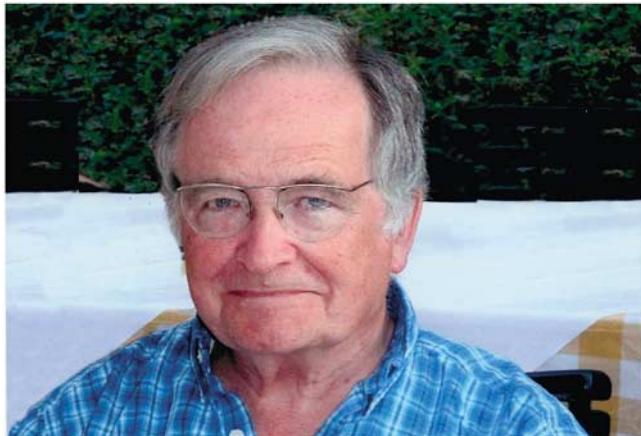


## COMMENTARY

## An appreciation of Tony Birmingham

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Anthony Birmingham, known as Tony to everyone, died suddenly on 6 December 2003 at his home in Nottingham. This article is an appreciation of the special contribution Tony made to British pharmacology through his activities at the University of Nottingham, the British Pharmacological Society (BPS) and *The British Journal of Pharmacology*. Tony, however, was far more than just a pharmacologist, as he had so many broad and diverse interests – cars, trains, music, especially opera and Mozart, dogs, cricket, history and restoring things, wine and cycling (not many of us have cycled from London to the Lake District and the Peak District), but more of this side of his life later.

Tony was born in London and went to the William Ellis School in Highgate before going to Kings College London as a medical student in 1949. As a child in the 1939–1945 war, he spent time as an evacuee in Leighton Buzzard and even then he used his bicycle to visit home. In 1952, Tony obtained a BSc in Physiology before getting his MBBS in 1955, and in 1957 he started his two years national service as a medical officer in the Royal Air Force at RAF Benson in Oxfordshire. After 2 years as a research registrar in the chest unit at Farnborough Hospital (1959–1961), Tony returned to Kings College to join the pharmacology department as a lecturer. Tony's first paper in the *British Journal of Pharmacology* was with A.B. Wilson in 1963 (Preganglionic and postganglionic stimulation of the guinea pig isolated vas deferens **21**, 569–580). At the same time, Tony was working with Professor G. Brownlee. Professor Brownlee was Secretary of the BPS from 1947 to 1952, and so was most probably very important in introducing

Tony to the BPS, resulting in his long and important involvement in the organisation of the society. Tony's work with G. Brownlee led to another long-term association of Tony's – the medical and pharmacy student 'double-blind' practical using atropine as the test compound – atropine bradycardia was one of the topics they worked on together. As student numbers increased at Nottingham, the organisation of atropine double-blind practical became more like a military operation and sadly it is now reduced to data processing. During Tony's years at King's College, he also worked with Leslie Iversen on the uptake and metabolism of <sup>3</sup>H-noradrenaline by the guinea-pig and rat vas deferens, thus making a significant contribution to a broad area of autonomic pharmacology.

In 1969, Professor David Greenfield, the Foundation Dean of the University of Nottingham Medical School, was making the first appointments for the new school that would open in 1972 and he attracted Tony to join that team as a senior lecturer in physiology, becoming Reader in 1971 and the Foundation Professor of Pharmacology in 1974. Tony remained at Nottingham until his retirement in 1995 and played a major role in the development of the new integrated B.Med.Sci curriculum of the medical school, which had an initial intake of 44 students in 1972 and was around 200 by 1995 (now about 250). Tony started his Nottingham career in what were known as the 'cow sheds' – recently flattened to make way for a gleaming new building – before moving to the interim medical school building (now The School of Pharmacy), and then onto the vast medical complex Queen's Medical Centre just across the road from the main campus. The initial plan was for separate departments of physiology and pharmacology in the new medical school, but at an early stage Tony and others involved made the bold decision to have a single department of Physiology and Pharmacology. Those of us who came afterwards realise how wise a decision this was, as the department developed rapidly and achieved 'critical mass' that gave it a lead role in future configurations (School of Biomedical Sciences). The department, under the rotating leadership of Tony, who first became head in 1975, and Peter Fentem became a powerful centre for teaching and research in pharmacology through wise appointments (Terry Bennett, David Tomlinson, Charles Marsden, Geoff Bennett, Sheila Gardiner, David Kendall, Steve Alexander, Michael Randall, Vince Wilson, Billy Dunn and Kevin Fone), judicious absorption of pharmacology from Pharmaceutical Sciences (Steve Hill, Rob Mason, Ivan Stockely) and careful nurture. Tony provided a stable, reliable and friendly atmosphere within the department; he gave great attention to detail and always dealt with issues that arose in a calm and reasoned manner, and finally he was most supportive to the younger

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members of staff and the PhD students. Three examples of these attributes immediately come to mind. The first was the extraordinary attention to detail he gave to planning BPS meetings hosted by the department in 1978 and 1988 – prior to the event we walked around the medical school and talked through every possible scenario that could occur; in 1988, however, the one we could not control occurred – the fire alarm went off repeatedly. The second example is slightly more delicate. A PhD student (one of mine) and a technician (mine) were found by the cleaners one evening in an office in what might be called a Monica Lewinsky situation; Tony dealt with the situation with great calm but also firmness, they certainly understood that there is a time and a place for everything. The final one is more academic; when Tony Crossland retired in 1984, it was agreed that the department would take on the pharmacology teaching to pharmacists and that we would integrate the medical and pharmacy pharmacology teaching as far as possible, the question was how to achieve this? The solution was to lock a group of us away in the Staff Club with adequate food and drink until we came up with the answer; I think it took us not much more than a day and the basic plan survives to this day.

Tony had a long and distinguished link with the Pharmacological Society, he was elected a member in 1965, joined the committee in 1978 and became Meetings Secretary in 1980, and was then General Secretary from 1983 to 1985 and was finally elected an honorary member of the society in 1997. In parallel, he played a major role in the running of the British Journal of Pharmacology as a member of the editorial board from 1980 to 1985 and then Chair of the board from 1990 to 1996. When Tony organised the BPS meetings and ran the society, there were no smart offices and staff in Islington, it was just Tony and a secretary operating from the office where this article is now being written. While the BPS was under Tony's stewardship, the members travelled far and wide to present their science. There was music in Verona, whisky tasting in Aberdeen, Smorgasbord in Stockholm and beautiful Connemara in Galway. It was also the era of the large winter meetings hosted by various London Colleges but held at The Institute of Education in Bloomsbury. By the end of Tony's period as General Secretary, the total membership of the society had reached the 2000 mark. Throughout the time of Tony's stewardship of the society, there was a feeling of calm efficiency and scientific excellence, combined with a sense of fun and enjoyment. In 1990, Tony took over the Chair of the editorial board of BJP from Jimmy Mitchell and again made sure that the journal retained its position as one of the top pharmacology journals in the world. Tony had other non-university responsibilities; he was on the committee of the Society for Drug Research (1969–1972) and on various ethical and protocol review boards, as well as an important Member of the Safety, Efficiency and Abnormal Reactions (SEARS) Committee for Safety of Medicines (CSM) from 1987 to 1995.

While Tony made such a major contribution to British pharmacology, he was far more than just a scientist. He had a love of cars; his first was an Austin Seven, which he built by himself, and his first publication was a description of this in

the Autocar Magazine. He then began his long 'affair' with Riley's. He owned several, including a prized Imp and the 1938 Kestral Sprite, which he acquired in 1960 and in which he drove his daughter to her wedding. This beautifully maintained car remains a wonderful example of the care and attention to detail that Tony gave to all he did. He took his driving test in a Riley, failing the first time for driving too slowly; he explained to the examiner that the car was venerable and needed to be nursed along and the man retorted, 'I was driving Riley's before you were born and I know how fast they can go!' I came upon a note to the University Surveyors Department dated 1973 requesting parking permits for two cars, a Riley saloon and an MGB GT, on the understanding that Tony would never bring more than one of the cars onto the campus at a time! He was founder member (just 50 years ago) of the Riley Register and its first historian. In 1965, his definitive history of the early Riley's – 'The Production and Competition History of the pre-1939 Riley Motor Cars' – was published and quickly became a classic. Tony had other mechanical interests including steam engines, but he was not satisfied just to watch them as he has both fireman's and engine driver's certificates.

When Tony retired in 1995, the Department commemorated the occasion not with a formal event with long speeches, but with wonderfully informal cricket match and picnic. Tony was caught out by Michael Randall, who is a great cricket enthusiast but not noted for his agility in the field, and to this day Michael has no idea how the ball stayed in his hands and regrets it did. Tony's all too short retirement was filled with activities old and new; he worked to establish The Pickering Association, named after Sir George Pickering whose report in the 1960s was so influential in the initiation of the Nottingham Medical School. He helped to restore the local Community Hall and did maintenance jobs in his church, St John's. His last three holidays are indicative of his *joie de vivre*. He did the Four Countries Ring in canal boat Willow with his great nieces as lock labourers, visited six capitals of Europe by rail and celebrated his 73rd birthday with a performance of 'Don Giovanni' at the Estates Theatre in Prague, where Mozart had conducted the premiere, and finally spent time in his brother's Mill in France, enjoying the company of old friends.

Sadly, Tony died just as his wife Rosemary, a Medical Ophthalmologist, left work, ready to start a busy joint retirement.

There is one aspect of Tony I have not mentioned so far, and that was his ability, with the help of Rosemary and their two children, to host superb parties at their large home in Nottingham. For the department, these events were held when the medical student external examiner came to town. On one occasion, the menu was a wide selection of delicious home-produced curries, Tony did have an Indian sister-in-law and so had some inside knowledge, served as always with another of Tony's areas of expertise – excellent wine; so let us raise a glass to Tony in thanks for all he did for so many of us.

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