

# **Prof. John Leigh Collis, M.D., B.Sc., Ch.B., F.R.C.S.**

One of the first people to undertake open-heart surgery in the Midlands now lives in Moseley. He is Professor John Leigh Collis, honorary professor of thoracic surgery at Birmingham University from 1971 until his retirement in 1977, and now emeritus professor. He was consultant surgeon to United Birmingham Hospitals from 1946 to 1976 and Hunterian Professor at the Royal College of Surgeons in 1944.

His specialities were lungs, heart and oesophagus for most of his career but his work on the oesophagus took precedence during the last ten years of his working life. He has served the people of Birmingham on many committees, including from 1948 to 1954, the management committee of Birmingham Sanatoria; from 1961 to 1963 he chaired the Medical Advisory Committee, and from 1961 to 1965 was a member of the Board of Governors of United Birmingham Hospitals; he was adviser in cardiac and thoracic surgery to the Regional Hospital Board from 1963 to 1972.

One of his greatest disappointments came soon after he left the Medical Advisory Committee. "We had succeeded in getting a lot of new building done and had plans for a fourth wing to the Queen Elizabeth," he explained. "The Ministry had committed itself to the building; then, to my horror, a few weeks after I left, they announced they were making a few changes and the Ministry cancelled the whole project."

After attending Shrewsbury School, John Leigh Collis took his medical training at Birmingham University where he came first in his first examinations. He gained a Queen's Scholarship which awarded him £10 - a large sum in those days - and went on to achieve a first class honours degree in 1935. This meant that he was able to choose his junior jobs. Two years later he passed the examination for Fellowship of the Royal College of Surgeons.

He served as surgical assistant to H H Sampson, a very good surgeon in Birmingham, doing elementary chest surgery. He then went to Brompton Hospital in London, then the world's leading chest surgery hospital, as resident surgical officer to Tudor Edwards.

He returned to Birmingham in 1939 as resident surgical officer at the General Hospital. Shortly after the onset of war he was sent to Barnsley Hospital to make special provision for air raid and war casualties affecting the chest.

He saw war service as a lieutenant colonel in the R.A.M.C. No.3 Surgical Team for Chest Surgery. He crossed to the continent with the Second Front's first British general hospital in the bridgehead. With tuberculosis rife at the end of the war Professor Collis was much in demand when he returned to the Queen Elizabeth Hospital. "There was only one other surgeon in Birmingham able to deal with this," he said. "We had only four beds at the Queen Elizabeth, so we had to get beds at other hospitals all over the region." He eventually had more than fifty beds, but these were scattered as far apart as Malvern, Warwick and Coventry, making work very hard and time-consuming. "I was operating five days a week and did a regular operating list at the Queen Elizabeth every Saturday for seventeen years," he explained.

The whole scene changed rapidly with the coming of antibiotics which removed the need for surgery to combat tuberculosis. "Cancer and cardiac surgery took its place and we found ourselves as pioneers, doing things for the first time," said the professor. "Warwick had a small number of beds but a unit was opened at Hertford Hill which was where I did my first open-heart surgery in 1957."

Professor Collis became secretary of the Society of Cardiac and Thoracic Surgeons of Great Britain and Ireland in 1953, and later their president. In 1957 he went to the U.S.A. to present their

Association for Thoracic Surgery with a gold medallion and chain of office for their president. "They had been very good to us after the war and had given a number of our junior thoracic surgeons the opportunity to study in the States", he said. The gold medallion was made in Birmingham by Stanley Morris.

When the new Walsgrave Hospital was being built at Coventry, Professor Collis and his assistant were given the opportunity to design the whole of the third floor as a heart surgical unit. It became the biggest open-heart surgery unit in the Midlands with fifty beds complete with such ancillary needs as radiotherapy, X-ray, etc. There are now four surgeons operating there.

In addition to his work as a surgeon he has written many papers and books. His 'The Practice of Thoracic Surgery' was the standard textbook in Britain though it is now out of date. His first-ever book was a textbook for nurses, chest Surgery for Nurses, which he wrote during the war and for which he did his own drawings. It went into four editions. His writings were very much sought after for American books and papers.

Before moving to Hayfield Road, Moseley, in 1976 Professor Collis lived and had his private consulting rooms in Augustus Road, Edgbaston, where, like so many doctors' wives, his wife Mavis had to combine her duties as wife and mother with those of receptionist, secretary, nurse and general factotum. She had already been introduced to the medical profession before she married the professor in 1941, having been trained as a nurse at Birmingham Children's Hospital. "She has had to work very hard", said the professor. "She has been a great help and support to me throughout my career." They have three sons and a daughter.

Although the professor was born and spent all his early life in Harborne, his family is a well known Stourbridge one with roots there going back to the 18th century when William Blow Collis, a great-great-uncle, was issuing his own bank notes. His was the earliest banking business from which, in 1750, the present-day Midland Bank had its roots.

Another ancestor, George Richmond Collis, a great-great-uncle who also lived in Stourbridge, was a well-known Birmingham silversmith. His company, G R Collis and Company of Church Street made the city's judge's silver. They also made a silver soup tureen presented to Robert Stephenson when the London to Birmingham railway line was completed in 1837. A silver replica of the Warwick Vase was also made by this company and is on show in the centre of the dining table at Warwick Castle. This relation was also Russian consul in Birmingham as well as being the French consul, and was said to have been a close friend of Napoleon III.

Professor Collis is a very family-minded man and is justly proud of his background, as many of his family have made notable contributions to the life of Stourbridge and Birmingham. He himself was on the council of the Birmingham Civic Society for a number of years and is one of the Friends of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, which has made a substantial contribution to the life of these city assets.

Soon after his retirement he became chairman of BURMA - Birmingham University Retired Members Association - which holds lunch meetings with speakers throughout the winter and one outing a year. "BURMA was formed a few years before I retired", he said, "and I was chairman at a time when it was expanding rapidly following the post-war increase in the numbers of, students. We had about forty at our lunches then whereas now about a hundred attend each meeting."

More locally Professor Collis was a pioneer in the local Neighbourhood Watch scheme. He was chairman at the early meetings at the police training centre in Pershore Road when the scheme was being set up in the Midlands. Now he is chairman only of the ten households in Hayfield Road and Yardley Wood Road which form his local group.

He and his wife joined the Moseley Society when it was formed to try to improve the local environment, and are still regular attenders at its meetings.

*Joan Hazelwood*

Source of information:

Private communication from Professor Collis