

**Two letters shewing the impropriety of electing assistant-surgeons. Respectfully addressed to the governors of the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital / [John Cross].**

**Contributors**

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*Presented by Mr. Cross*

# TWO LETTERS

SHewing THE

IMPROPRIETY OF ELECTING ASSISTANT-SURGEONS.

RESPECTFULLY ADDRESSED TO

The Governors

OF THE

NORFOLK AND NORWICH HOSPITAL.

BY

JOHN CROSS,

ONE OF THE SURGEONS TO THE HOSPITAL.

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NORWICH.

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TWO LETTERS

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*The former of the two following letters was intended for the Norwich Papers, but the insertion of it was unavoidably delayed, and it afterwards appeared in the Mercury only. Circumstances have since come to my knowledge, which induced me to write the second letter, and to print both together that I might avail myself of the best method of submitting them to the perusal of some of the Governors of the Hospital before Saturday next, when the question in debate will be decided.*

*J. C.*

*Monday, October 15th, 1827.*





*Two Letters to the Governors of the Norfolk and  
Norwich Hospital.*

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LETTER I.

*My Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen,*

I PRESUME to address you upon the subject announced for discussion at the approaching General Board, "*the propriety of electing two additional assistant-surgeons*;" and, conceiving this to be a question of importance to your Charity, I trust you will pardon my taking this method of exciting your attention to it, by submitting to you evidence that may in some degree facilitate your coming to a just and expedient decision.

When the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital was first established, fifty-six years ago, a dozen medical officers were nominated, and amongst them three assis-



tant-surgeons, no doubt to conciliate all parties, and to bring the much needed contributions to an infant institution. After five years' experience, the physicians and surgeons felt it incumbent on them to express their opinion, that one assistant-surgeon would be sufficient, and, amongst the reasons for recommending a law to that effect, they urged—*the usage of other hospitals—the inutility of having more than one assistant—the necessity that, with three assistants, might perhaps arise, in some future time, of electing unfit and unqualified persons—a single assistant would enter better qualified for principal surgeon upon every vacancy—and lastly, the avoidance of competition, which would tend to preserve the harmony of the surgeons, remove all jealousies on that account, and relieve the governors from the irksomeness of future applications and disagreeable oppositions.* This recommendation from the medical gentlemen was not acted upon, and twenty-five years were suffered to elapse, during which the worst consequences foretold did actually happen. The weekly board then originated the measure; the medical gentlemen being consulted, replied that they entertained the same sentiments expressed twenty-five years before; and the governors were pleased to enact that in future there should be only one assistant-surgeon. Upon its present plan, therefore, with one assistant-surgeon, whose office is to attend at the request, or in the absence, of any of the surgeons, without having necessarily any responsible duties, your hospital has been conducted during nearly twenty-five years, and you will naturally inquire against the approaching occasion, whether the present system has worked well? what new circumstances have arisen in the condition of the hospital, or the conduct of its surgical officers,



that should make a material change in its laws requisite? what has led to a proposal for reverting to a system proved by former experience to be both superfluous and injurious?

Were I to attempt an answer to these questions, I should claim your indulgence, not merely as a subscriber of two guineas annually, but as a daily visitor to your hospital in the capacity of one of its surgeons; for I should feel myself very feebly qualified either to oppose or to advocate any great change in its regulations, without being well acquainted with all that transpires within its walls. At present, however, I shall only adduce a few illustrative and incontrovertible facts, most willingly leaving you, my Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen, to determine whether the surgical officers do their duty with becoming zeal and humanity, and whether the patients receive attention corresponding to your wishes.

Formerly the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital contained about eighty beds for the reception of in-patients. Several years ago a new ward was added, and another small ward has been fitted up within the last three years, so that a hundred and five beds are now always ready for the reception of in-patients, and are generally occupied. These are equally destined for medical and surgical cases, though, in years not very remote, a preference was always given to the latter; and I beg to submit to your notice the following table, arranged from documents furnished by Mr. Griffin, the excellent apothecary to the institution, in which the number of patients admitted during four years at the period of *diminishing the assistant-surgeons*, is contrasted with the number admitted in the same space of time immediately preceding the present period, when you are



called upon to discuss the propriety of *encreasing them*.

Years.	Medical.		Surgical.		Total.
	In.	Out.	In.	Out.	
1801	153	259	294	127	833
1802	180	299	323	119	921
1803	161	258	308	127	854
1804	146	274	301	146	867
*1823	217	135	313	87	752
1824	394	162	349	104	1009
1825	326	135	308	119	888
1826	350	159	313	143	965

The average annual admissions, calculated from these two periods of four years each, will stand thus:

Annual Average.	Medical.		Surgical.	
	In.	Out.	In.	Out.
1801-2-3-4	160	272	306	129
1823-4-5-6	321	147	320	113

from which you will perceive that the great encrease has been in medical cases, which fall exclusively under the care of the physicians, the number of surgical in-patients being on an average not fifteen in a year more than it used to be twenty-five years ago, or about five patients more annually to each surgeon. Taking this statement for your guide, it would be nothing less than a vote of censure upon your surgeons, to vote them more assistants, when they assure you they do not need them.

Including patients of all descriptions, about 900 annually receive relief in the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital, a very insignificant number compared with the applicants for advice at the hospitals in the Metropolis

\* This period extends from the 1st of July, 1823, to the 1st of July, 1827.



and several large provincial towns. Of the seven general hospitals in London, I am able to lay before you authentic records, showing that to some, capable of receiving four times as many in-patients as our Hospital, fewer surgical officers are attached. St. Bartholomew's is the only hospital in London, or indeed, I believe, anywhere else in the world, where three assistant-surgeons have permanently existed, and is the largest in the kingdom. At the London Hospital the laws have recently been altered, and the new appointments are not yet all filled up.

Metropolitan Hospitals.	Physicians	Assistant Physicians.	Surgeons.	Assistant Surgeons.	Beds for In-Patients.	Patients in one year.
Westminster . . . . .	3	0	3	1	150	3502
Middlesex. . . . .	3	0	3	0	190	5472
St. George's. . . . .	4	0	4	0	220	4139
London. . . . .	3	3	3	3	280	7250
Guy's . . . . .	3	1	3	1	400	20,000
St. Thomas's . . . . .	3	1	3	0	460	10,553
St. Bartholomew's.	3	0	3	3	480	8487

In provincial hospitals I am not acquainted with a single example of an assistant-surgeon being appointed, except in the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital. The subjoined table will afford a comparative view of those established in most of the largest towns in Great Britain, except the Bristol Infirmary, of which, from accidental circumstances, I have hitherto failed to obtain particulars.



Provincial Hospitals.	Physicians.	Surgeons.	Assistant Surgeons.	Beds for In-patients.	Patients in the year 1826.		
					In.	Out.	Total.
Bath. ....	3	3	0	120			
Gloucester .....	2	2	0	120			
Leeds .....	3	3	0	120	1574	3507	5081
Birmingham .....	4	4	0	160	1459	3317	4776
Manchester.....	6	6	0	180	1310	4664	5974
Exeter.....	4	4	0	200	1200	450	1650
Liverpool .....	3	3	0	220	1974	1060	3034
Glasgow.....	2	4	0	230			2521

The Leeds Infirmary is one of the best regulated and most effective institutions in the kingdom, and with a small medical establishment gives relief to the greatest proportionate number of sick at the least expense. Much of what is excellent in that Hospital was accomplished by one of its surgeons, Mr. Hey, who for many years devoted himself to its improvement, and gained a greater reputation than any other provincial surgeon. This gentleman had relinquished his appointment, and was above 80 years of age, when he successfully opposed an encrease of its officers, and in the memoirs of his life, since published by my friend, the late Mr. John Pearson, some observations are made in reference to this subject, which I prefer quoting, rather than to state in less dignified language my own remarks and sentiments.

“ As the subject, on which Mr. Hey delivered his sentiments, is one of great importance, and upon which some diversity of opinion prevails—not indeed among



well-informed medical men, but with the governors of some charitable institutions—it is greatly to be regretted, that the well-digested opinion of so competent a judge has not been preserved. This point has indeed been discussed by the late Dr. Gregory, of Edinburgh, with great ability, precision, and strength of reasoning, upon a case not very dissimilar from the above-mentioned, which related to the royal infirmary of that city. In his invaluable memoir he has shown, by an invincible train of argumentation, the advantages resulting from employing no greater number of professional men in an infirmary, than are necessary to supply the wants of the patients. It must be obvious, indeed, to every one who will exercise a little patient consideration, that, by multiplying medical and surgical attendance, in a charitable institution, the business will be most probably done with less exactness, care, and punctuality, than when the appointments are duly proportioned to the number of the sick. Every superfluous attendant will diminish the responsibility of those already stationed there. By abridging their opportunities of practice, their individual improvement, and that of the art they profess, will be obstructed; and the credit attached, by common consent, to the situation of an hospital surgeon being thus divided, a powerful stimulus to exertion will be abated. There are, undoubtedly, many professional men, who would fulfil their duty under every disadvantage, from higher considerations than those of emolument, reputation, or honorable distinction. Yet, while men retain the sentiments and passions of human nature, it cannot be wise to withdraw the impulse arising from inferior considerations, and require them to engage in an employment of much labour and anxiety, solely from the pure and



elevated motives of benevolence and humane feeling, without one single inducement of a lower order—that inducement being in no wise at variance with the moral or social character of a member of civil society. It is not unusual, on such occasions, to hear the medical officers, who are in opposition to such proposals, reproached with acting from narrow, interested, and selfish views. Charges like these are easily adduced, and will, by many, be hastily received; but such general accusations are equally invidious and futile.....

..... If the hardships and annoyance inflicted on the medical officers of an hospital, by forcing upon them supernumerary colleagues, and encumbering them with help, tended in any measure to promote the interest of the charity, the improvement of the art, and the consequent advantages of society, the partial evil ought to be endured patiently. But when the very reverse of this is, and always must be, actually the case, as long as men and their natural constitution remain the same, the governors would do well to reflect whether they may not be actuated more by a desire of promoting the private interests of certain individuals, than by a sense of the general benefit of the charity of which they are the trustees. To the position, that a multitude of retainers will add dignity and consequence to an hospital, in some proportion to their numbers, it may be quite sufficient to reply, that an hospital is not a palace, and its officers are enrolled for action, not for display. The governors of an hospital are commonly very incompetent judges of matters that concern the medical department; and if they refuse to receive information from those who are the best qualified to impart it, discords, heats, and dissensions, will be engendered, and perhaps perpetuated, to the lasting injury of the institution."



Should it not be deemed superfluous, I will occupy as much of the columns of this Journal as can be spared to me the succeeding week, in pointing out some of the numerous unavoidable evils attending an establishment of three assistant-surgeons; and assuring you, my Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen, that I shall always be watchful over the true interests of your hospital, more especially in matters that regard the department in which I have the honour to hold an appointment, I beg permission to subscribe myself, with the greatest respect,

Your very obedient Servant,

JOHN CROSS.

NORWICH, 3rd Oct. 1827.

## LETTER II.

*My Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen,*

IN offering for your perusal a second letter upon the subject of encreasing the number of assistant-surgeons, I wish to premise that nothing I am about to state is intended in the slightest degree to detract from the merits of those gentlemen, whose laudable ambition it is to be connected with the Hospital; neither do I wish my arguments to avail against your electing as many officers, whether physicians or surgeons, as are found necessary to effect every thing for the patients, which humanity, skill, and science, can accomplish.

I take it to be a sign of good management in an institution, to change rarely its laws, and to act rigidly up to those already in force. If a change be not necessary, for the improvement and better success of your Hospital, would you not hesitate to accede to it, even if you could persuade yourselves that it was harmless in its effects? But the election of more assistant-surgeons is not a harmless measure; it is open to many more objections than I should be able to state to you in a moderate space; and I must content myself with pointing out a few of the leading evils attending it.

Where three assistant-surgeons are attached to an Hospital, they must either succeed in regular rotation



to be surgeons, or compete with each other for the higher appointment. It may be doubted whether the latter be not the worse plan of the two; for it introduces contention amongst the officers of the establishment—it creates a war of the worst sort—an intestine war—and disunites men who must either frequently meet together or perform very ineffectively the duties assigned to them. Amongst the officers of your own institution, there should clearly be no struggle for a higher appointment, if you can avoid it, and still ensure to the patients a sufficient number of able surgical attendants. It is true I am unable to quote any experience upon this subject so far as it relates to Hospitals, except what occurred in your institution whilst there were three assistant-surgeons, because such an arrangement has nowhere else, to the best of my knowledge, existed for any length of time; but such appears to me to be the conclusion at which we arrive by common observation, unbiassed by any refined or speculative doctrine. I should expect, judging from the feelings which actuate honorable minds, and particularly such as are found amongst the governors of an Hospital, that the eldest assistant would be elected to the situation of principal surgeon; and were the contrary to happen, the officer passed by would be a very unpleasant, because a dissatisfied, associate, whom it would be a discredit to the institution ever to have elected, and whom I should be very sorry indeed to have attached to me as assistant.

I think it can scarcely be maintained that any gentleman, whatever might be his talents, would be elected surgeon, who had not been an assistant, because the interests of the three assistants would always be combined to prevent such an occurrence, and it would



be impossible to conceive all three to be so deficient as to warrant such a preference. I was assistant-surgeon several years, and am prompted by my own feelings to tell you, that it is a situation rather endured than enjoyed, in hope of the more responsible and commanding situation to which it almost necessarily leads, and to which it can never fail, under any arrangement, to lead, unless the governors should err in their choice; and I am convinced you will never have it filled by zealous men, if they are to spend the greatest portion of their lives without gaining promotion.

It is now fifty-six years since the Norfolk and Norwich Hospital was established, and there have occurred eight vacancies for principal surgeon; upon the best ground you can obtain, therefore, to make a calculation from, it is evident that, with three assistants, each may be expected to remain twenty-one years in office. If we except the death or resignation of an assistant-surgeon, nothing can *diminish* the force of this argument, whether the assistants succeed in regular rotation to be surgeons, or not: it may, however, be *increased*; for, if you elect a principal surgeon, who has not already been an assistant, you must add a period of seven years to the probable continuance of each assistant in office, making it twenty-eight years; if a junior assistant were preferred for the higher office, you must add seven years to the probable continuance of the senior assistants who were passed by, making also twenty-eight years; if a senior assistant be twice passed by, it will be thirty-five years, if he should so long live; and so on. Now the effect of this prospect of a long continuance as assistant must be, that only young men could be can-



didates, and you would be compelled to elect them, when you could not have had experience of their qualifications as operators, as you can upon your present most excellent plan, which secures you a candidate possessed of extensive reputation before he is honored with your choice ; and who does not hesitate to seek an appointment in your Hospital, because he may reasonably calculate upon getting to the responsible situation which is the summit of his ambition, before many years shall elapse.

This argument, derived from the long continuance in the inferior office, where there are three assistants, applies in another direction ; your principal surgeon would be appointed at a later age, and might commence his active duties at so advanced a period of life, as to preclude his becoming a good operating surgeon ; and this curtailment of the principal surgeon's duration in office, by deferring his being appointed till, with ordinary men, the best period of life is past, would be an injury to your hospital. These are not speculations ; they are reasonable deductions from observation of the past ; such events have actually happened, in the only institution, where the system of maintaining three assistant-surgeons, instead of having as many responsible officers as are required, has been long tried. At St. Bartholomew's Hospital in London, the shortest time an assistant-surgeon has remained without promotion, as I am informed, has been ten years, and repeatedly he has waited nearly thirty years, being between fifty and sixty years old when he became surgeon. These evils never happen where there is only one assistant-surgeon. Surely these observations are worthy the consideration of all governors, who of course look only to the good of an institution. Would



you fetter yourselves with assistant-surgeons, whom you do not want, and prevent yourselves from a free choice of a principal-surgeon, when at a distant time you shall be called upon to exercise your prerogative? By passing a new law, you bring in officers without duties to perform, and determine *at the present moment* who shall be your acting-surgeons *twenty* or even *thirty years hence*, virtually excluding men of genius and superior attainments, who might as strangers be induced to settle here, were your appointments open as they have been, and as they ought ever to continue!

There is perhaps something peculiar in the temperament of medical men; they do not associate well together in great numbers; yet the effectual working of a charitable establishment under their charge must greatly depend upon the harmony and good understanding subsisting between them, and on this account, as far as I have been able to learn, it has been found best to attach no more of the faculty to a public institution, than are required to transact well the duties to the sick: but with numerous assistants, *without responsible duties, and in a comparatively small institution*, you must not expect harmony; you will as surely find discord arising, as that weariness of long waiting for promotion in all instances sours the temper, and makes the mind irritable and ungovernable. The restless enthusiast, who would betray you into new laws to meet his own short-sighted views, argues as if men were perfect as angels; the reasonable adviser in these matters, who would not change for the sake of change, but prefers leaving well enough alone, takes human nature as he finds it.

Another objection to encreasing the number of surgical officers in an Hospital, beyond what are required



to take care of the patients is, that it dilutes the honor till it is too weak to stimulate to any great exertion, and is the surest way of preventing the heavy duties of our Hospital from being well done by those most capable of doing them. Appointments may be multiplied till the lowest candidate is satiated, but the zest and spirit of an honorary station, encircled with anxious duties, flee from such an arrangement. That post of honor is of little value, which all who aspire to are sure to gain; 'tis the very essence of a *high* appointment, that some of its candidates, not without fair pretensions, must be disappointed. The number of respectable candidates pressing upon you for a preference, and which, rather than any recent change in the Hospital, has led to this discussion, has arisen out of your present manner of electing and the great credit of your institution; and it is an advantage you should be very careful not to deprive yourselves of, without some powerful reason connected with the care of the patients: a gentleman must now have considerable weight with the public before he becomes assistant-surgeon, and we find him entering into his office with a degree of zeal proportioned to the difficulty he has found in attaining to it. Well o go it - in - John

The addition proposed to be made to the honorary officers at the Hospital would make them amount to one third of the medical men of all descriptions in Norwich, and will it be said that, for a perpetuity of years it is certain a third of all the medical men will be possessed of the natural capacity, extensive education, sound practical experience, and professional zeal, which entitle them to the distinction of being attached to an Hospital, where they may, to a certain extent, be considered as teachers of their profession to each



succeeding generation of practitioners in this town? Of nothing do I feel more convinced than that the number, found after an ample trial to be sufficient for the comfort and cure of the patients, should be the limit of the medical officers to an Hospital; enlarge the number, beyond what is required for those humane purposes, and bring in assistant-surgeons, through kindly feelings of family compact and friendly acquaintance, and you will deprive yourselves of the privilege you now so wisely retain, (a privilege invaluable to your Institution,) of choosing, to fill each vacancy that occurs, the gentleman who makes out the highest claim to support. I would urge you, my Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen, to keep to your laws as they now stand, and you may gather the cream of the medical talent offered to you; change your laws, as will be proposed, and dull, heavy, half-a-sleep men, will one day creep into your establishment. I wish to speak of the remote consequences, because you are not legislating for the present alone, but also for the future, and will, I am satisfied, before you decide, look to the possible bad effects of a change, however distant you may be pleased to consider them. I here allude as much to the care with which the governors will hereafter exercise their votes, as to the abilities of the candidates, of whom you will have to form an opinion when they are comparatively young, and when, being recently established in the town, it cannot be known that they possess all the abilities as operators, which may be desirable; whilst the prospect of their becoming surgeons to the Hospital being very remote, you might be less careful in your choice, under the idea that all deficiencies could be made up during their long continuance as assistant-surgeons—a very erroneous no-



tion, contradicted by former sad experience in your institution.

It is a great fallacy to suppose that, with three assistant-surgeons, you will have the same men for principal surgeons as with only one assistant, and that the only difference is the introduction of them earlier into your Hospital, that they may profit by the experience offered them ; a consideration of the circumstances I have stated must convince you, that with lapse of time, you will have very different men ; indeed you would never have been summoned to this discussion, were it not felt by certain interested parties to be so. Since no two men possess precisely the same abilities, we may be permitted to say, presuming the choice of the governors to be perfect, that the immediate effect of it must be to introduce a second and a third rate man.

The appointing of assistant-surgeons is well known to offer a temptation to the surgeons to give less personal attendance, to act by substitute, and to retain their office when superannuated or disabled. When the law was altered, nearly twenty-five years ago, it was thought likely to be advantageous, and has actually been found so, that the one assistant would not be attached to any particular surgeon, but would enjoy the benefit of seeing the practice of all, whilst each surgeon would take exclusively the charge of his own patients, and could request either the assistant or one of the surgeons to take charge of them in his absence ; each assistant being appointed to his particular surgeon, is led to suppose he has a right to attend to the patients of that surgeon, rather than to those of the other surgeons, and this divided responsibility is not the way to secure either harmony amongst the officers, or good attendance on the patients. There



are innumerable objections which might be urged against three assistant-surgeons, which, it is the opinion of the best informed men in the country, should not be endured in any Hospital, principal surgeons being the proper officers to elect, where more are requisite: but I shall wave the introduction of more arguments, hoping what I have stated will be sufficient to shew you, my Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen, that this question, about changing your laws, demands your most careful consideration. The amount of what I have been desirous to state, will be shown in the following brief recapitulation.

That the old plan of three assistant-surgeons was found injurious after ample experience, and was for very good reasons relinquished.

That the present plan of having one assistant-surgeon has been followed by the best effects.

That there are no extraordinary duties in the Hospital, requiring more assistants for its performance.

That electing supernumerary or unemployed officers is to be deprecated, as unjust to those of your present surgeons who oppose it, and contrary to the interests of the Institution.

That the plan of having three assistant-surgeons is not supported by the example of any other Hospital in this country, which admits of just comparison with yours in extent, management, and efficiency.

That the law of three assistant-surgeons, however modified, has a tendency ultimately to let men of inferior rank and abilities into your Hospital.

That with three assistants, young men only are elected, at a time when you can rarely judge of their character and qualifications, who may live to be old men before they become surgeons, virtually excluding



men of middle age, who, in the interval, might settle in this town, and acquire reputation.

That your candidates, being in effect restricted to younger men, the number to choose from is lessened, whilst the distant prospect of their coming into the most responsible office, as certainly leads the governors to give their votes with less discrimination, as it is certain that we see objects less distinctly at a distance.

That the number of contested elections is encreased, to the inconvenience of the governors, and that the three assistants, in contesting for the surgeoncy, are waging *intestine war within the walls of your own establishment*, instead of carrying on an honorable contention without.

That with three assistants, the principal surgeon is likely to be appointed at a later age, and the duration of his active services in this office is consequently shortened, to the injury of the institution.

And lastly, that an encreased number of officers, particularly where some must have few duties to perform, is sure to create disunion, and to prejudice the Hospital, both as regards the patients, the students, and the profession generally.

If these are only a few of the evils, attending a permanent establishment of three assistant-surgeons in an Hospital, it may be asked, why is such a measure proposed? After proceeding thus far, I need not hesitate about expressing to you my conviction, that it is a way of *wedging in* supernumerary officers, by beginning at the smaller end of the appointments, and it ought, therefore, to be well scrutinized by the Governors, before it is adopted. The Hospital receives liberal support, for which it makes ample return to the public, not more by the relief afforded to the sick, than by the



instruction conveyed to the profession. You need only compare the state of the Medical Profession in this town, with what it was some years ago, in order to learn how much it is improved, owing, chiefly, to the Hospital; and every encouragement is given towards a continuance of this improvement. Do not all the junior practitioners in the town know and profit by the greater events which transpire in the Hospital? Are there not students daily receiving instruction, by conferring kind and serviceable attentions upon the patients? Would not the very candidates for the appointments now urged to be created exclaim, with one voice of gratitude, that they have gotten instruction within the walls of your Hospital? nay, some of them have received the greater part of their education there. But these benefits are not confined to this city; they extend to the most remote parts of the county; many of the respectable practitioners at a distance have been educated here; in short, the Hospital as it is now conducted, (thanks to my senior colleagues, who have alone the merit of it,) is the great centre of medical intercourse and instruction, and I sincerely hope nothing will occur to place it upon a less liberal footing.

More than this, my Lords, Ladies, and Gentlemen, I will not obtrude upon your notice, and in taking leave of the important question, which it rests with you to decide upon, I beg leave to subscribe myself, with the greatest respect,

Your very obliged and obedient Servant,

JOHN CROSS.

NORWICH, 15th Oct. 1827.











































































