WILLIAM WARWICK WAGSTAFFE (1843-1910). B.A. (Lond.), M.B. (Lond.), L.S.A. (Lond.), F.R.C.S. (Eng.). - Medical Officer to the Privy Council and Professor of Anatomy at St Thomas’s Hospital.

“The prominent feature of his work was the application of his anatomical knowledge to the study of morbid anatomy, which at that period was at the height of its popularity as a means of elucidating the problems of pathology.”

British Medical Journal (1910).

William Warwick Wagstaffe (1843-1910) [Epsom College 1855-1859] was one of the first one hundred boys to enter Epsom College when it opened in October 1855, and during his last term there he was appointed prefect, and captain of both the cricket and rugby football teams. The son of M. F. Wagstaffe, a surgeon of The Borough, South London, and brother of Mathew Mawe Wagstaffe [Epsom College 1855-1859], he was a contemporary at Epsom of such medical luminaries as Sir Henry Morris, Sir Frederick Taylor and Sir James Frederick Goodhart. From King’s College, where he obtained First Class Honours in the University of London B.A. Examination, William Wagstaffe was awarded an Entrance scholarship to St Thomas’s Hospital Medical School, and further scholarships in classics, mathematics, natural science, and modern languages. He then won the Cheselden Silver Medal and the Treasurer’s Gold Medal in 1864. Following this he was appointed Demonstrator of Anatomy and a short while later, Professor of Anatomy at St Thomas’s. It was said that as a lecturer he was lucid and fluent, “holding the attention of his class, which was always orderly and well behaved at a time when the lecture theatre occasionally tended to degenerate into a bear garden.” In 1868, at the very early age of 25, he obtained his Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons, and then proceeded to the appointment of Surgical Registrar at St Thomas’s Hospital. At about the same time Sir John Simon gave him the post of Medical Officer to the Privy Council. Shortly after this appointment he started upon a purely surgical career and was soon appointed Consultant Surgeon at St Thomas’s, and Sevenoaks Hospitals. He was elected to the board of examiners in Anatomy and Physiology of the Royal College of Surgeons and, in 1875, Surgical Secretary to the Pathological Society of London.

As a surgeon Wagstaffe belonged to the progressive school, and he became well-known for his surgical approach to intestinal obstruction. He was an early advocate of the direct reduction of intussusception. In 1875, he published The Student’s Guide to Osteology, and he also edited the second edition of Le Gros Clark’s Outlines of Surgery (1872). In 1878, he developed a severe and debilitating neurological disorder. John Bristowe, the senior physician at St Thomas’s saw Wagstaffe walking down the corridor with a ‘tabetic gait’ and prescribed, much to his disgust, potassium iodide, the current treatment for syphilis. Although there are a number of other diseases with similar symptoms from which Wagstaffe might have suffered, he became increasingly incapacitated and eventually died of pneumonia, totally paralysed, in 1910. The hospital authorities kept his appointment open for three years but he was never able to return to active work. Although he was prevented by this illness from practical work he busied himself for some years in writing reviews for the British Medical Journal, translated Heiberg’s Atlas of Cutaneous Nerve Areas, and edited the third edition of Mayne’s Medical Vocabulary. William Wagstaffe was a founder member of the Old Epsomian Club and served on its committee until 1884.