

# Blue Plaque Ceremony, Witney, May 2019

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It's a great honour to be here this afternoon at the unveiling of this blue plaque in memory of my father Patrick Steptoe. I am delighted to be here with my son Will and his wife and two children, following the Steptoe tradition. My father was one of the eight surviving children of Harry and Maud Steptoe. He was born in 1913, and was the fifth and youngest son. As was common at that time, the children were spread over many years, so his oldest brother had already left home when Patrick was born. Harry worked for the council, and died in 1951 just around the time that I was born, so I never knew him. But I knew my grandmother Maud well, and she was a formidable character right through to her 90s. As well as looking after her large family, she played a leading role in the Mother's Union, and organised Infant Welfare Clinics and events for elderly people.

My father Patrick was brought up in Witney, and was educated at the Grammar School, now the Henry Box School. So every day he would walk the mile or so from West End to the school next to St Mary's Church. It was here that he developed a great love of his life, which was music. He was a pianist and organist, and frequently played the organ at St Mary's. He would later say that his playing of the organ greatly strengthened his fingers which were so valuable for his work as a surgeon. As well as playing in the church, he also picked up some pocket money as a teenager, playing the piano for silent films at the Palace Cinema in the centre of town. So he would accompany the films of people like Rudolph Valentino and the Westerns of Tom Mix, improvising appropriate music to accompany the mood of the film. He was also keen on sport at school, playing hockey and cricket in particular.

Patrick turned out to be very bright, and he successfully applied to Medical School in London. He did his undergraduate years at King's College in the Strand, and main training at St. George's Hospital Medical School which at that time was on Hyde Park Corner. The hospital building is now a 5-star hotel called the Lanesborough. He continued to be devoted to music; indeed, he came very close to failing his exams and losing his place at Medical School, and had to curtail his musical activity as a result. However, it was a lifelong passion, and I still have the programme of the last concert in which he performed at the age of 73 in Cambridge, less than a year before his death. He was soloist in Haydn's D major piano concerto, and also played a solo piece of his own composition.

Patrick would come back to Witney during vacations when he was at Medical School in the 1930s. He qualified shortly before the war. He had already joined the Royal Navy Voluntary Reserve, so went to sea as a medical officer in 1939. He served on several ships and was involved in actions such as the Narvik and the battle of Cape Matapan, but in May 1941 he was aboard HMS Hereward when it was sunk by Stuka

dive bombers during the Battle of Crete. Around half the crew perished, but Patrick spent around five hours in the sea supervising a lifeboat containing the wounded. He seldom spoke about his wartime experiences, but did vividly recall this gruesome episode, since he had to decide on which men should be allowed on the lifeboat, and which had to be left to the water because they were beyond help. Fortunately, they were picked up by the Italian Navy, and transferred to a POW camp in Italy.

Patrick spent the best part of two years in the camp. During this time, his address remained 52 West End Witney, so it was here that the occasional postcard was sent through the Red Cross to his parents. He finally returned to England when Italy was liberated in 1943, and went to work at the Admiralty in London. He soon met my mother Sheena who had trained as an actress at RADA and had recently started working for ENSA. They married in December 1943, and this marked the end of his residence in Witney.

The rest of his life is pretty well known, and Peter Brinsden is going to talk about his later work. After training in obstetrics and gynaecology, he was appointed as a consultant in 1951 in Oldham, just outside Manchester. My parents did not know the North of England, but nevertheless stayed in that industrial area far from London and Oxfordshire until he retired from the National Health Service at the age of 65 in 1978. It was in this most unpromising environment that he and his colleague Robert Edwards carried out their pioneering work into infertility and in vitro fertilisation.

Patrick was first and foremost a doctor intensely concerned about the health of women, and did much work on cervical cancer, pelvic pain, and sterilisations as well as infertility. He worked very hard, doing a five-and-a-half-day week, and generally going into the hospital on Sunday morning as well to see how his patients were getting on. His other pleasure at weekends was sailing, and he would spend half a day racing his dinghy on the lake near our home in Rochdale. His greatest probable indulgence was cars, and when he came to afford them he chose rather ostentatiously – such as the open top Mercedes coupé that was not very suitable for the North of England, or the vast metallic blue and chrome Pontiac Parisienne that was one of the first American cars in the area. His exceptional contributions to medicine and science came through his work with Bob Edwards, each bringing unique skills to the collaboration. But I think much of his commitment came from his upbringing here in Witney, his parents' strong sense of service, and his mother's example in helping poorer people in need. So I'm very proud that the town has recognised him in this way.