

Memories of Chris Bulstrode 1951 - 2023.docx

Memories of Chris Bulstrode who died on 7 December 2024 after 7 years suffering from a neurological disease. He was in the Oxford Pentathlon team in 1970 and 1971 and then in the Cambridge team a year or 2 later as a graduate student.

Report from Angus Macindoe:

I have just heard that Chris Bulstrode died on 7 December, which followed a long illness. He was relatively well on Tuesday and looking forward to seeing Jenny and Harry at the weekend. Then a catastrophic decline. The three children were all with him on Wednesday. He was moved to a hospice on Thursday morning and died in the evening."

I myself had a 2-hour teatime visit to his Oxfordshire house on 12 August. He was physically frail then, balance uncertain, slow to move and could only walk 100 yards, but mentally 100% and cheerful. He told vivid stories about serving as an overage army doctor in Afghanistan, operating on people in a tent, going out on patrol with the Gurkhas. I told him about the pentathlon varsity match in March and the dinner afterwards with both teams from 1970 plus a few older and younger. I reminded him that he had more or less won the riding event for Oxford:

a) he rode first on a stocky, sticky piebald horse that he had to boot round, and even he dropped about 200 points. He insisted the horse was unrideable and should be withdrawn forthwith: Cambridge captain and referee both agreed, so that 3 riders of our team could cruise round on Saracen, an armchair ride.

b) After the Cambridge star Mike Hieatt had taken the wrong course and scored 0, Chris stood under a tree at a crucial point in the course and directed Oxford riders which way to go.

Let us salute his memory!

Angus

Report from John Oldring

Alas I lost contact with Chris, but in 1971 I spent 3 months with him and 2 engineers from St Catherines travelling on a tanker to Venezuela and then on to Columbia where we spent about 10 eventful weeks at a German Marine station in Santa Marta, 5 weeks doing marine work and 5 weeks with local bandits up in the mountains.

We came back the same way and home to Liverpool docks on another tanker .When you were around Chris ,something usually happened, not always what you wanted, I remember well Chris bringing back Herman from Columbia (a live Boa Constrictor - Chris at the time was doing a zoology degree before preclinical in Cambridge and his clinical back in Oxford) among other interesting items from our time out there .

I flew back many years later from a European medical meeting sitting with the Professor of general practice from Oxford. He told me 2 stories about Chris (that you wouldn't have heard from him)

- 1) how he was the only consultant who would regularly offer to help pay for a student's elective if money was tight for the medical student in question
- 2) how junior doctors on rotation at another hospital were being given a hard time by the consultants - and how he did a 2 week locum at that hospital pretending to be a junior doctor (when he was a consultant) and didn't let on who he was - witnessed the abuse and after 2 weeks revealed his identity and told the consultants what he thought -which wouldn't have been diluted.

He was one of life's characters with a bloody good heart and a very great deal of ability

Report from Michael Shipster

I regret not having kept in touch with Chris. I received news of him only sporadically and admired and was intrigued by what I heard, especially his decision to serve as a trauma surgeon in Afghanistan, and his work in Sierra Leone to combat Ebola. When I first met him at Oxford as a new member of our Pentathlon squad it was immediately clear he was an original, somewhere between eccentric, hilarious, brilliant, brave and disruptive. He could ride at least, which is more than some of the rest of us could do. In the 1971 Varsity Match, as you say, he won the match for us both on and off the horse in the riding event. And he could sometimes shoot, though I recall he had a couple of misfires which fortunately didn't kill anyone. I do also remember he once poached a swan from the Isis and, so he claimed, was pursued in flagrante by the Oxford Constabulary.

On the first night of that closely fought 1971 match, staying in one of the Cambridge colleges, I was sharing a room with Chris. We decided to have an early night but were initially kept awake by some persistent drumming from upstairs. After suffering this in grim silence for about five minutes, Chris exploded from his bed, and, wearing only underpants and brandishing a short stocky whip made from a bull's dried penis, he stormed upstairs. I heard a brief exchange and then Chris returned, got into bed without a word and was soon asleep.

I will always be grateful to Chris for lending me his leaky motorcycle, a Velocette Viper 349cc in Trinity term 1970. Named 'Elijah's Chariot', it leaked oil, belched smoke, backfired regularly, was hard to start without spraining one's ankle and had unreliable headlights. But I rode it with great pleasure all around Oxford (no helmets in those days) and beyond, including to some Modern Pentathlon matches. I survived a couple of spills, only one of which, with my brother riding pillion, required hospitalisation. I've owned motorcycles ever since.

I'm very sorry he's died, and that I never had a chance to hear about his own adventures at first hand and to thank him for being such a good friend and teammate.

Report from Michael Hieatt:

Thank you for letting me know that Chris Bulstrode has died.

I was aware that he had not been in good health in the last few years. I exchanged various e-mails with him when contacting people about attending our "50years on" modern pentathlon get-together. The first e-mail I got back from him (shortly before the pandemic caused a pause) came from a cruise ship in a gale in the Southern Ocean of South Georgia heading for Antarctica when he was acting as the ship's surgeon, which made me realise that he had changed little from his days at Oxford and Cambridge! The next year I got another e-mail, saying that he would be unable to come as he was due to be on another cruise ship in the middle of the Pacific.

Thank you also for forwarding Angus's e-mail, it is good to know that when the end came it was brief.

The mention of the ride in the pentathlon match at Blenheim brought back memories. I can still clearly visualise the closing stages of the ride and my wondering "What are those two chaps were doing standing under those trees looking in the wrong direction"...the two chaps were the scorers for the last fence. Chris obviously realised my error and made sure that others did not make the same mistake!

Photo from Bruce Spaven

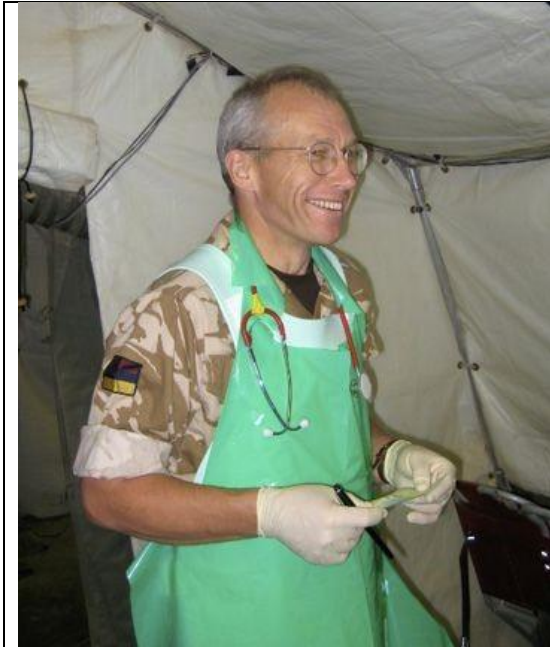
Richard Robinson, Jeremy Bridgeland and Boyo Stoll + a plucker give Chris post match treatment after the Varsity Match – exact year not known

Was it when he went turncoat and joined Pembroke Cantab to get both dark and light blue colours?!



Obituary - Green Templeton College

[Professor Christopher Bulstrode CBE \(1951 – 2023\) | Green Templeton College \(ox.ac.uk\)](https://www.gtc.ox.ac.uk/news-and-events/news/professor-christopher-bulstrode-cbe-1951-2023/)
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The college has learned of the death of Emeritus Fellow Professor Christopher Bulstrode CBE.

Christopher was elected to the fellowship of then-Green College starting in 1986 and joined Governing Body in 1987. He became an Emeritus Fellow when he took early retirement from the university in 2011. Christopher was Professor of Orthopaedic Surgery at the university and a consultant orthopaedic surgeon at the John Radcliffe Hospital and the Nuffield Orthopaedic Centre from 1982 until his retirement in 2010.

He had studied Zoology at Oxford, then preclinical medicine in Cambridge, and returned to Oxford to complete his clinical studies. Along the way he was variously implicated in the overnight appearance of giant black footprints up and down the Tower of the Winds, and in overnight rearrangement of the city's one-way traffic signs to generate an inescapable loop.

Christopher was appointed Commander of the British Empire (CBE) for services to humanitarian medicine in 2016. He was honoured for his work with Doctors of the world, which provides medical care to people affected by war, natural disasters, disease, hunger, poverty or exclusion around the world.

Commenting on his recognition at the time, Christopher said, 'Getting involved in humanitarian aid work is the dream for many of us doctors and nurses. It has been an honour to contribute what I can. Certainly, helping those less well off than ourselves, especially when war or disaster has struck, feels like one of the most useful things that we can do.' Christopher was an enthusiastic supporter of the college, where he is remembered as an individual passionate and committed to his endeavours. He served in many roles, including chair of the Library Sub-committee.

Associate Fellow Lindy Castell recalls her time as a hip-replacement patient of Christopher's, 'In 2003, Chris Bulstrode undertook a hip replacement operation on me. I well remember him saying that, rather than a modern technique, he proposed to use an old tried and trusted prosthesis method. I am so glad he did, as I have never had a problem with my hip in the 20 years since he performed the operation.

'I also remember with affection when Chris and my college dinner guest (recently back from Kenya) talked enthusiastically in Swahili – there was a lot of laughter!'

Obituary Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh (www.rcsed.ac.uk)

<https://www.rcsed.ac.uk/news-public-affairs/news/2023/december/college-saddened-by-the-death-of-former-director-of-education-christopher-bulstrode>

The College is saddened to hear about the loss of Christopher Bulstrode. This poignant obituary pays tribute to our former Director of Education for RCSEd.

Christopher Bulstrode was Director of Education for the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh from 2010 - 2012. With his partner then wife, Victoria Hunt, they developed a series of very popular courses for Junior Doctors, Examiners, Dentists and the Intercollegiate Boards of Surgery, which the College then commissioned them to run worldwide. Chris made many trips to Sri Lanka and India, and also Hong Kong, Africa, Australia and Singapore. In all, he trained 26,000 clinicians.

He was just 16 when he was awarded a scholarship to Oxford to read medicine. To fill the year before he was 17 he was offered a junior post at the Max Planck Institute in Bavaria under Konrad Lorenz studying animal behaviour. He was fascinated. When he started in Oxford the following year, he found that the labs and the thinking in Oxford were not to his taste, and within a term, he changed to Zoology specialising in ornithology and marine biology. At a loss of what to do after his degree, a wise tutor advised him never to make a career out of what you love most – keep it as a hobby. So, he decided to drop Zoology and start again in Medicine, this time in Cambridge. After this he returned to Oxford for his clinical studies, where amongst many practical jokes, he organised a change-round of the road signs which were being set by the Council for the new Central Oxford road scheme scheduled to begin on April 1st. The traffic went into a closed loop and the jams were enormous. When the police finally arrived to interview him he was on his way to Scotland for 2 weeks of climbing while the dust settled.

After a spell in Africa, during which he met his first wife, Katherine, he returned to Edinburgh to take his FRCSs and start his training in Trauma and Orthopaedics while completing an MCh thesis on the treatment of Leg Ulcers. He was appointed to Oxford as a Clinical Reader and then a Professor specialising in hip and knee replacements.

After a spell on the General Medical Council, where he found change almost impossible, Chris joined the Territorial Army aged 56 as the oldest recruit ever, went to Sandhurst, and was immediately deployed to Afghanistan where he worked for seven months in the field assessing medical and refugee problems for the local Afghans.

On his return he joined Médecins du Monde (MDM) and was deployed to Gaza to perform reconstructive surgery on the injured Palestinians, later helping in Haiti, Ukraine and setting up and running the UK's Ebola Hospital in Sierra Leone. He received a CBE from his classmate Prince (now King) Charles for his humanitarian work.

Remaining a keen ornithologist throughout his life he took great pleasure in travelling back to Scotland with his children and with his second wife Victoria. Chris died on the 7th of December 2023 from complications associated with a degenerative neurological condition. He leaves two families and a wide circle of friends and colleagues who will miss him greatly.

<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/dr-chris-bulstrode-obituary-k6nsjv0xm>

Oxford professor of orthopaedic surgery who at 56 trained to treat soldiers on the front line in Afghanistan



Bulstrode, who played polo with Prince Charles at prep school, became a GP in Kenya and a lecturer in Tanzania before campaigning on behalf of junior doctors back in Britain

Chris Bulstrode made his first wife Katherine Homewood laugh more than anyone else she had ever known. He was, she said, outrageous. But there was a pivotal moment when she decided she “wanted to marry him and have his babies”.

They were alone in the wilderness of the East African Rift Valley. The Land Rover battery had gone flat overnight. Bump-starting wasn’t an option — the vehicle was perched on a slight downhill slope above a 1,000ft precipice.

But there was something of Houdini in Bulstrode’s highly creative, brilliant mind. He jump-started the vehicle with their torch batteries. Bulstrode, later professor of orthopaedic surgery at Green Templeton College, Oxford University, showed the same kind of imaginative wizardry as a student, albeit not so constructively. He was linked to giant black footprints that appeared up and down the Tower of the Winds, the 12-metre octagonal structure rising above the old Radcliffe Observatory in Oxford.

More sensationally, he re-arranged the city’s one-way traffic signs to generate an inescapable loop. The jams were enormous. By the time the police arrived to interview him, Bulstrode was Scotland-bound for two weeks climbing while the dust settled.

Non-conformist, left-wing, attention-seeking, Christopher John Kent Bulstrode was born in 1951, one of three children of Dr John Bulstrode, a radiologist, and his wife Jacqueline. They lived on Guernsey but Chris boarded, latterly at Radley College; initially at Cheam prep school, with the future King Charles.

Their teachers included the formidable Colonel Shipway, who shared Charles’s love of polo — he had even joined an Indian regiment so he could play a lot. But he terrified the young prince, who reportedly “took cover” behind Bulstrode whenever possible if Shipway appeared. The two men joked about their schooldays when Charles appointed Bulstrode CBE in 2016 for his work with Doctors of the World, which provides medics to regions struck by war, natural disasters and disease.

Precociously bright, Bulstrode took a year out before he was old enough to take up his Oxford medical scholarship. Unlikely as it may seem for a 16 or 17-year-old, he developed a passion for studying geese and other birds, thanks to work experience with the Nobel prizewinning zoologist Konrad Lorenz at the Max Planck Institute in Bavaria.

In a process that became known as “imprinting”, Lorenz had found that geese and other newborn animals formed an attachment to the first large moving object they met. When one group of geese hatched, he imitated a mother’s quacking sound. The hatchlings then regarded him as their mother.

The inspired Bulstrode dropped medicine for zoology at Oxford, leading undergraduate expeditions to Iceland to study geese and to South America to study plankton in river mouths. But, deciding against a career in ornithology or marine biology, after graduating he reverted to medicine, qualifying in Cambridge and Oxford.

Driven by wanderlust and an uneasy, restless spirit, Bulstrode began his medical career by driving across the Nubian desert to the Sudan-Ethiopia border with a colleague. They each opened a medical clinic in a refugee camp. But there was no food, so medicine was no help. Bulstrode became a GP in Mombasa, and a lecturer in veterinary pathology in Dar es Salaam, before returning to Britain to train in trauma and orthopaedics and complete a thesis on leg ulcer treatment.

Appointed a professor in 1992, he evoked mixed feelings among senior colleagues, from admiration for his kindness and compassion to intense dislike. Highly controversially, he believed surgical colleagues were exploiting long waiting lists to boost private income. He even argued that senior colleagues had been in the job too long and had “progressive indispensablitis”.

Campaigning for better conditions for junior doctors, who in the 1990s were routinely working more than a 100 hours a week, Bulstrode went undercover, posing as a night house officer to report on juniors’ working conditions. He was vehemently opposed by leading doctors, who insisted that a 48-hour week would stretch staffing levels to breaking point, disrupt continuity of care and adversely affect training.

Believing that medical education lacked compassion, Bulstrode and Victoria Hunt, a medical educationist who became his partner and finally second wife, devised a training programme to encourage medical students to discuss mutual problems. It was adopted in many countries, including the US, Australia, New Zealand and India.

Determined to drive change, he joined the General Medical Council, which sets standards for doctors and their trainers. Yet the highly conservative council was not receptive to the forthright Bulstrode. After one vexatious meeting he returned home to complain to Hunt about stifling medical bureaucracy. In an interview with The Times in 2008 he recalled: “She turned to me and said, ‘Actually you’re getting a bit pompous and dull. If you don’t do something new you’ll just freewheel into retirement and oblivion.’ Basically she dared me to offer the army my services, and I find dares irresistible.”

When he volunteered for the army as a trauma surgeon, the response was positive — until he revealed his age was 56. The recruiting office erupted into laughter, but he finally persuaded them he was serious. What made his application surprising was that he was, supposedly, a pacifist.



Bulstrode in August 2008

DOCTORS OF THE WORLD UK

While Hunt, whom he later married, might have understood his need for action, his former wife Katherine and their three children were less supportive — one was “incandescent”. They included Harry, now a neurosurgeon and researcher; John James, an Amnesty International fund manager; and Jenny, an academic historian.

Bulstrode’s adventurous, buccaneering spirit shrivelled under the harsh demands of the royal military academy at Sandhurst, where he gained one distinction — as its oldest officer trainee.

He said: “To say it was a shock to the system is something of an understatement. The army breaks you down to build you up again. There was a point when I was cold and very, very angry at being shouted at by some 20-something NCO [non-commissioned officer] after a horrendous training exercise, that I thought: ‘I’m a professor. People don’t speak to me like that.’ But, of course, to him, I was just an elderly new recruit.”

Bulstrode joined Sandhurst’s so-called “vicar and tarts course”, a six-week intensive programme for professional recruits such as lawyers, doctors and dentists.

Hunt said: “Chris lost two stones in six weeks, such was its intensity. He was the worst at marching they had ever known and had to be taken out to practice at dawn by the sergeant-major before the passing-out ceremony.”

He became a junior frontline doctor at Camp Bastion, in Helmand, Afghanistan. On patrol his last fantasy of derring-do evaporated when what he thought were two suicide bombers landed spreadeagled at his feet.

Stunned by gunfire that had knocked the men from their moped at a roadblock and surrounded by men half his age, he recalled: “I told myself. ‘Bulstrode, you’re facing the wrong way. You haven’t got a clue what’s going on. You’re never going to be Bruce Willis.’”



A Chinook lands during a humanitarian aid mission in Afghanistan, September 2004

GETTY IMAGES

He saw men rendered limbless and faceless. “One of the guys came in with both legs and an arm missing. He had a 20-month-old-daughter at home. We got him stabilised when he started swearing and shouting. I rushed to him and said: ‘What is it? Are you in pain?’ And he said: ‘No, I’ve just realised that I spent £120 on some Nike trainers and I haven’t got any legs, have I?’ That joke indicates the level of bravery.”

Bulstrode had told himself in the past, as someone who went on peace marches, that soldiers were stupid and unreasoning. “But in fact, I liked and admired many of the men and women I met. They’re a team of hugely loyal, talented, committed individuals who are passionate about their jobs. There are plenty of things I don’t like about the army, like the staggering weight of full combat gear and the gut-churning responsibility of going out on patrol, but I did savour the absolute simplicity of the life.”

After completing his scheduled three-month tour, he spent six months restructuring the Helmand healthcare services and working in refugee camps.

“Retiring” after Afghanistan, Bulstrode retrained as an emergency doctor in Invercargill, New Zealand, before working with Doctors of the World. He travelled to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and to Sierra Leone during the 2014-15 ebola outbreak. He also worked as an Antarctica cruise ship doctor.

His Sierra Leone homecoming reflected his characteristic, sometimes dark humour. In a British Medical Journal blog, he described leaving the house to see a neighbour walking her dog. Fearing he was infectious, she dropped her dog lead and ran. Bulstrode commented: “I have never seen her run before or since. It was a splendid sight and made me roar with laughter for the first time in weeks.”

Dr Chris Bulstrode CBE, surgeon, was born on January 5, 1951. He died of a progressive neurodegenerative disorder on December 7, 2023, aged 72