

FRANCIS BRETT YOUNG

An Article by Martin Smith

I have delved again into the blue plaques of New Road to highlight another former resident. Francis Brett Young was born on June 29th 1884 in Halesowen, Worcestershire. He was the eldest son of Dr Thomas Brett young who was later to become Medical Officer of health for the borough. Francis was sent to a small private school at the age of seven. In 1895 he went to Epsom Collage in Surrey where he showed early signs of his literary talent when he won the Rosebery prize for English Literature. In 1901 he entered Birmingham University as a medical student and in 1907, after qualifying as a Doctor, he became a medical officer for the Holt line serving on SS Kintuck before entering practice with Dr William Jenkins Quick who practised and resided at Cleveland House, New road, Brixham, now Our Lady of the Sea Roman Catholic Church, with Francis lodging at Cumber House. The next year Francis eloped and married his sweetheart Jessica Hankinson a singer and accomplished piano player. They were married in Worcestershire and on his return to Brixham with his new wife took over the Cleveland surgery with Dr Quick leaving to become a ships doctor.

Life at Cleveland House could be described as 'comfortable'. Francis employed a surgery maid, a cook-housekeeper and a groom to care for Gladys the surgery horse that pulled the small dog cart he used for visits to the patients. Gladys was succeeded by 'Poltergiest' and finally the horse was exchanged for a small car. Francis, as a GP, treated visiting trawler men and was on call to Brixham Hospital and had to routinely practise dentistry charging one shilling per tooth pulled or one shilling and sixpence if you wanted anaesthesia.

1911 proved a challenging year as Dr Elliot reported to the BUDC. He said that the situation was 'the worst for many years, compounded by conditions and poor housing especially in the housing located just behind the Strand (Paradise Place, Mill Tye etc.) These were houses in poor repair and of what we today call 'houses of multi occupation' where whole families could be living in one room with shared toilet facilities. At this time there was a serious measles epidemic and there were high mortality rates brought on by whooping cough and diphtheria. The following year Francis was visiting a very sick two year old girl, he diagnosed pneumonia and diphtheria. The girl's life was in extreme danger and Francis drove the girl to the hospital but the matron was vexed that Francis should bring such dangerous germs to her hospital. Francis performed an emergency tracheotomy and the girl survived.

If you look up Francis Brett Young in an encyclopaedia or on the internet it will say novelist, short-story writer and poet. His observation on life was extraordinary and he could not be bothered to make up names for characters he simply used the names that were around him. His first published book was 'Deep Sea' set in Brixham about the fishermen and the fish hawkers and it is almost a document of how Brixham was in 1913. Many names of prominent families appear such as the Varwells and the Drews and places that are familiar to many such as the Rising Sun public house and the old military buildings up on Berry Head. The main fishing boat is named the 'Pilgrim'. He wrote about what he knew and often put his own experiences into his books. The episode with the little girl with diphtheria and pneumonia appears in a later book 'My Brother Johnathan'

Air... There was none in the room; but the child was dying for it. The muscles of the chest, the nostrils, the neck were all fighting together in that supreme, that desperate struggle. In

vain; for the face was already blue and livid. Nothing but a diphtheric membrane could have clogged the larynx like this, starving the avid lungs of the air that was life. The old woman was right. Now it was only a matter of moments. One chance-a thin chance-and one only. Yes there it was, thank heaven! A doubtful scalpel. And a number twelve rubber catheter. Anything would do. He sliced the rubber tube in half and approached the bed. No time for sterilisation. Lister be damned! He knelt by the bedside, bending over the child, the dubious scalpel poised like a pen in his fingers. Tracheotomy without chloroform! This was vivisection with a vengeance!

Just before war was declared Francis and his wife Jessica moved from New Road up to Berry Head into the Old Garden House. In August of 1914 Francis volunteered to serve his country he was 30 years of age. As a Captain in the Royal Army Medical Core he was posted to German East Africa under the overall command of General Jan Smuts a man used to fighting against odds having fought, against the British, using renowned Guerrilla tactics against them.

Fighting was intense and often and the pressure on Dr Brett Young's team was immense with no let-up in casualties bought to him. He wrote this poem about when even a five minute break in activity seemed like heaven in the midst of hell.

All through that day of battle the broken sound
Of shattering Maxim fore made mad the wood;
So that the low trees shuddered where they stood,
And echoes bellowed in the bush around:
But when, at last, the light of day was drowned,
That madness ceased.....Ah, God, but it was good!
There in the reek of iodine and blood,
I flung me down upon the thorny ground.
So quiet was it, I might well have been lying
In a room I love, where the ivy cluster shakes
Its dew upon the lattice panes at even:
Where rusty ivory scatters from the dying
Jessamine blossom, and the musk-rose breaks
Her dusky bloom beneath a summer heaven.

On one occasion, Dr Brett Young was forced to evacuate his dressing-station in the face of a strong German attack, making an incredibly perilous journey to save his severely wounded patients from death at the hands of the enemy. To protect them, Dr Brett Young and his 15 men exposed themselves to enemy fire, armed with only one rifle between them.

With courage and stealth, Dr Brett Young led his troops and patients across a swamp to cover their tracks, despite losing his Red Cross insignia, which confirmed that they were a hospital unit, without which they could not be identified and were doubly endangered. As night fell, their pursuers retreated, enabling Dr Brett Young to ensure his patients' safety and re-join his brigade.

As an Ambulance unit they had been assigned to the 2nd Rhodesia Regiment numbering 600 men by the end of the conflict they were reduced to just 50 men. Francis himself was suffering with dysentery and fever and was invalided out of the army and because of his frail health he felt he could no longer be a doctor. His exploits during the war were the subject of his book 'Marching to Tanga' although the book was heavily censored and so he covertly put those exploits in a later novel 'Jim Redlake'.

After the war Francis continued to write and lived and travelled the world. His success began in the 1920s and continued into the 30s and 40s. He died in Cape Town in 1954 and his ashes were returned to Worcestershire.

In 1994 The Francis Brett Young Society put a plaque on the wall of the Garden House located up at Berry Head. To commemorate the event they invited Dr David Langley, senior partner of the St Lukes surgery and a former patient of Dr Brett Young Mrs Elsie Stabb to unveil it. Elsie has been immortalised in print as she was the two year old that Dr Brett Young operated on when she was so ill.

It is impossible to say if Francis, had he not become so ill whilst at war, would have remained a doctor and produced the work he did, over 40 books and plays. Of all professions Doctors can have the biggest impact on all our lives. By saving Elsie when she was two he gave her the chance to grow up and have a family, but that's what Doctors do, they maybe treating one patient but that patient will probably have a family or will in the future have a family, they are treating so many more people than just the patient. So at this time please remember when the Government spokesmen are standing there giving out the statistics, that each of those numbers is a person and each of those persons have a family so please do your bit to keep the statistics low stay in and keep safe.