

# STEEL TRUE, BLADE STRAIGHT — HAMPSHIRE'S DOCTOR OF THE MILLENNIUM.

BY DR JOHN S. GILBODY

**W**HEN Paul Cave asked me to write about Hampshire's doctor of the millennium, I was taken aback. I could think of the most famous nurse — Florence Nightingale — and even the most famous writer wasn't too difficult. Charles Dickens? Jane Austen? But the most famous doctor was less obvious, and I had to do some research. With public records being what they are, I couldn't look back more than about 400 years. Another problem was the tendency of doctors to move around. So I decided to look for the most famous doctor to have practised in Hampshire. After delving into the history books, and consulting such bastions of medical history as the Wellcome Institute in London, I found the answer.

It is Spring 1999, and during my lunch break I drive to the village of Minstead, a few miles west of Southampton, to visit All Saints' Parish Church. Under the branches of a large oak tree on the south side of its 13th century churchyard I find what I am looking for — the large cross-shaped gravestone of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, who is buried there along with his wife Jean. It is a fitting resting place, as Doyle had lived at Bignell Wood — a house on the northern edge of the parish — and he referred to Minstead Church in his novel *The White Company*. At the base of the carved gravestone is a large block, which carries the following inscription:

STEEL TRUE  
BLADE STRAIGHT  
ARTHUR CONAN DOYLE  
KNIGHT  
PATRIOT, PHYSICIAN & MAN OF LETTERS  
22 MAY 1859-7 JULY 1930  
AND HIS BELOVED, HIS WIFE  
JEAN CONAN DOYLE  
REUNITED 27 JUNE 1940

A lesser known fact is that the original grave marker was made of wood — a gift from a local craftsman — and is still kept in the tower. If you ask Peter Murphy the Rector nicely, he may agree to show it to you!

There are plenty of facts about Conan Doyle, but what was he like as a person?

Thankfully, some rare recordings allow us to go beyond the written word. Travel back with me to 1930, and shortly before his death a 70-year-old Conan Doyle records a gramophone record. His accent is melodious, softly Scottish, careful and deliberate.

"I was educated in a very severe and critical school of medical thought, especially coming under the influence of Dr Bell of Edinburgh who had the most remarkable powers of observation. He prided himself that when he looked at a patient he could tell not only their disease, but very often their occupation and place of residence. Reading some



*Sir Arthur Conan Doyle*

detective stories I was struck by the fact that their results were obtained in nearly every case by chance. I thought I would try my hand at writing a story in which the hero would treat crime as Dr Bell treated disease and where science would take the place of chance." This is perhaps the most authentic record of the origin of Sherlock Holmes.

Despite the fame of Holmes, Doyle's main interest was spiritualism, and in a film made a year earlier by Fox-Case Movietone, he spoke mainly on this subject. A monocle hangs from his double-breasted jacket. He has the fatherly appearance of countless movie Watsons.

"There are two things that people always ask me," he begins.

"One is how I came to write the Sherlock Holmes stories, the other is about how I came to have psychic experiences and to take so much interest in that question."

He states that he became convinced that spiritualism was all-important "in the time of the (First World) war when all these splendid young fellows were disappearing from our view. ... When I talk on this subject I'm not talking about what I believe, I'm not talking about what I think, I'm talking about what I know."

He emphasises that he always had witnesses and proof. Indeed, Conan Doyle promised his wife that when he died he would provide her with the ultimate evidence of life beyond the grave. Sadly for all of us, this proof never came. Most famously, Conan Doyle declared the Cottingley Fairy photographs to be genuine in 1922, although these are now



*This goblet to commemorate the 50th anniversary of Conan Doyle's death was designed by Ronald Good, who for a spell combined running his Southampton insurance business with running the Minstead Village shop. This goblet was the only one produced as it proved to be too costly to manufacture.*

known to be fake. A movie about this event — *FairyTale: A True Story* — was recently produced.

Of all Conan Doyle's achievements, the greatest was undoubtedly his prolific writing. Whether letters, poems, newspaper columns, magazine stories or novels, Conan Doyle turned his hand to all of them. His crowning achievement was the most famous fictional character of all time — Sherlock Holmes — about whom more movies have been made (starting in 1903) than any other character. In December 1893 (the year Henry Ford produced his first car), Conan Doyle killed off Holmes in a struggle with Moriarty — the "Napoleon of crime" — at the Reichenbach Falls in Switzerland. The reason? He preferred writing historical and romantic fiction. He wrote to his mother: "I think of slaying Holmes ... and winding him up for good and all. He takes my mind from better things."

Despite this, Conan Doyle later admitted that he "buried his chequebook" along with Holmes! The event shocked the world, and was widely reported by the media. People wore black armbands, and 20,000 subscriptions to the *Strand Magazine* were cancelled. Conan Doyle initially resisted attempts to resurrect Holmes, but relented in 1901 when he wrote *The Hound of the Baskervilles*. Other characters to have graced the pen of Conan Doyle included Brigadier Gerard and Professor Challenger. The latter character first

appeared in the novel *The Lost World*, which has been the inspiration for several famous movies.

### **He fought for the underdog**

Conan Doyle wrote to the newspapers on many topics, and was always a strong campaigner for the underdog. His interests in medicine and crime solving came together in 1907, when he wrote to the *Lancet* and *British Medical Journal* to request the opinion of ophthalmologists as to whether George Edalji could have mutilated a pony as charged, in view of his severe myopic astigmatism. Edalji was sentenced to seven years in prison based on dubious evidence, and Conan Doyle's investigations and articles caused a storm of indignation throughout the country. A Government committee was formed to report on the case, and the Law Society re-admitted Edalji to their roll of solicitors.

### **He was a fine sportsman**

Conan Doyle was a prominent cricketer — once capturing the wicket of the great W.G. Grace — and football player. He was a member of the British motor-racing team in the Prince Henry tour of 1911, and also skied, played golf and rugby, indulged in rifle shooting, and was an amateur boxer. Most notably, he invented cross-country skiing while in Switzerland.

### **He was a patriot**

In 1896, Conan Doyle was a war correspondent in Egypt, observing Kitchener's desert campaigns. During the Boer War in 1900 he served as senior physician at the Langman Field Hospital. After observing the epidemic of enteric fever amongst the troops he wrote a moving account to the *British Medical Journal* stating that "we lost more from the enteric than from the bullet in South Africa." Doyle concluded that: "There is one mistake we have made, and it is one which will not be made in any subsequent campaign. Inoculation for enteric was not made compulsory. If it had been so I believe that we should have escaped from most of its troubles." This recommendation was remarkable in that typhoid vaccine was not widely known at the time. A Royal Commission was set up — at which Doyle gave evidence — and military policy was changed. More broadly, Doyle was a great advocate of routine vaccination for the country as a whole.

Following the Boer War, there was an extraordinary outbreak of defamation around the world over Britain's conduct, and this prompted Conan Doyle to write a short pamphlet — *The War in South Africa: Its Cause and Conduct* — which was widely translated. It was patriotic, though not overtly propagandic, and made Doyle something of a national hero. Indeed, the favourable reaction to the pamphlet led to Doyle being knighted in 1902. Interestingly, he initially declined the honour thinking it was for creating Sherlock Holmes, but was persuaded to accept it when he was informed that it was for "something serious!"

### **He was an adventurer**

Conan Doyle craved adventure. While a fourth year medical student he spent seven months on an Arctic whaler as a ship's surgeon. Following graduation he held a similar position for three months on an African steamer, and throughout his life travelled widely around the world. He adventured in other ways too, and on one occasion self-experimented with gelsemium "to ascertain how far one might go in taking the drug, and what the primary symptoms of an overdose might be." This is from his letter to the *British Medical Journal* in 1879: "On Saturday and Sunday, I took three drachms and 200 minims. The diarrhoea was so

persistent and prostrating, that I must stop at 200 minims. I felt great depression and a severe frontal headache. The pulse was still normal, but weak." Deaths had been widely reported from doses of less than half this amount, so he was a brave man indeed!

What of Hampshire? Conan Doyle arrived at Clarence Pier, Southsea in June 1882, and practised at Southsea as a general practitioner until December 1890. Starting from nothing, he built up his practice to £300 a year (although this was not sustained), and pursued an impressive range of activities. Over the course of a single year, for example, he managed to run his practice; write two novels, a medical research thesis and a number of short stories; play cricket, football and bowls; pursue his hobby of photography; act as Secretary of the Literary Society; and get married!

There is, however, a great irony about Conan Doyle's time in Southsea. Though probably the most famous doctor to have practised in Hampshire, it was the very failure of his practice to thrive that led Doyle — in these moments of solitude — to write the Holmes and other stories! As Doyle said himself: "An unkind American once remarked that the most sinister feature of my career was that no living patient of mine had ever yet been seen." As a doctor, I feel something of a traitor saying this, but what we would have lost if his practice had succeeded . . .

There are no records of Conan Doyle's conduct with patients during his years of general practice in Southsea, but he is well-known to have been a humanist. Here is a description, from a colleague, of his behaviour towards patients as a medical student: "Conan Doyle impressed me chiefly by his very kind and considerate manner towards the poor people who came to the out-patient department, whom I'm afraid some of us were in the habit of treating somewhat cavalierly."

In 1900, while serving as a voluntary physician in South Africa during the Boer War it was said: "It was difficult to associate him with the author of Sherlock Holmes: he was a doctor pure and simple, an enthusiastic doctor too. I never saw a man throw himself into duty so thoroughly heart-and-soul . . . It fascinated me to watch their cheery doctor carrying the sunshine with him wherever he went, worshipped by all."

In an address to medical students at St. Mary's Hospital in London in 1910, Conan Doyle stated: "There is another facet which life will teach you, which is the value of kindness and humanity as well as knowledge. A strong and kindly personality is as valuable an asset as actual learning . . . I have known men in the profession who were stuffed with accurate knowledge, and yet were so cold in their bearing, so unsympathetic in their attitude, assuming the role rather of a judge than a friend, that they left their half-frozen patients all the worse for their contact."

During a scientific era when doctors increasingly looked at patients as just the vehicle for a disease, Conan Doyle believed in holistic, humanistic medicine and showed concern for the patient as a thinking and feeling individual.

Just in time for the next millenium, this approach to medicine is thankfully returning, and is another example of how Conan Doyle was way ahead of his time. Ironically, he prompted the opposite trend in detective work, namely the development of a scientific approach.

So, whenever you read the adventures of Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson, Professor Challenger, Brigadier Gerard, or his other creations, think of Southsea and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and be inspired! If we all lived to our full potential as he did, and still managed to be "steel true" and "blade straight," the world would be a much better place!

---

# The Good, the Bad and the Ugly Sisters

## John Bull reviews this year's pantos

A pleasant buzz of anticipation as the house lights go down, darkening the gilded decor and the red plush.

A fanfare from the orchestra. Up goes the curtain and the stage is suddenly full of beautifully dressed singers and dancers launching into a full-bloodied opening number.

It's magic time again at the Christmas pantomime.

The Dame will once again chase someone round a bedroom, with lots of old beams and panelled walls which slide back to let the Ghost nip in and out while everyone in the audience shouts 'Look behind you!'

You'll be expected to cheer or hiss, as required.

Of course, you know what's coming. That's what is so satisfying about this traditional and unique English entertainment. Miraculously, whatever show it is, no matter how many times you've seen it, talented players give it a new breath of life every time.

There's always a transformation scene. That's where you go 'ooh' and 'aah' as the white mice turn into six groomed ponies, and the pumpkin becomes a glittering golden coach. And there's that wonderful bit where kids go up on stage and join in the fun.

A couple of million of us at least will go to a panto this Christmas. In an unusual break with tradition,

Southampton's Mayflower, the biggest and best venue in the south, has dropped the panto to concentrate on staging *The Phantom of the Opera* to kick off the new millennium. A decision bound to give the theatre's famous ghost something to moan about.

However, Southampton will have *Cinderella* at the Guildhall (Dec 21 — Jan 16) with Jack Douglas as Baron Hardup, Ruth Madoc, Maureen Nolan and John 'Boycie' Challis, as an Ugly Sister.

There's *Jack and the Beanstalk* at the Anvil, Basingstoke (Dec 17 — Jan 9) with Ian Lavender, Kirsten O'Brien and Lynda Baron. Another 'Jack' at the King's, Southsea (Dec 16 — Jan 8) with Alan Jenkins and Jane Pegler.

Salisbury Playhouse also offers *Cinderella* (Dec 4 — Jan 15), featuring Laura O'Day. And Princes Hall, Aldershot (Dec 11 — 30) presents *Seeta Indrani* (from *The Bill*) as Peter Pan and featuring Poppy the cat from BBC TV's *Playdays* — whatever happened to Nana, the Darlings' dog?

If you want something different, Freddie Eldrett's 'theatre in a back garden', the unique *Prince Regent* at Farnborough, is putting on *Snoopy*, based on the Peanuts cartoon figure.

So much choice, so much talent.