

REMEMBERING LOVED ONES

# Sir John Chalstrey, 88: Unassuming surgeon who helped to save Bart's hospital



John Chalstrey as lord mayor of London when Nelson Mandela became the first Commonwealth leader to receive the Honorary Freedom of the City of London, in 1995

NEIL MUNNS/PA

In the 1980s the concept of keyhole surgery was just starting to cross the water from the US and Europe. In its early days it involved the surgeon looking down a telescope held with one hand, or by an assistant, while operating.

John, as a young consultant general surgeon, was intrigued by this new technology and was among the first to embrace it. (The relatively crude instrumentation of 40 years ago is now replaced by the telescopic view being transmitted to a large TV screen, and for some operations a robot controlled from a keyboard manipulates the instruments.)

Specialising in oesophageal and gastric cancers, John was a lead surgeon carrying out radical operations. “Knife, spoon and fork” surgery would involve long incisions and often the removal of whole organs, necessitating long stays in hospital. Having been

the first research fellow and senior registrar in transplant surgery at the Royal Free Hospital, north London, he was well prepared for this kind of operation.



John with his wife, Aileen

Born in 1931 in Staffordshire to Leonard, a secondary school teacher, and Frances (née Lakin), an early teacher of the Montessori method, John went to Dudley Grammar School, where he took up middle-distance running and was captain of the cross-country team. He met his future wife, Aileen Bayes, a pharmacist, at the St Matthew's Church youth club in Tipton, but they did not marry until 1958, when he had finished his medical studies. John and Aileen moved to Winchmore Hill, north London, and had two children: Susan, a consultant ear, nose and throat surgeon; and Jonathan, who works in learning and development.

Both John and his younger brother, Frank, read natural sciences at Queens' College, Cambridge, followed in John's case by three years studying clinical medicine at St Bartholomew's Medical College in the City of London. In 1969 he was appointed a consultant general surgeon at Barts, as well as a senior lecturer at the medical school, where he was known as a supportive, easygoing and approachable teacher.

Unlike some of his grander peers at the time, he had none of the pomposity of the short-tempered surgeon Sir Lancelot Spratt, of the popular 1960s and 1970s novels and TV series *Doctor in the House*. (They were written by Richard Gordon, also a

Barts student and doctor). Gentle kindness to all and never a voice raised in anger were his hallmarks; unsurprisingly, he was one of the first Barts consultants to extend his role at Barts when he uncomplainingly took on work at Hackney district general hospital.

Many of those who worked with this unassuming man were surprised when they learnt towards the end of his career as a surgeon that he was leaving the hospital wards for the aldermanic wards of the City of London Corporation, and its ancient bodies of livery companies, and lord mayoralty. He rapidly rose up the ranks as alderman of Farringdon Ward, and sheriff of the City of London, having the rare distinction of being master of two livery companies, the Society of Apothecaries, and the Company of Barbers. Encouraged by doctors and others who wanted the voice of Bart's hospital to be heard in the City, his name went forward for election as lord mayor of the City of London. He was the first surgeon to be elected to this position. Sir Thomas Cosby, the only previous doctor in line for the office in 1911, died before election.

The year of his mayoralty, 1995 (in which he was also knighted), coincided with the government's plan to close down Bart's hospital in a reorganisation of London's health services. A huge public outcry led to a campaign to overturn the decision. For the first time in history John persuaded his council to allow political protesters from the Save Bart's Campaign to take part in the parade of the Lord Mayor's Show. As one City source said: "If we are going to develop and retain a reputation as the world's leading financial centre, we need a bloody hospital."

Having rowed for the Bart's boat club as a student, and worked as a junior houseman and then consultant, John was proud that his daughter Susan chose to study at Barts. Barts and the City, intertwined for nine centuries, remained close to John's heart to the end.

Among many things, he will be remembered for the valuable part he played in 1995, which ensured that Barts, with its fine grade I listed buildings, could survive as one of the country's most modern cancer, cardiac (and latterly coronavirus) hospitals. His presence shall be missed at the celebrations of Bart's hospital's 900th anniversary in 2023.

Like all lord mayors, he travelled extensively promoting the City, including to South Africa where he met Nelson Mandela. Later, when Mandela was awarded the Honorary Freedom of the City by John, he was amused to discover that two of his five young grandsons had shown the president how to jump up and down on the huge bed in state bedroom No 1 of the Mansion House.

A warm, sociable man, with a keen sense of humour, John greatly enjoyed the company of friends and family. Privately, he was sustained by a deep religious faith.

In retirement, he returned to his love of painting in oils, in which, along with gardening, he found great pleasure.

Sir John Chilstrey, surgeon, was born on March 17, 1931. He died on March 12, 2020, aged 88