

Professor D.S. Shovelton

Past president: 1970-1971



Made in Birmingham.

A Profile of Professor David Shovelton Taken from the BDJ 1990, by Colin Davis, OBE, FOS

Professor Shovelton retired in September 1989 after 46 years of association with the dental school of the University of Birmingham, apart from 2 years of National Service in the RAF. Even in his richly earned retirement from Birmingham, he is continuing to serve his profession as a member of the Board of Faculty of the Royal College of Surgeons and in many other ways.

It is an astonishing fact that not only was your father a dentist but also two of your uncles, and they all qualified at Birmingham. There must have been great pressure on you to follow in their footsteps.

My father practised with my uncles in Evesham. I was always conscious that he was happy in his chosen profession and that he was greatly respected in the town. He certainly put no pressure on me to go into dentistry. I toyed with the idea of accountancy and librarianship, but in the end, I decided to follow in his footsteps.

Was he pleased?

Yes, he was delighted and looked forward to me joining him in the practice.

Going back, what about your schooling?

I went to the Downs School at Colwall, beyond the Malvern hills; a place with very high ideals, Quaker/Cadbury dominated, where among other things I was taught English by W. H. Auden. From there, on to King's School, Worcester. I suppose I was 17 years old before I made up my mind to do dentistry and then of course there was only one possible choice of dental school.

In what year did you leave school?

In 1943, when I was accepted by Birmingham, where I soon came under the influence of Humphrey Humphreys, who had been demobilised after commanding the 14th General Hospital in Burma. Shortly after he returned to Birmingham, he was appointed vice principal of the university and later vice chancellor for one year until his retirement in 1953.

Half way through your LDS course you were awarded a Nuffield Foundation Scholarship to read physiology for 2 years and take a BSc. Tell me a bit more about that.

This was when the Nuffield Foundation decided to encourage academic dentistry and started their support for both graduates and undergraduates. Humphreys suggested - or perhaps commanded - that I should do a science degree, so I became one of their first dental scholars. This was something of a turning point since after that my father agreed with me that general practice and I were not really for each other.

You did, in fact, join the family practice for a short time. Did it work? I mean, with a LDS and a BSc the world was your oyster?

Yes, this was while I was waiting for my call-up. I was newly married, life was good and I did enjoy looking after the people of Evesham, and anyway I wanted to see something of general practice whatever I decided to do in the long run.

Where did that take you?

Nowhere very heroic. Six months at Gloucester and then the rest at Pembroke Dock (where they flew Sunderland's in those days). There we discovered the incomparable and still unspoilt coastline of West Wales.

It was during this interlude I imagine that you came to realise that an academic career was what you were destined for?

Yes. I decided I wanted to teach, preferably perio., but the only job going was that of a lecturer in operative dental surgery at my Alma Mater. I was lucky enough to get it and started there in 1953.

This of course was in those heady days (alas no more) when dental schools were a growth industry. Who were your mentors?

I was incredibly lucky in having Alex MacGregor as my chief. A great man and a wonderful supporter and encourager of his junior staff. I remember after I had been there about 5 years I got restless and told him that I thought I ought to move on. I shall always remember his wise reply-'As long as you think it's time you went, you can stay'.

Fortunately for many people you took his advice because 6 years later Birmingham established a chair of conservative dentistry with you as its first incumbent. It was an appointment you held for 25 years, during which time you have done so many things: the GDC, the Royal College of Surgeons of England, EDA and FDI committees. Looking back, what has given you the most satisfaction?

Two things, which are interrelated. Working with young people and guiding them in their formative years and developing the teaching of whole patient care. This was something we started doing almost 30 years ago and which Birmingham has always been in the forefront of teaching.

You seem to have been an advisor to just about every dental body there is and you had the unique distinction of being the only dental member of that unspellable, unpronounceable and volatile committee which always seems to be referred to in a single, plosive splutter as 'Schanschieff'. It must have been a very difficult assignment?

Yes, indeed it was, and it took a year of very hard work, but it was very interesting: working with two very able men and learning from so many groups, organisations and individuals. Not everyone, of course, agreed with all our findings but many of our recommendations have been adopted and I believe we helped to do some good.

The only time our paths have crossed was when, the insufficiently recognised, John Davis started the Cordent Dental Trust in 1970 and asked you and me, Richard Miller Yardly and David Berry to be the committee of management. The establishment, as is its wont, sniffed at us suspiciously but what fun we had spending other people's money and what a lot of splendid projects we got under way.

I can still remember John coming to talk to me about his idea. He said that dentistry had been good to him and he wanted to do something in return. How generously he has done that, both with money and time, over the last 20 years.

Recently you were just pipped at the post in the election for a new president of the GDC. Was this a great disappointment to you? Yes, initially it was. I always loved my work at the GDC, but it is an increasingly onerous appointment and I soon realised that I can start to enjoy my retirement now, rather than postpone it for another 5 years.

But, by Jove, you are no way near retired yet. What have you still got on the stocks?

Well, I have got another 2 years on the Board of the Faculty at the College. I'm still doing some examining and am still concerned with postgraduate and continuing education. There is also a book to re-write, but I am gradually easing off and, in a few years, shall bow out of the dental scene.

And what will you be doing in the wings?

Spending more time with my wife, seeing more of my family and enjoying my grandchildren. Also learning a little more about the inexhaustible subject of wine, travelling in our caravan, especially in France, and cultivating my garden.

I hope you have a long and happy retirement.