

Distinguished Old Girls

Dr Patricia Nickson OBE

In last year's Masonica we published a very moving tribute from her sister Nikki Cranston. Earlier this year, we found the following obituary on the website of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine which is reprinted here with kind permission from the LSTM. This pays tribute to her professional life which was one of tremendous commitment and dedication.

One of the mission giants of her generation, Pat worked in Northern Australia, Bangladesh, Afghanistan and The Congo and became a world authority in her field, working closely with the World Health Organisation, the World Council of Churches and LSTM.

After moving to Bangladesh in 1975, she ran a rural health programme and developed her expertise. She acquired even surgical skills, from emergency caesarean sections to rewiring fractured jaws. "I learnt there that I had to understand the culture before I could ever begin to practice health care," she said. In 1982, she was posted to the Democratic Republic of Congo, where she worked until 2004. She was a leading trainer of indigenous healthcare workers and became an authority on utilising the healing properties of local herbs.

In 1992, she founded the Institut Panafricain de Santé Communautaire et Medecine Tropicale (IPASC - the Pan-African Institute of Community Health) with academic support from LSTM.

Despite some terrifying episodes as the war raged in The Congo, a second centre was opened in 1998 and IPASC remains strong. Pat herself was abducted and held at gunpoint with nine others in the Mission Aviation Fellowship hangar at Nyankunde. On another occasion she was interrogated by security forces for two days - during which time she was so terrified she could neither eat nor drink. The biggest tragedy of all happened in 2002 when the whole complex was destroyed in inter-tribal conflict and many students and staff were killed. Pat was Dean of IPASC at the time and was away from Nyankunde attending to duties at a hospital in England. Despite the security risk she wanted to go to Oicha to join the refugees. "If I am killed, there are lots of other people to carry on, but while I'm here I'm responsible for the



The Plaque outside the Nickson Room at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine

Institute" was her comment.

Pat's commitment and dedication provided an example for others to follow, at IPASC, at LSTM and in every other part of the world that she visited. In 2004 she was ordained into the Anglican ministry. Then in 2005 she was awarded the OBE for her services to Africa, which she accepted with characteristic humility. All who knew her agree that she was a person of exceptional energy and strength and it was a privilege to enjoy

her company for as long as we did. She is survived by two sisters and a brother. Dr Patricia Nickson OBE, Health Adviser to the Christian Medical Commission (Geneva), renowned community health pioneer and Lecturer at LSTM died on 26 April, 2009.

Obituary reprinted from the LSTM website

We were very pleased to hear from Len Smith, previously Head of Music at RMS and now the organist at St Mary's Upton, Pat's home church. He tells us that a teaching room has been named for Pat at the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. Known as "The Nickson Room", it was dedicated to her memory in January 2010. The ceremony included Congolese music and a great spread of food organized by members of St Mary's. Several people spoke of Pat's radical vision for community health. Her faith and her vision have inspired many and had a far reaching influence. The Rev Graeme Skinner from St Mary's Upton has kindly sent us a photo of Patricia Nickson's plaque, unveiled on this distinguished and joyful occasion.

A website devoted to Pat's life and work has been set up, called "Diamonds in the Darkness" <http://www.diamonds-in-the-darkness.co.uk/>

Pamela Brooks (Lidstone) 1921 - 2003

School and University

Pamela went to the Royal Masonic School at the age of 10. She was born in Mauritius where her father was an architect and surveyor serving with the Corps of Royal Engineers. She was a pupil at Clapham and Rickmansworth and she was in Moira House. Her school career was distinguished and in 1938 she won the History prize. Bertha Dean, the Headmistress, was ambitious for her and wanted her to try for Cambridge. Their relationship appears to have been a tempestuous one, characterised by a battle of wills. On one of her school reports, Bertha Dean wrote, "I am

not sure if the school is big enough for both of us." Pamela went to Reading University where she was one of only two undergraduates to undertake the newly introduced Honours Degree, the equivalent of PPE at Oxford. She gained a 2:1.

War years

On leaving university, she was called up and joined the Foreign Office where aptitude tests revealed her special analytical skills and this resulted in her being drafted to Bletchley Park. One of the tests was the speed with which the candidate solved the Daily Telegraph

Crossword. Pamela's skill in doing this was legendary and in later life, she and her husband would vie with each other as to who could complete it first, the record being seven minutes! Little is known of her time at Bletchley Park because all members of staff signed the Official Secrets Act and never spoke about it, even to their closest family members.

Sinclair McKay in *The Secret Life of Bletchley Park* writes of the immense challenges posed by the work of code breaking which "would require not merely diamond-sharp minds, but also young people with the energy and character to face exhausting trials of patience. Recruits with the strength to focus every single day upon tasks of stunning complexity, without letting the pressure undermine their mental well-being." Much of the work was boring and repetitive belying the glamorous image of popular accounts such as that found in Robert Harris's *Enigma*. The teams worked literally round the clock in gruelling eight-hour shifts and the work was very pressurised, requiring great speed and accuracy. I would like to think that it was not only Pamela's brilliant mind, but also her experience of institutional life, that sustained her through this period.

All through the war, Pamela's family thought she was working for the Foreign Office, and neither then, nor afterwards, did they realise the true nature of her work. Only at her funeral, when tributes were being paid to her life, did her family learn from a senior member of the Foreign Office, what she did and the high regard in which she was held for the work she did at Bletchley. Her name is entered on the Roll of Honour of those who worked at Bletchley Park. The Roll of Honour reveals that she worked in hut 13 on the Japanese codes. An obituary printed in the *Worthing Times* informs us that she was a naval decoder and she worked under Angus Wilson. He later nominated her for an award with the Order of the British Empire. It is reported that, on one occasion, Angus Wilson announced to those working in Hut 13, "I have seven New Year's Honours to recommend to the Cabinet Office in the order of the British Empire. But, as you are all equally worthy of such an honour, I want to put all your names into a hat. The first seven names I draw out will be the ones put forward." At the end of the war, he burnt all Hut 13 records.

Other famous denizens of Bletchley Park included Alan Turing, who invented the bombe machines, crucial to the decoding process and Ian Fleming, author of the James Bond novels. Pamela

met Ian Fleming many years later when she and her husband were living in Trinidad.

Life was not all drudgery, and, as home to so many brilliant young people, Bletchley Park enjoyed a rich and varied social and cultural life. People were recruited from all walks of life and staff included talented actors and musicians. Pamela may have participated in the performances and concerts that took place regularly. She is remembered by all who knew her for her laughter, and, later in life, friends recall that at the Bridge Club, her table was always the one with the most laughter coming from it.

Post War years

Pamela met her husband, Alan Brooks at University and they married after the war. He worked for UNESCO, founding teacher-training colleges throughout the British Commonwealth. Pamela accompanied him on all his postings to far-flung corners of the world including the Sudan, West Indies, Nigeria and Papua, New Guinea, until his death in 1974.

She always spoke of the school with warmth and gratitude. One of her letters, written in 1938, just before she left school, sheds an interesting light on school life at the time.

"Yesterday we had an absolutely glorious time. We left here about 10.30am and motored to Hampton Court, then had a stupendous lunch at The Mitre. The Committee of course joined us for lunch, after which Pat [Eade] and I left the others in the school bus and motored down to Lord Donoughmore's place at Chelwood Beacons with Mr and Mrs Beachcroft [Mr Beachcroft was the school secretary]. After tea we played tennis and croquet and swam and then after having supper we came back to school arriving at 11pm."

When she was discharged from Bletchley Park, the Freemasons supported her taking a year's



Pamela Brooks after her graduation from Reading University

postgraduate course in administration and secretarial work at Denham College, London. She joined the stock-broking firm of Sydney Simon as PA to the Chair, Sidney Simon himself, who described her analytical skills as "a godsend to the firm". One of her closest friends described her as "one of those people who are put on earth for a special purpose and who are an honour to know."

*Vivian Wright
Atholl, 1963*

Sources

Most of the information for this article was provided by Pamela's brother, John Lidstone and he also sent us the obituary from The Worthing Times. I have also made use of Sinclair McKay's book The Secret Life of Bletchley Park, a fascinating account of the war years, in the words of the men and women who worked there. The Bletchley Park website, <http://www.bletchleypark.org.uk/>, contains a wealth of information and includes the Roll of Honour.