

"It is always necessary to preserve what many of us feel to be genuine osteopathy. There is always an outside pressure on osteopathy which, if we react to it rightly, is perhaps a good thing. But there is also an original osteopathic idea which is different from the medical idea, and different specifically from the orthopaedic idea" - John Wernham



John Wernham
DO FICO FCO
Osteopath
1907 - 2007

John Wernham (JW) died on the 9th February, a few months short of his 100th birthday. He was the world's oldest practicing osteopath. Those sanitized obituaries already published are from the hands of the same osteopathic politicians who tried so unsuccessfully to make the last years of his long life so difficult. But, he always fought back. "His mind is sharp, his wit sharper," reported a newspaper article of the then 97 year old John Wernham.

Early Years

John Wernham was a Fleet Street photographer when age 28 he began studying at the British School of Osteopathy. His tutor and founder of the School was J M Littlejohn, one of the first students of A T Still. A class mate was Alan Stoddard who graduated in 1935 and immediately went on to become a medical doctor, serving as a ships doctor in the Royal Navy during World War Two. JW, though, could not afford his last year's fees and ended up in the army as a military intelligence cameraman.

In an interview with Kent News in 2004, he remembered his dislike of army authority, "It's undignified to shout at people ... They knew me as a bolshie - I wouldn't salute and I wouldn't say sir. They didn't know what to do ... They knew I was a non-combatant, a pacifist, but a good photographer." JW, though, did have great admiration for the leadership skills of General Montgomery. "I started my battle life at El Alemain [North Africa, 1942]. We had the stuff, we had the men and we just knocked hell out of them. Monty was a key figure ... We all knew a real commander was there."



The John Wernham College of Classical Osteopathy

He graduated after the War but, after Littlejohn's death in 1947, JW believed his successors at the BSO were changing the original teachings and physiological insights of Littlejohn and Still. The engineering principles of Applied Mechanics were not utilized to understand how the body functions and malfunctions. Treatments were near-chiropractic or near-orthopaedic, but with little osteopathy.

JW adopted the already used name of Classical Osteopathy to express the traditional nature of a holistic rather than an allopathic medicinal approach to osteopathy and established an itinerant clinic to pursue these aims in 1949. The clinic settled near the centre of Maidstone. Five years later he started teaching postgraduates there and for the rest of his life, he was as much teacher as practitioner. "The numbers don't matter," when asked later about how many osteopaths he has trained, "It is the quality of the man that counts". His teaching methods were described by one of his then students as eclectic rather than rigidly exclusive Osteopathy.



There was always political controversy with the other colleges throughout the years but many have remarked of his friendship with Tom Dummer. Together they founded what became the ESO in Maidstone but he was unhappy with, among many problems, the later emphasis on Cranial Osteopathy and left, leaving his original investment with the school.

JW started the JWCCO in 1984 to teach Classical Osteopathy to undergraduates. He was 76 years old. 14 years later, he moved it from Maidstone to NESCOL at Epsom to become the first four year full-time BSc osteopathic course actually on a campus.



Maidstone Clinic and JWCCO

When the University applied for GOsC accreditation in 2000, the assessors, among whom was Mr Nicholas Woodhead, failed it on absurd grounds and so JW asked a barrister to apply for a Judicial Review. The GOsC immediately came back and said, if NESCOL just covered a few points, they would reassess the course in 6 months but only if JW dropped his plans for the Judicial Review. Of course, when the GOsC returned after the time for the Judicial Review had expired, they recorded even more points of failure and went out of their way to fail or only conditionally register most of the tutors there. JW then left NESCOL who, after bringing in ex-MRO tutors among whom was Mr Nicholas Woodhead, re-applied and were eventually accredited. What remained was not Classical Osteopathy.

Questions were raised in the House of Commons but, as usual, Health Ministers refused to do anything. In a 2001 Sunday Telegraph interview, JW commented, "We have a small group of people who are mishandling the [Osteopaths] Act and destroying people's livelihoods. They are modernists and dislike the classicists".

"Retire! Good heavens, no. I'm a workaholic, always have been"



He always retained the steadfast confidence in his ability to ease suffering. For fifty years when he was not teaching abroad, JW cycled into his clinic six days a week and worked at least a nine hour day. In his later years, he concentrated more on writing, publishing and lecturing. "I'm happiest when I'm working - what's the difference between work and pleasure? I've been doing it for 70 years - why stop? And I'm teaching others to carry on," he said in a BBC interview of 7th June 2006. One of his students in the early 1990s used to give JW a lift most evenings by putting the bike in the back of his van. He thinks he probably learnt most of his osteopathy taking him to and from home.

When the GOsC showed their customary, offensive insensitivity to him, JW reacted in characteristic manner, as can be seen in an example on the next two pages.
