



Sir Roger Bannister with a 19th century ceramic head used by Victorian phrenologists – which reminds him of the advances science has made during his medical career as a neurologist

When my brother Michael Harry came from Australia to visit me in 1970, he wanted to make a pilgrimage to the Iffley Road running track where Sir Roger Bannister ran the first sub-four minute mile on May 6, 1954 – with the help of Christopher Chataway and Christopher Brasher.

If, like me, you remember 1954, you will appreciate the morale-boosting effect this event had on the country.

Life in post-war Britain was largely grim and grey – illuminated in 1951 by the Festival of Britain, and in 1953, by the conquest of Everest and the coronation of Elizabeth II.

When Sir Roger achieved what many thought impossible, we felt we had entered a new world, filled with possibilities.

1954 was also the year when wartime rationing finally ended.

“All that training was done on a limited diet,” Sir Roger recalled. “I cannot understand people who are nostalgic for the 1950s – they were very tough times.”

You can find video clips of Sir Roger’s record-breaking run at the Iffley Road track on the Internet.

“Just look at that action as his long legs take him nearer to that world record,” the BBC commentator enthused.

Sylvia Vetta talks to Sir Roger Bannister on the eve of the 57th anniversary of his record-breaking run at Oxford’s Iffley Road track

Norris McWhirter (perhaps best known as the publisher of *The Guinness Book of Records*) was the timekeeper on the day. He excited the onlookers by delaying the announcement of the record breaking time as long as possible.

He said: “As a result of event four, the one mile, the winner was R G Bannister of Exeter and Merton Colleges, in a time which, subject to ratification, is a track record, an English native record, a United Kingdom record, a European record, in a time of three minutes . . .”

The roar of the crowd, which drowned out the rest of the announcement, could be heard a mile away.

Later that same year, on August 7 at the British Empire and Commonwealth Games held in Vancouver, Roger Bannister competed against John Landy – the Australian athlete who was the second man to achieve a sub-four minute mile – for the first time in a race billed as ‘The Miracle Mile’.

It is said that 100 million people heard the race commentary on the radio, while millions more watched on television. The outcome of the race will have pleased all true Brits. On the final turn of the last lap, as Landy looked over his left shoulder, Bannister raced past him on the right.

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Sir Roger and Lady Moyra Bannister pictured at Lady Bannister’s retrospective exhibition at The Dragon School

Photographs: Marc West

World record and beyond



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Vancouver commissioned a larger-than-life bronze statue of the two athletes by artist Jack Harman to commemorate the event.

While that day in 1954 stands out for many of us, Sir Roger revealed that he is prouder of other achievements during his career in medicine.

"I was a 25 year-old medical student at St Mary's Medical School when I ran the four minute mile and qualified as a doctor six weeks later," Sir Roger said.

"St Mary's was the hospital where Alexander Fleming isolated crude penicillin, in 1921, although it was synthesised here in Oxford by Florey and Chain, in the 1940s," he said.

In 1958, conscripted as a medical officer Sir Roger was sent to Aden – now the Yemen, then a British protectorate – to fathom the mysteries of a heat-related illness after troops died of heatstroke. Sir Roger marched up and down mountains with the soldiers to work out what the problem was.

He continued the research when he was back in the UK, and as a result of Roger's work it was accepted that care in the treatment of infections would reduce the likelihood of heatstroke.

Roger recommended that if a soldier had an infection he should not exercise in the sun and thereby avoid the risk of death through heatstroke.

Lady Moyra Bannister, Sir Roger's wife of 56

years, recalled the results of that research. "Knowing that lives depended on his work, Roger put himself at risk," she explained. "Back in London, he injected himself with pyrogens made from bacteria and exercised in a heat chamber made to simulate conditions in Aden, and published the results in a paper in *The Lancet*.

"I just remember, after one experiment, I opened the door at home to find him standing there him looking green and ill. It would not be allowed now."

Sir Roger added: "That was how a lot of research was done in those days. You often had to be a guinea-pig."

Sir Roger once said of the sub-four minute mile: "The man who can drive himself further once the effort gets painful is the man who will win." Again and again he has applied that attitude to medical research.

"My training and first appointment in neurology was in 1959, at the National Hospital for Nervous Diseases, in Queen Square, which was the first hospital in the world to specialise in neurology. I became a consultant, in 1963, shared between Queen Square and St Mary's Hospital, Paddington."

Sir Roger's desert island choice – a 19th century ceramic head used by Victorian phrenologists – is inspired by his interest in the workings of the brain.

"I am most fortunate in having led a satisfying life as a neurologist with a special interest in research into the autonomic nervous

system," he said. "As a neurologist, my choice to take on the desert island is this head," he said.

"A Victorian phrenologist would feel the lumps on a patient's head using the ridiculous notion that qualities like ideology, caution and insight were situated in particular regions of the brain. Moyra bought it from an antiques shop as a joke. But it shows how much my subject of neurology has advanced in the last 100 years.

"I have chosen this as a startling reminder of how spectacular the advances in neurology have been. The achievements of the early British neurologists at Queen Square should fill us with pride, as their work is carried forward," Sir Roger explained.

"During 30 years practicing as a neurologist and doing research, the new procedures, such as brain scanning, have advanced the scope of neurology rapidly.

"For instance, with a stroke victim we are able to use imaging to find where a vessel is blocked. And sometimes we can operate to remove the clot or use drugs to dislodge it."

"The analysis of brain function, first with special x-rays and now brain imaging, shows the structure inside the brain. We can even relate the blood supply to each part of the brain."

Sir Roger pioneered research into diseases of the autonomic nervous system, as well as bringing out six editions of a test book of neurology. His definitive book, *Disorders of the*

Autonomic Nervous System is still in print.

In 1985, Sir Roger received a letter that was to change his direction once more.

"To my surprise, I was asked to be the next Master of Pembroke College, Oxford," Sir Roger said. "It was quite a career change, so I discussed it with the family and we decided to accept and this brought us back to Oxford. But I did not lose touch with neurology and research."

Lady Moyra Bannister (nee Jacobsson) came to Oxford in 1945, to study at the Ruskin School of Fine Art and Drawing. From here she went to the Corcoran School of Art in Washington DC.

She was well on her way to a successful career, having exhibited work in major London galleries, including the Royal Academy and the Royal Portrait Society. She met Sir Roger in 1954, just before his record-breaking run.

"I met Roger just before that glorious time. And he became a doctor in that same year. We married a year later in 1955. As a young doctor he was absent much of the time, so when we started a family – we had four children in six years – I had to give up ideas of a career in art to concentrate on them. I never stopped painting and drawing, but my art reflected our family life. If I hold a paint brush it makes me enormously happy."

When her father, Per Jacobsson, was chairman and managing director of the International Monetary Fund, she and Sir Roger met many American politicians and enjoyed being at one of John F Kennedy's inaugural balls.

Lady Bannister said: "Through a combination of my father's and Roger's work and fame, our lives have been enriched by meeting marvellously interesting people – from Churchill to the Clintons – but what we treasure most is our close friends."

There is a framed letter on the wall of the Bannister's home expressing condolences on her father's death from President Kennedy who wrote: "The world is by far a better place in which to live because of Per Jacobsson's untiring efforts."

Lady Bannister has kept diaries throughout her life, impressive illustrated and bound volumes. "I was sent to boarding school aged six. My parents were based in Switzerland and I only got to see my elder sisters occasionally on a Sunday," she recalled.

"There was a rigid rule that we had to write to our parents every week. These were of course read and censored! My mother kept my letters and the writing is something I have continued all my life. I almost always carry small sketchbooks with me."

Tough is the best description of the Bannister's early married life. From Lady Bannister's paintings and sketches of their family, and Sir Roger's appreciation of them, it is easy to see that their four children and 14 grandchildren are the bedrock, joy and pride of their life together. But those early years were not easy.

Sir Roger took up posts in London and had to live in the hospitals, working all hours.

Lady Bannister said: "We rented a flat in Earls Court but I had no family around to support me. Christopher Brasher's mother lived nearby and she was like a mother to me. I found a solution by organising an informal nursery with five other mothers, so that we could share the child care and cope with the exhaustion of sleepless nights."



Lady Moyra Bannister's painting of her husband skulling near Oxford's Pembroke College



'I love English poetry, so if there is only thing I can take on the island it would be the collection I assembled for the children. I have copied and illustrated the ones that inspire me'

Under Roger's aegis as Master of Pembroke College new accommodation for 100 students was built south of the river.

"It was tough raising the money at a time of economic depression but he did it. There were a few comments that the architecture was not cutting-edge, but the students love it," Lady Bannister recalled. Lady Bannister has painted the building, with her husband skulling in the foreground.

"That painting could be one option for the desert island. Roger's sporting interests have not only been athletics. We enjoyed sailing too, and he started an orienteering club near our country cottage in Sussex. Roger believes in sport for all. I feel the same about art."

That brought us to Sir Roger's work as the first chairman of the Executive Sports Council, in 1971. He said: "With our motto of Sport for All, we meant to improve sports facilities not only for the elite but for everyone. We aimed to spread 400 multi-purpose sports centres across the country."

With the 2012 London Olympics on the

horizon, we have reason to be grateful for his foresight.

"Another council achievement, in 1972, was the devising of a test to detect anabolic steroids which was a form of cheating that I foresaw would become a major problem. The test is still in use today," Sir Roger said.

During their years together, Lady Bannister has sketched, as well as kept the diaries to give to her children. While Sir Roger was Master of Pembroke (he retired in 1993) she returned to painting with renewed vigour and was rarely seen without a sketchbook and pencil in hand.

She said: "I spent most Sunday afternoons painting and drawing with the children. When Erin was 13, I realised that she had surpassed me as an artist. I should consider taking my family sketches to the island and Erin particularly loves the one of her which I put in my recent retrospective exhibition at The Dragon School."

Erin Townsend, the Bannister's eldest daughter, lives in Oxford and is a successful professional artist. Their sons Clive and Thurstan went into management and finance.

Lady Bannister said: "Our other daughter Charlotte Bannister Parker is assistant priest at the University Church of St Mary the Virgin."

"She has developed contacts with Kimberley in South Africa. Twice a year she goes to the township where she has set up a woman's refuge and Aids prevention schemes.

"We are very proud of our children and grandchildren. After taking her degree in French and art history, one of our granddaughters started working on the Teach-First scheme in Tower Hamlets."

I wondered what she would take to our island? Lady Bannister replied: "I love English poetry, so if there is only thing I can take on the island it would be the collection I assembled for the children. I have copied and illustrated the ones that inspire me. The pictures I use are mostly reproductions of works of art which I admire, from Rembrandt to Renoir."

"I have woven into each volume, pictures of the children to inspire them. I would not want to be without my paints, but I suppose if I can take only one thing to the island, then it must be this anthology."