

Report of the British Society for the History of Radiology annual lecture 2019

Godfrey Hounsfield – Inventor of the CT scanner

Report by Dr Arpan K Banerjee Past Chair Brit Soc History Radiology

This year's annual lecture of the BSHR on 18 Feb was delivered by Liz Beckmann and Stephen Golding in the Governor's Hall at St Thomas's Hospital, London.

Liz Beckmann, an electrical engineer by training and Past President of the BIR, and Stephen Golding, a retired radiologist from Oxford and also a Past President of the BIR. Both had the honour and privilege of meeting and getting to know Hounsfield and the double act was not just a chronological biography of the great man but peppered with reminiscences and personal reflections which gave the presentation a unique dimension and had the audience of over fifty riveted to their seats. Hounsfield was born on 28 Aug 1919 and the lecture was a celebration of the centenary year of his birth. It was also nice to see several people in the audience who had worked directly with Hounsfield.

When the classic presentation on CT scanning occurred on 20 April 1972 at the scientific congress of the British Institute of Radiology (BIR) people realised what an extraordinary advance had been made in the field of radiology. Radiology and the practise of clinical medicine was to be changed forever. Everyone had to have one of these new machines.

Hounsfield came from humble origins the youngest of 5 children born to a father who had hit hard times and Hounsfield grew up in modest circumstances on a farm. At Magnus School near Newark, Hounsfield did not excel academically -- although he did like maths and physics -- and his school report said he was intellectually retarded. Hounsfield was an experimenter and liked making things. He was imbued with an insatiable curiosity. Holidays would be taken in the Lake District. Hounsfield liked taking long walks and was a keen Rambler.

He did not go to university but joined the RAF and worked on radar and started working for EMI in 1949 where he started to develop his interest in computers. The work here was to lead to the development of the CT scanner and the famous 1972 papers with Ambrose.

Hounsfield was showered with honours and a Nobel Prize in 1979 and a knighthood in 1981 but always remained modest and shy. He did not like the

limelight and actually disliked lecturing and giving presentations and being in the limelight. He had no interest in money or power.

The 21st anniversary of the discovery was celebrated at the Glasgow meeting in 1993 (I remember it well) and was attended by Hounsfield. He was also happy to give his name to the eponymous Hounsfield lectures started by the efforts of Dr Golding and initially funded by the BIR and the first lecture was delivered by the late Martin Blomley in 1997 on the topic of functional imaging with contrast agents. This lecture was to be given annually by a young researcher and not just the great and good in radiology. Hounsfield would often attend and always enjoy questioning the lecturer about the new ideas. It was this that gave him the greatest pleasure.

Godfrey, forever the unassuming and retiring bachelor, died in 2004 and left money in his will to help with the BIR lectures. His legacy lives on in the way modern medicine is practised.

All those who attended the lecture were left humbled by hearing a brilliant exposition about not only a remarkable scientific genius but also a man of wonderful character.