

Tribute to Surgeon Heroine of War Responsible for the Saving of Many Lives

Peter Sherrad

The life and work of Gertrude Toland, a surgeon and Dover GP, who saved the lives of many Dunkirk soldiers and civilians during World War Two, was remembered on Friday 17th August. A plaque was unveiled in her honour in Buckland Hospital by her son, Gordon, in the presence of the Chairman of the East Kent Hospitals University NHS Foundation Trust Professor Stephen Smith; Deputy Medical Director of the Trust Jonathan Purday; the Right Worshipful the Town Mayor of Dover; Councillor Mrs Susan Jones, President Elect of the Rotary Club of Dover; David Fisher; members of her son's family; Rotarians and friends.

Fulsome tributes were paid to Dr Gertrude Mary Beatrice Toland MD, FRCS., (1901-1985) by Professor Smith, Jonathan Purday and Councillor Jones before her son, Gordon, was invited to unveil a plaque specially commissioned by the Rotary Club of Dover members. In his tribute Professor

Smith indicated it was highly appropriate to remember Gertrude Toland in the year when the NHS was commemorating the 70th anniversary of its foundation and he praised her achievements while reminding his audience that the Health Service was reliant on very many people including surgeons, nurses, consultants and other health care professionals, as well as ancillary staff. Mr Purday recalled that Gertrude Toland trained at St Mary's Hospital, London, where she qualified MD in 1930 gaining the FRCS in 1931 and being one of the very early women doctors to be awarded this. He said he and Professor Smith felt privileged and honoured to be attending the ceremony to honour Gertrude Toland as they both had attended St Mary's Hospital. He referred to her wartime work of coping with hospital duties as well as her GP practice and especially at a period of great challenge during the evacuation of Dunkirk when she worked tirelessly for nine days, with others operating on severely injured troops landed at Dover.



Dr Gertrude Toland in Retirement

Mayor of Dover, Mrs Sue Jones, in her tribute to Dr Toland, referred to the fact she had made significant advances as a woman in what had hitherto been very much the domain of men and it was particularly worthy to remember her contribution to securing equality for women in her profession. She thanked members of the Rotary Club of Dover for their initiative in providing the plaque and indicated her research showed that Gertrude served as a Town Councillor and had been Deputy Mayor of Dover in the 1960's.

Having unveiled the plaque, Gordon Toland, who was accompanied by his wife Elizabeth, read out its inscription and thanked the NHS Trust and its Chairman and Medical Director for allowing the memorial to be placed in the new Buckland Hospital and thanked them and the Mayor for their attendance and their kind words about his mother. He thanked the Rotary Club of Dover for its initiative and the President Elect, David Fisher, for his attendance at the ceremony. Gordon singled out my initiative in ensuring both that an original plaque had been placed in the former hospital in 1991 and for arranging the replacement plaque in memory of Dr Gertrude Toland to be erected in the new hospital, in a location accessible to members of the public. Gordon indicated his mother was born in Edinburgh and had married his father, Dr Patrick Toland, in 1932 moving to Dover where she worked in the Royal Victoria and Buckland Hospitals as well as being a GP at Clyde House in Maison Dieu Road until her retirement. He recalled his mother had broken through several glass ceilings in her career and that in the war, in addition to her surgeon duties in the hospital, she single-handedly ran the GP practice as Dr Patrick was called up as a medic with the

army in Italy, returning to the joint practice in 1945. He recalled his mother operated during wartime in underground bunkers at Buckland Hospital and during the nine days of unrelenting work at the time of the Dunkirk evacuation operated on more than 350 wounded troops of whom some 300 survived. She had recalled that the teams of surgeons, one of which was led by her, worked side by side on two operating tables ministering to the wounded, many of whom had arrived at the hospital wearing their dirty field dressings. Gordon mentioned his mother also attended many people injured by the constant shelling of Dover from the German guns in Calais. She remained in Dover, known as Hellfire Corner, throughout the war driving to different hospitals in her Morris car often at night in the blackouts, which was dangerous. In addition to Buckland and The Royal Victoria a hospital was located at Waldershare during the years of conflict. Gertrude and her husband retired from their practice in 1968, he subsequently dying in 1979 and she in 1985. Post war she had also worked as a consultant gynaecologist and obstetrician.

Neither Gertrude or Patrick Toland received any official recognition by the nation, or the town, during their lifetimes for their many contributions to Dover's life and while a memorial bench was unveiled on the seafront on 27th May 1990 by the then Mayor, Councillor W. Newman as part of the 50th anniversary of the Dunkirk evacuation commemorations, it was not until the Rotary Club of Dover commissioned a memorial plaque in the Rotary year 1990-1991 that a dedicated fixed memorial to this outstanding lady was unveiled near to where she operated in the



Dr Gertrude Toland with son Gordon at Clyde House

former Buckland Hospital. I was privileged to be the President of the Rotary Club at that time. Following the demolition of the former Buckland Hospital I made inquiry as to the whereabouts of the memorial plaque and ascertained it had been lost. In conjunction with the Hospital Trust I set about to rectify matters. Thanks to the willingness of the Trust to display a replacement plaque and the co-operation of Amanda Bedford of the Trust and with the agreement of Gordon Toland, a new plaque with agreed wording was produced which is now on display in the reception area in the 'new' Buckland Hospital. For many Doverians it was hugely disappointing that such a remarkable woman was not recognised in her lifetime so I was pleased to be able to unveil the original plaque in 1991 as well as being privileged to initiate a replacement. Tribute should be paid to the Hospital Trust generally for remedying the loss of the

original plaque by offering a location for a replacement which, appropriately, is sited below some photographs presented by the League of Friends of the hospital and which in particular focus on the operating context of the former hospital. I found it satisfying to be present to see Gordon Toland unveil a second permanent memorial to his mother in the 'new' Buckland Hospital so that her life and works can be retained for posterity and in a medical environment which would be all too familiar for her.

The Rotary ethic is based upon "Service above Self", which words appear on the new plaque together with the Rotary logo. "A finer example of service above self would be hard to find" said a club spokesman.

In April 2018 the Dover Society installed a blue plaque at Clyde House in memory of Gertrude Toland.

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