



DR JOHN WALSH

Hemingford Grey resident, Dr John Walshe, will be celebrating his **100th birthday on 24th April**. He was born in Kensington, London, to Sir Francis Walshe who was an internationally distinguished neurologist, working at the famous National Hospital for Nervous Diseases. Previously, Sir Francis was a Medical Officer in Alexandria, Egypt, during WW1 and had another older son called Peter

John made his own decision to walk in the footsteps of his father and both grandfathers (his paternal grandfather was also a Medical Officer, on the Caribbean isle of St Lucia and his maternal grandfather ran a business in England employing male nurses).

In 1939, John went to Trinity Hall, Cambridge to study medicine. He describes himself as having “taken every

brass rubbing available within cycling distance of the University”. He studied at Trinity Hall for three years and then in 1942 took his first job at University College Hospital in London where his father was then working.

Dr Walshe later served as a Captain in the Royal Army Medical Corp in the Middle East (including then Palestine) and Cyprus. He alludes to his time in Greece as: “seeing the country before tourism ruined it”. He was demobbed in 1948 and returned to University College Hospital.

In 1955, Dr Walshe located to the US where he took a Fellowship studying at Boston City Hospital. It was during this time that Dr Walshe made a ground breaking discovery which resulted in him finding a life-saving treatment for patients suffering from Wilson’s disease – a genetic terminal illness affecting people with high levels of copper in their body. Dr Walshe explains the symptoms as “similar to Parkinson’s Disease but much worse”. Medical figures calculate that 1 in 20,000 people suffer from this debilitating and life threatening illness but it could be underestimated due to potential inaccurate diagnosis

Dr Walshe discovered that a compound called Penicillamine could help patients suffering from Wilson’s disease which would improve the quality of life and extend their life expectancy. He persuaded a US laboratory to manufacture small amounts of the compound (which is a breakdown product from penicillin which ends up in the bladder, (making Penicillamine). Dr Walshe tested the manufactured medication on himself first before it was given to patients – he explains “in those days there were no trials”. He found that Penicillamine could “get the copper out of the body”. Dr Walshe describes this disease as being “all in the genes” and although he researched to find the root, he was never able to.

His first patient in the 1950's was a then dying 14 year old girl called Shirley. Shirley now continues to enjoy life, as a grandmother, thanks to Dr Walshe.

Dr Walshe became a Consultant Physician at Addenbrookes. After he retired from the hospital, he continued practising part time until he was 80, working one day a week at London's Middlesex Hospital. Dr Walshe continued into his 90's writing medical papers for The Lancet which fills 4 volumes.

In his personal life, Dr Walshe married Ann in 1956 in Kensington, (her mother was his father's secretary). The couple settled in Hemingford Grey in 1958 in a late 17th century Grade II * house... They had two daughters, Susan and Clare and three grandchildren. Part of Ann's time was spent typing up all of Lucy Boston's famous childrens' books for publication and delivering meals on wheels. She was also a great embroiderer. Ann sadly passed away in 2011 after 55 years of marriage. Dr Walshe says: "when we came to Hemingford Grey there were only 700 residents". He has seen a lot of changes, mainly increased development, but describes the village as "nice and quiet.



In his more mobile years, Dr Walshe was a very keen photographer and enjoyed taking pictures of churches and medieval stained glass windows. He still loves watching rugby and cricket, playing Patience on his computer and listening to classical music. He sadly reflects on the loss of people saying: "at my age, all my friends and contemporaries are gone". He has been able to stay in his beloved home, being cared for by his daughter Susan and son-in-law Phil, something Dr Walshe says he is "immensely grateful for".

At 100 years old and having witnessed many historic events such as Man landing on the moon, what does Dr Walshe see as the greatest thing that has happened to the human race in the 20th and 21st century so far? "The introduction of anti-biotics. Medicine has changed from an art to a science" he exclaims without hesitation. When asked his favourite piece of music, Dr Walshe says: "probably Danny Boy" but he also loves Abide With Me because the lyrics were written by one of his ancestors

Dr Walshe will celebrate his centenary with a small gathering of family and the Wilson's Disease group has also planned to throw a party for him in Cambridge on another day. He remains a much loved, well respected medical man. There are hundreds of grateful people worldwide who still revere Dr Walshe for his pioneering work to discover a treatment for them. A huge and worthwhile achievement in a long life. Happy Birthday Dr Walshe.