, since the print runs of the majority of his books sold out, and new editions had to be prepared on an almost annual basis.

In 1830, he was deeply disappointed when his offer to write the sections on Insanity and Phrenology for the 7th edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica was rejected by Macvey Napier, recently appointed as editor. Napier politely rejected Combe’s offer ‘because he (the editor) had a strong conviction that Dr C. could not do justice to his particular views without taking aid from Phrenology . . . and that he (the editor) would have been placed in the very disagreeable situation of rejecting on that account an article otherwise able’. This response was not altogether surprising, because an offer in 1829 to contribute an article on Insanity to the Edinburgh Review had also been rejected by Napier, at that time its editor, on the grounds that it was his view that Combe could not write an article on insanity without founding his views on phrenological principles.

In due course, the article on Phrenology for the Encyclopædia Britannica was written by Dr P. M. Roget, an opponent of the doctrine. The article on Insanity was eventually published under the title of Mental Diseases, the author being Richard Poole, M.D., one of those who in 1823 had established the Phrenological Journal. In the 19th century, the term insanity was also used to encompass aspects of medical jurisprudence, and the section on it in the 9th edition of the Encyclopædia Britannica was written by an Edinburgh advocate, Alexander Gibson. It was almost certainly because of this rebuff that Andrew produced his monograph on Mental Derangement . . . and Treatment of Insanity.

Crown appointments

On the recommendation of Dr James Clark (Table 1) Dr Combe received a similar royal appointment in 1836. The circumstances of his appointment to King Leopold I, are curious. At the time, Clark had only a slight personal acquaintance with Combe, though he was known to him by his work on physiology, and by a few letters that had passed between them. Initially, the King had sought advice about the appointment of a physician for his nephew, the King of Portugal, and Combe’s name came to Clark’s mind, both because of his work and a belief that the climate in Lisbon would be beneficial to his health which Clark knew to be delicate. Discreet enquiries in Edinburgh confirmed Clark’s view that Combe might be a suitable candidate for this post. However, in the interim, Leopold had been particularly impressed by what he had heard of Combe, and decided that he should instead be offered the post of physician to the Belgian Royal Family. Combe was, however, forced to resign the latter post later that year due to a further bout of ill health. As a mark of respect for the kindness he had been shown by the King and his family, Combe dedicated an edition of his The Principles of Physiology applied to the Preservation of Health . . . to his Majesty the King of the Belgians.

In 1838, Andrew Combe was appointed one of the Physicians-Extraordinary to the Queen in Scotland (an office of honour, but without emolument) and in 1844 Physician-in-Ordinary to the Queen in Scotland.

Visit to America

Having previously found sea voyages beneficial to his health, Andrew Combe decided to travel to New York in the spring of 1847 to visit his brother William. He sailed from Liverpool on the Montezuma, and was horrified at the conditions in which Irish emigrants were housed. He returned earlier than planned due to ill health, landing in Liverpool on the 25th of June. The appalling conditions and mortality statistics of the Irish emigrants prompted Combe to write ‘A Communication on the Nature and Causes of Ship Fever’. He became ill during the preparation of the paper, and asked his nephew Robert Cox to finish it. The paper was published in The Times on 17 September 1847, just over a month after Combe’s death, and in the Journal of Public Health in March 1848. Many of his recommendations were implemented on board ships in due course.

Andrew Combe was struck by a severe bout of diarrhoea, and died on the 9th August 1847, while on a visit to a nephew at Gorgie Mill, near Edinburgh. He was buried in St Cuthbert’s Churchyard, at the west end of Princes Street in the family plot. His obituary appeared in The Scotsman of 21 August 1847.

Post-mortem

A post-mortem was carried out thirteen hours after his death, and a report appeared in his biography and also in the final issue of the Phrenological Journal.

His friend, Dr John Scott, conducted the post-mortem examination. The skull was ‘remarkably thin’ and the ‘internal surface more deeply marked by the blood vessels than usual’. The brain was ‘exceedingly healthy’. The thorax was contracted on the left side, measuring 2 inches less than the right. On opening the thorax, it was noted that the right lung filled ‘a space on the left side of nearly 2 inches in breadth and 3 inches in length’. The right lung was adherent to both the costal pleura and to the diaphragm. Also the right lung appeared ‘congested in the lower region, but there were no tubercles’. The left lung was contracted and adherent to the ribs. The apex was ‘particularly indurated and infiltrated with black matter. It also contained many large and small cavities’. The surface of the lung was black but there were no tubercles. This appearance of the lungs strongly suggests that Combe suffered from bronchiectasis rather than from pulmonary tuberculosis, which was suspected at the time. The heart was ‘enlarged but not diseased’. The kidneys appeared normal but were filled with a greyish-coloured thick fluid’. The colon and rectum were thickened and covered with ulcers of varying size.

In addition to Scott’s report, another examination of Combe’s skull and brain was prepared by Dr Peter Handside (Table 1). He first of all describes the cranium. The texture was noted to be thin, ‘the tables having closely coalesced’.

The exception to this being in the regions of the frontal sinuses, which were large
and well developed, and on both sides of the superior sagittal sinus, where the inner table was 'opened up in texture'. The cranium was found to be symmetrical, except on the left side of the vertex, which was said to be 'quite diaphanous'. Also, 'the area of the cranium to the left of the mesial line is greater than on the right', and the internal occipital protuberances were unequal in form and bulk.

Regarding the cerebral hemispheres, Handyside describes each as a 'regular ovate' with very deep longitudinal and oblique fissures, and strongly marked 'anatomical features'. He found the left side to be larger than the right. It measured 7 inches in length, 5 and 1/16 in breadth with the greatest depth vertically to the cerebellum of 4 and 3/8 inches. The brain weighed 57 oz. The structure of the brain was found to be 'perfectly normal' and 'remarkable for its firmness of texture'.

Andrew Combe's nephew, Dr James Cox (Table 1) supplied additional remarks on the prepared skull. He noted that the texture of the bone was 'remarkably firm and dense' and the plates 'generally in close approximation'. The sutures were mainly obliterated and the skull 'resembled that of a much older person'. A transverse section showed that the walls were remarkably thin except in the frontal region due to an 'apparently abnormal deposition of osseous matter between the plates'. Cox thought this was probably due to 'shrinking of the brain'. He also stated that there was thickening of the parietal bones sufficient 'completely to remove the diphaneity remarked by Dr Handyside in the fresh state'. He agreed with Dr Scott that the internal surface of the skull was deeply marked by blood vessels, and noted a large amount of 'amorphous deposit on the internal surface'.

In our view, the features of the skull are remarkable for their normality, with the exception of the region of bone overlying the middle and anterior part of the superior sagittal sinus where there is indeed evidence of the 'abnormal deposits of osseous matter' alluded to by Cox. There is, in addition, clear evidence of numerous fibrous/vascular adhesions between the periosteum and the dura in the proximity of the superior sagittal sinus, suggestive of a chronic inflammatory reaction at this site.

Although greatly influenced and guided by his uncles, Cox did not appear to have become involved in phrenology. His brother Robert Cox, on the other hand, gave up his practice as a lawyer to become secretary to the Edinburgh Phrenological Society and conservator of their Museum. He succeeded his uncle, Andrew Combe, as editor of the Phrenological Journal, holding this position from 1841 until publication ceased in 1847.

Finally, the post-mortem report contains phrenological observations on the features of the skull and brain by George Combe. He stated that the above average size of the brain 'corresponds to his general force of character' and that the deep fissures which resulted in an increased surface area would have led to an increase in both the 'activity and power of his mind'. He also stated that the 'equibility in the development of the cerebral organs' produced the 'soundness of judgement which characterised his (Andrew's) life'. However, his conclusion that the brain was larger than average appears to contradict the observation by Cox (see above) that the thickness of the skull in the frontal region was due to shrinkage of the brain.

George Combe felt that the large development of the 'moral and intellectual organs' gave rise to his brother's 'habitual love of virtue' and 'deep interest in human welfare'. The small organs of 'Alimentativeness and Destructiveness' explained Andrew's 'habitual temperance', 'extreme dislike of war' and also his dislike of 'being present at surgical operations'. A large 'organ of the Love of Life' was also noted, and the small 'organ of Destructiveness' was felt to be balanced by the large development of 'Combativeness, Self Esteem, and Firmness'.

George Combe was, like his brother, a prolific writer. His most important and influential work Essay on the Constitution of Man, Considered in Relation to External Objects, usually abbreviated to The Constitution of Man, was published in 1828. He had earlier published a substantial broadside against those, but particularly John Gordon, who had denied the validity of phrenology. Combe also toured Scotland, Europe and America giving lectures on phrenology, spreading the doctrines of Spurzheim.

It is relevant to note here that shortly before his death in May 1831, William Ramsay Henderson suggested that his trustees print and publish one or more editions of The Constitution of Man in a cheap form, 'so as to be easily purchased by the more intelligent individuals of the poorer classes...'. The book normally sold for 6 shillings, but with the support of the Trust a 'peoples edition' was published at 1s 6d. Subsequent editions were sold for 4 shillings per copy, and a one-off 'Henderson' edition of 2,000 copies was sold in 1835 for 2s 6d each. The last record of the Trust's involvement with the standard edition was in 1874, when fifty pounds were given towards the production of a further 2,000 copies. By 1860, total sales of the 'standard' and 'peoples' editions totalled 100,000, while in America, where 27 editions were published, it sold over 200,000 copies, and was even printed in Braille, for the blind. The Constitution of Man was, clearly, much more than a treatise on phrenology, it was a practical manual for daily life. Central to its main theme was the idea of self-improvement for the individual, and ultimately of mankind.

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CIRCUMSTANCES SURROUNDING THE EXAMINATION OF
THE SKULL AND BRAIN OF GEORGE COMBE (1788–1858)
ADVOCATE OF PHRENOLOGY

M. H. Kaufman, Department of Anatomy, University of Edinburgh Medical School

George Combe (1788–1858), an Edinburgh lawyer, and his younger brother Andrew Combe (1797–1847), Fellow of the College and Physician-in-Ordinary to Queen Victoria, were the foremost British proponents of phrenology during the early to middle part of the nineteenth century. An account of the life of Andrew and of the history of the Edinburgh Phrenology Society has been published in Proceedings.1 George (Fig 1a and b) was the author of The Constitution of Man.2 When Andrew died, George undertook the phrenological examination of his brain, and the findings were published in Andrew’s biography. George provided John Struthers, anatomist and surgeon, with instructions for the post-mortem examination of his own brain, so that the features of George’s brain and Andrew’s brain could be compared. The post-mortem report on the skull and brain of George Combe which, contrary to George’s wishes was never published, has recently been discovered in the department of anatomy, along with Combe’s instructions to Struthers, together with relevant correspondence which describes the unusual circumstances surrounding the events that took place shortly after Combe’s death.

In the biography of George Combe published twenty years after his death in 18583 the author, Gibbon, records that 3 months before his death he had given detailed written instructions to his nephew, Robert Cox, and to the anatomist Dr John Struthers, as to how the post-mortem examination of his brain should be carried out.4 He was especially keen that a comparison be made between the features of his brain and those of his brother Andrew, the distinguished physician and phrenologist5-6 who had died in 1847 at the age of 49.

Death of Andrew Combe

The circumstances surrounding Andrew’s death are recorded in the biography written by his brother, George,7 and have been referred to in the previous paper.1 The details of his life are fully recorded and the final chapter of the book deals exclusively with the findings from the post-mortem. This was carried out by a number of distinguished physicians and anatomists, but the detailed description and subsequent phrenological analyses of the skull and brain were carried out by the most distinguished phrenologist of the day, his brother, George.

Andrew died suddenly on the 9th of August 1847, though he had for many years been unwell with what was at the time believed to be pulmonary tuberculosis. He had been struck down by a severe bout of diarrhoea and unexpectedly died while on a visit to a nephew at Gorgie Mill, near Edinburgh. One can only imagine that the team of pathologists that had been selected to conduct the post-mortem must have been in a state of immediate readiness, for when death occurred the examination was only delayed by the time taken by a professional modeller to prepare the death mask. The post-mortem started almost exactly 13 hours after Andrew drew his last breath.

EDITORIAL NOTE

Andrew Combe (1797–1847) is not to be confused with John Combe (1796–1883), a physician in Leith who in 1822 gave the first clear description of pernicious anaemia (Boyd DHA The first four consulting physicians of Leith Hospital, Proceedings 1993; 23: 518–529). Dr Boyd tells us that although the fathers of both Andrew Combe and John Combe were brewers in Leith, he could find no connection between the two families.