

## **Richard Owen's contribution to Endocrine Surgery**

Professor Malcolm H. Wheeler

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Sir Richard Owen, biologist, anatomist, palaeontologist and Fellow of the Royal Society at the age of 30, is best remembered for coining the term 'dinosaur' and for being the driving force behind the establishment in 1881 of the Natural History Museum in London. He is also well known for his opposition to Darwin's theories for the process of natural selection and evolution. Although accepting the concept of evolution Owen believed in a creationist mechanism. However, to the endocrine surgeon, Owen's name will be forever linked to the death of an Indian rhinoceros (*Rhinoceros unicornis*) at the London Zoo in 1849. Sir Richard who was Professor and Conservator at the Hunterian Museum of the Royal College of Surgeons performed a post-mortem on the animal. In his account published in 1862 he clearly describes a parathyroid gland as 'a small compact yellow body attached to the thyroid gland at the point where the veins emerge'.

Identification and description of the parathyroids in man followed in 1880 when the Uppsala anatomist Ivar Sandström named the structures 'glandulae parathyroideae'. Remarkably, Sandström, although having no understanding of the physiological importance of the glands, did speculate on their possible pathological and clinical relevance. The birth of parathyroid surgery took place in Vienna in 1925 when Felix Mandl operated on a patient suffering from severe hyperparathyroidism. Undoubtedly parathyroid surgery owes its origins to the astute observations made by Richard Owen, a man who was described by William Gladstone, later to be Prime Minister, as 'a splendid genius and the world's greatest living naturalist'.