

HOLLERIN' BOB FOLEY

Country rocks, but bluegrass rules!

Bob Foley, 66

Why I should have been born wealthy, but wasn't – the silent MP – hiring the Wigmore Hall to fulfil a whimsy – Somerset – my first boarding school – horse riding – my second boarding school – my parents' marriage fails – my mother dies – my father has a stroke in South Africa – the money in the knicker drawer – my father dies – my father's funny funeral, with old Wilfred – Trinity College, Cambridge – London Hospital – Eleanor – skiffle music – the funny thing about Peggy MacColl – David Michel Chaput de Sontage – working as a surgeon for 36 hours – we adopt a daughter, Elizabeth – the Royal Free Hospital – I'm promoted, and my income halves – house fires – bijou Biddenham – James and Isabel are born – I mislay Eleanor – I mislay Val – Hailey, the 20-year-old student nurse – Hailey and I have two sons – Merle Watson falls off a tractor – laparoscopic surgery – buying guitars – my heart operation – becoming a father again at 64

I was born in Stoke-on-Trent, in 1942. The war was at its height, but in spite of this my mother had moved up from Cornwall to live with her parents. Her father was in the Royal Navy, and at the time a commander in the Fleet Air Arm. Stoke may seem a strange place to have a naval base. My father, serving in the

Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry, was a subaltern, first in North Africa, and then up through Sicily and Italy. We were not to see him again until the end of the war.

How had the descendant of a poor Irish immigrant become married to a young Cornish beauty? The Foley family came from Sligo. As the potato famine came to pass, my great-great-grandfather emigrated to Yorkshire. Fortunately, he had sufficient means to either purchase or rent a farm in Yorkshire, where he had a very comfortable living, but this involved a lot of hard work.

His son Patrick, my great-grandfather, had no feeling for the land, and as many young people do, he drifted to London. Like Dick Whittington before him, he dreamed of streets paved with gold. But unlike Dick Whittington, he was later to turn down the offer of the position of lord mayor of London, on the grounds that it would be too expensive. He was, however, to find the streets of gold. He founded a little insurance company on Commercial Road in the East End, and called it Pearl. He became its first managing director and duly made his fortune. Later, he was to become the MP for Galway, initially as a Parnellite, and then as an anti-Parnellite. His sole recorded contribution to the business of the House of Commons consisted of the four words 'Please close that window'. He was subsequently known as 'the silent MP'.

He amassed a vast fortune and, as so often happens, had a son who lacked ambition but still wanted the finer things in life, to which he had become accustomed. To support his lifestyle, his son – another Patrick – forged his father's cheques, though they impinged little on the fortune. Patrick James Foley the First could not forgive his son for dishonouring him in this way, and he was disowned. My grandfather compounded this problem by

marrying a young woman from Somerset, and emigrating to South Africa. And so it was that my father – another Patrick – was duly born in South Africa, just before the First World War.

The stay in South Africa lasted a very short time, and the family moved back to Bray, in Ireland. My father was to undergo a rigorous education, first under the care of the Christian Brothers, who have been depicted in many recent novels and films denigrating the Catholic faith. But then sense prevailed, and he was sent to Ratcliffe College, between Leicester and Nottingham. Although he was not academic in any sense of the word, he did gain entrance to the Camborne School of Mines.

He was charming, good looking, and a sportsman, playing for The Pirates at rugby. He also played tennis and squash to quite a high standard, and he started to move into Cornish society, where he met my mother. She was a native of the tiny fishing village of Mousehole, three miles west of Penzance. Her mother had married a 'foreigner', Cecil Wright, a foreigner because he came from the village of Poole, one mile inland.

Although my father was entering into Cornish society, he was not the best student, and was never to use his mining qualifications. By this time some of his grandfather's fortune had trickled down to him. So for a young man of his age, he now had money to add to his good looks, charm, and sporting ability.

The fortune had gone to my great-aunt Agnes. I would have got some of it, but I wasn't born until after she died. My brother got some of her money. But most went to the other side of the family, and particularly my father's cousin, Guy, who lived in Cheyne Walk in London, with Tommy. They also had an apartment in Beverley Hills. Now Guy didn't work much, but he fancied himself as a concert pianist. After a while he ceased to

get employment in this line, so he'd hire the Wigmore Hall on occasions, to fulfil his whimsy.

Barbara Tremayne Wright was bowled over by this man, and quickly agreed to marry him. But plans went awry when she was in a car crash while being driven by my father's brother. Barbara suffered a dislocated hip and various other injuries, but what bothered her most was that her face had almost been destroyed by the fracturing of the windscreen. After her major injuries had been corrected, Sir Archibald McIndoe was summoned to look at her face. He'd operated on most of the facially injured fighter pilots of the Second World War. He stayed a little while with us, and said to her, 'If you're still alive in 12 months' time I'll sort you out.' She was, and he did. And so I remember my mother as the beauty she had always been, although if you looked carefully, you could still see some of the scars.

The wedding day came around. My father's new-found wealth enabled him not only to buy a house, and to have servants to look after him, but he could also afford not to work.

My mother was engaged at 18, married at 19, and gave birth to my elder brother Patrick at the age of 20. She was in clover. To make things really fine, she employed one of her best friends, who had just qualified as a Norland Nanny, to look after Patrick. In the evenings both young women wanted to get out of the house. My grandmother became the nanny, Nanny became the flapper, and the girls went out on a spree. By now they were living in Laneast, in a beautiful 1930s Art Deco house just outside Marazion, overlooking St Michael's Mount. All this was to end with the advent of the Second World War. My father joined the Duke of Cornwall's Light Infantry and, just prior to him going abroad, I was conceived.

During the final months of the war my mother had worked hard to find my father employment, so that he could look after the family. And as was possible then, through her connections she arranged an interview for him at Lloyds of London. But my father didn't want an office job, and so eventually found himself working as a sales representative in the west country. Due to my maternal grandfather, most of his fortune had been put into trust for the children's education. But with his low-paid job and reasonable private means, the family continued to live in relative prosperity in post-war Britain. Work meant moving, and we were now living in Somerset.

When I was seven, in line with other middle class children of that era, I was sent away to school in Sussex. In idyllic countryside just outside of Crawley, at Turner's Hill, was one of Lord Cowdray's estates. It had been bought by the Benedictines, and turned into not only Worth Priory, but also Worth Preparatory School, the preparatory school for Downside school. Initially, at seven, I hated the school – lots of tears. But by the time I was 11 or 12, it was really fantastic. I learned to ride horses there, and that became my passion in those days. I'd had a pony when I was quite young, and my mother's best friend gave me a really nice Arab horse when I was 11 or 12. It was unbroken. I took it to school, and the riding mistress broke it in for me. She taught me not only how to ride, but also how to break in horses.

When I was 13, I went to Downside, the famous Catholic boys' boarding school in Stratton-on-the-Fosse, in the Mendips. It was 12 miles from Bath, and 8 miles from Wells. My elder brother had just left the same school, to study at the Architectural Association in London.

I have wonderful recollections of Downside, mainly because the schoolmasters were not all just educationalists. We were taught a lot by the monks. The headmaster was an ex barrister, my housemaster was a former commander of submarines, and my Latin teacher was a former racing driver. Nearly all the monks had been in employment before becoming monks and getting their BAs and teaching degrees. The young people were in the main extremely supportive of each other, though there was the occasional bully around. I remember being abused – verbally, mainly – for some time by a boy who was to become a well-known novelist, and who would write a rather nasty history relating to the school. He bullied everyone in sight. But by and large I was very happy, and I made a lot of good friends. I don't go to reunions, but I went back about ten years ago to have a look around, and that was very nice.

I remember being very cold when we were out in the countryside, beagling. That's the sport where beagles try to catch hares, but we never actually caught any. We didn't have horses, so we had to run behind the bloomin' dogs, which was exhausting. It was all a ruse to make us run around, I think. But it helped make me fit, and later I was to enjoy cross-country running.

I returned home one holiday, when I was about 14, to find the horse gone, and the mother gone. I wasn't sure which was more hurtful, really, as you do in such circumstances. My mother had run off with another man.

My parents tried a reconciliation, but it completely failed. My mother moved back into the family house, and my father emigrated to South Africa. He carried on supporting my mother in a modest kind of way, but things were obviously a lot more difficult financially, and she took in lodgers. One was a really

horrible bloke, but he became her lover, which wasn't a very good idea. Eventually, she died of peritonitis at the age of 47, when I was 21. We had to call my father in South Africa to tell him to return to the UK. He had to throw the lodger out, and it was all very tense.

Meanwhile, at 18, I'd already gone up to Cambridge. My father sold up in the UK, and returned to South Africa, eventually marrying again. He lived to about 73, when he had a major stroke and, some days later, died. There's quite a funny story there. Well, an incident at the *funeral* was funny, but I'll come to that later.

After he'd had his stroke, I told my stepmother, Vera, that if he were alive the next morning, I'd fly down to South Africa. If he were dead, it wouldn't have been worth it. So I called the next morning. Vera said he had improved a bit, and the doctors believed he'd survive for at least another week, so I decided to go. Now it was a Saturday morning, and I had a financial problem. I looked at my Access card statement, to discover I could just pay the return plane fare of maybe £700, but that would leave me with only about a further £5 credit limit, so I'd have had no spending money once I got to South Africa.

I had a friend whose husband was a bank manager, so I called him and ask how I might get some money on a Saturday morning. He said it was impossible, as all the banks were closed. So I was in a real fix. But he called back half an hour later and said, 'Bob, I've found £500 in my mother's knicker drawer. You can have that.' So I had the money to go to South Africa.

On the flight to South Africa I read one of those glossy magazines, which had a feature on a beautiful hotel overlooking the Indian Ocean. The Oyster Box Hotel, near the village of Umhlanga Rocks, north of Durban, was doubtless very

expensive. I saw my stepmother, who had daughters from a previous marriage, all of whom were born-again Christians. She announced, 'My daughters have said it would not be nice to have a young man staying in the flat, with all of us women here, so you're going to have to stay in the Oyster Box Hotel.' I thought, 'My God, how much is *that* going to cost?', but actually it was very reasonable. And I don't quite know what the daughters thought I might do with all of them. But the 'colonials', as we called them then, were often very staid. I remember going shopping with Vera in Cape Town, and she wore a hat and gloves.

Anyway, I managed to have a nice chat with my dad, so it had been worth the trip, but as so often happens at such times, he then simply fell off his perch and died. Now my first wife and kids were on holiday in France at this time, and I wanted to go and spend some time with them. I was working as a surgeon in the south wing of Bedford Hospital in 1992, and there weren't many surgeons there in those days. So I didn't get to see much of my kids, and I was keen to see them on holiday in France. I rang up the funeral director, who told me it would be more than a week before my father could be buried, so I'd miss seeing my wife and kids on holiday.

But an hour later the phone rang, and it was the funeral director. 'Mr Foley, I'm very pleased to tell you we've had a cancellation.' He went on, 'We can have the funeral in two days' time, but we won't be able to organise any pallbearers.' Well, my fathers' friends were all in their 70s and 80s. My stepmother being a born-again Christian, she roped in her born-again Christian priest to help bury this good Catholic boy in the Catholic cemetery. Now of the pallbearers, one was the priest, one was reasonably young and fit, I was about 50 and reasonably

fit, but the other three were fairly elderly and frail, particularly Wilfred. He was 84, and about five feet high, plus a fag end.

Well, the funeral ceremony was very nice, and we had no trouble getting my father from the church into the hearse. Then we drove ten miles to the graveyard – really beautiful it was, I've never seen one so beautiful, before or since. It overlooked the Indian Ocean, but it was on quite an incline. The views were beautiful, but you had to watch your step. So we got my father's coffin out of the hearse, and struggled up a steep incline for maybe 15 or 20 feet. By the time we got to the grave position, Wilfred was visibly flagging. And it was then that the funeral director said, 'I'm sorry, Mr Foley, but you've brought him up the wrong way round.' I didn't know that you had to bury people a particular way round.

Now they dig the graves in South Africa very deep, maybe 10 or 12 feet deep, so the wild animals can't get at the bodies. We whirled the coffin around, whereupon Wilfred rose off the ground, and was desperately holding on to the coffin for dear life. I thought he was going to go into the grave before my dad.

Afterwards we went to the Durban Club, which looked like a Victorian British Empire film set. There was a portrait of the Queen and the Duke of Edinburgh in the lobby. We had drinks and watched people playing croquet. Then I flew to France, and managed to have a week with my wife and kids.

Let me go back a bit. When I was 14 and my mother and my horse left, my elder brother was in architectural college. Now he had started playing classical guitar, and he'd left it in the house, along with a Lonnie Donegan EP with some great tracks – *Railroad Bill*, *Stack-a-Lee*, and others. I was actually entranced by the record. So in the absence of my mother and my horse, my consolation was my brother's guitar. When I was 15, I did my O

levels – the equivalent of GCSEs today – a year early. My parents were trying a reconciliation, and my mother persuaded my father to buy me a guitar of my own, as a reward for having passed my O levels. So the guitar became my hobby at school, basically.

About that time, my headmaster asked me what I planned to do for a living. I told him I wanted to become a doctor, and he asked me why. So I told him that I'd looked at all my father's friends, and I had concluded they were all bloody miserable, except for the doctors who all seemed very happy and enjoyed their lives. I didn't want to save the world or anything, but doctors seemed happy when they were at work, and happy when they were at home.

After I finished my O levels, and before I started my A levels, I was provisionally accepted for a degree course in medicine at Trinity College, at Cambridge University. The school I went to was very much a 'Trinity supplier', so provided you got decent A levels, you were pretty well in.

I got the A levels I needed, and started at Cambridge, but music was becoming more important to me than my studies. I wasn't terribly good at the guitar, so I learned to play the five-string banjo. I didn't do much studying at Cambridge, so I failed my preliminary exams, and they duly told me to leave. But I'm pleased to say I was later an examiner there, which was fun.

Fortunately, the London Hospital in Whitechapel accepted me for a degree course. It's now the Royal London Hospital. The teaching there was better for a guy like me, who was a bit thick. It was too erudite for me at Cambridge. They lectured all around the subject, and you were expected to do all the groundwork – but I needed a bit of help along the way, which I got in London.

When I was still a pre-clinical student, maybe 20, I met my future wife Eleanor at the London Hospital. She was in the year ahead of me, and eventually became an anaesthetist, while I went on to become a surgeon. During my student days I continued playing music, and formed a little group, Foley's Follies, with some other students. I played guitar, auto-harp, and banjo, David Michel Chaput de Sontage played guitar, and Peter Thorburn Walling and Diana Strange both sang. David liked to be called 'Mark'. He was a lovely fellow, and a very good guitarist. We'd play Dylan covers, stuff like that, in pubs and clubs in the area, but we never got paid anything more than 'beer money'.

What kind of music did we play? Well, you'll recall I started off with skiffle. I went into a shop and saw *The Origins of Skiffle*, an EP record by Peggy Seeger and Guy Carawan. They had a number of hits, including a really nice version of *Freight Train*. Peggy Seeger was Pete Seeger's half-sister. Peggy came to the UK and married Ewan MacColl. Ewan had a daughter, the musically talented Kirsty MacColl, by a previous wife. Kirsty tragically died after being hit by a speedboat while on holiday. When Ewan died, Peggy became a lesbian.

When I was a student I became very interested in traditional American music, stuff like The Carter Family, and bluegrass music, and I've played that sort of stuff ever since. Now the group I played in was basically *my* group, so they had to learn to play whatever I told them to.

Eleanor and I were married soon after I graduated at the age of 24, in 1966. We were on honeymoon in Menorca when England won the World Cup. I got prickly heat, a very nasty condition. When we returned to the UK, it was time to start work. Eleanor went to work in Poplar, by the London Docks - a

bit rough. I went to work in Chelmsford, and for about a year we saw each other only once a fortnight.

We then had jobs here, there, and everywhere, and we eventually bought a house in Buckhurst Hill, near Epping. Basically, I worked the Essex and East London hospitals. I was a trainee surgeon by this time. I'd done casualty and houseman jobs. I became a SHO - a senior house officer - at Harold Wood in Essex, then went to Whipps Cross in Leytonstone, a 1,000-bed hospital, where I was 'on call' one in three nights. We worked ridiculously long hours back then. One Thursday I started operating on emergency patients at 9 p.m., and finished at 9 a.m. on the Saturday - 36 hours, almost non-stop. By then I was obviously completely knackered. I decided to phone the hospital secretary - the position would be called chief executive these days - who had just been appointed to the position. The three candidates for that position had three O levels between them.

There was terrible under-funding in those days, hence the reason we were working crazy hours. I phoned the hospital secretary to tell him he'd have to close the hospital for surgery for four hours, while I had breakfast and a short sleep. So I got to the canteen about 9.10 a.m., only to be told, 'Breakfast's off, dear; you should have got here before nine o'clock.'

I had a short sleep and was on call for the rest of the weekend, and back on my normal shift the following Monday. There wasn't much guitar playing in those days.

I had to do all sorts of surgery at Whipps Cross, even head injuries. I remember a 13-year-old boy who had been struck on the head by a cricket ball. He was patently dying, so I had to drill a hole in his head, and remove a blood clot. That was quite scary, but he survived. The day after the operation, we

transferred the lad to London Hospital's neurosurgical centre. My wife, Eleanor, was on a ward round, and it was presented to all the students how well this young man had been treated, which obviously thrilled me to bits.

These days a specialist head injuries surgeon would handle cases like that. But in those days, you did all sorts of operations and so you learnt a lot very quickly. In my two years at Whipps Cross we operated on about 2,000 patients. I was there myself for most of them.

These days we've become so over-protective of junior doctors and non-specialists that if a similar case presented itself the patient would be taken to Papworth Hospital, near Cambridge. But with time not on the patient's side, the patient would be up the swanny by the time he or she arrived there. In those days we had to just go for it, and that helped in some life-or-death situations. Now we have to justify everything, and go by the book. As a result, I think the surgeons have lost their balls.

Then I got a job as a middle registrar, at the Royal Free Hospital. The interview was interesting. It wouldn't be regarded as politically correct these days. There were three candidates - two gentlemen from the Indian subcontinent, and myself.

Fortunately I'd been to a dinner with the chairman of the appointments committee some three weeks before. I was the last to be interviewed. The first chap was in for 30 minutes, and the second for 50 minutes. So it was with some trepidation that I entered the interview room, whereupon the chairman asked me, could I deal with a perforated stomach ulcer? I replied 'Yes', and he said, 'Wait outside,' which I did. Two minutes later, I got the job.

I was on call maybe one in four nights. In those days consultants were at the top of the career ladder, with a senior

registrar beneath them, and a middle registrar beneath *them*. The middle registrar was a dogsbody, really. But it was actually a very good system, and it spread the operating load. You learned a lot from your peers, who were around the same age.

By 1975, Eleanor and I had been trying to have a child for some time, without success, so we decided to try and adopt a child, and in due course adopted Elizabeth, just six weeks old. It was an extraordinary process. We heard nothing for 18 months, then the agency called and asked if we could pick the baby up 'next Friday'. But Eleanor was on call that weekend, so they agreed that we could pick up Elizabeth the following Monday. In those days, if you were a woman, you had to commit to giving up work for at least a year, to be eligible to adopt.

At the Royal Free I met up with a couple of students who were keen amateur musicians, and we'd play local pubs and folk clubs. There was no money in it; I just did it for the love of it. I had a great time at the Royal Free, and spent six or seven years there. The people I worked for, without exception, were absolutely wonderful. They were all extremely good surgeons, and nice people, very supportive, just what you'd reckon a good doctor should be. Friends worked in some other hospitals in London, and they found the exact opposite. They were treated like shit, while our seniors treated us almost like they would treat their children, I suppose.

My senior boss, George Qvist - a Scandinavian - was the inspiration for the surgeon character Sir Lancelot Spratt, in Richard Gordon's *Doctor* books, played by James Robertson-Justice in the films. Richard Gordon had been an anaesthetic registrar in the hospital, but left before I went there. On the outside, Qvist was terribly frightening, but the bloke had an absolute heart of gold. I remember walking down the corridor

one day. Qvist came across a student from a very poor background, who had just failed an exam. He pressed a piece of paper into his hand, with the remark, 'Bad luck - this might help you get through the next term.' It was a cheque for £100, a large sum in those days. He knew the student would make a good doctor in due course, and he was determined to help him qualify.

We lived in a nice terraced house in Islington at that time. Eleanor was commuting to the London Hospital, and I was commuting to the Royal Free. Eleanor had started working part-time again, a year after we'd adopted Elizabeth, and we had a nanny. It was great. We were both going against rush-hour traffic, and we had a pretty idyllic life. James came along two years later. He was a 'proper job' - that's a Cornish expression! - he wasn't adopted.

I was promoted to the position of consultant in Bedford Hospital, whereupon my income roughly halved, because I no longer got paid overtime. I didn't think that was very fair, because I was still working long hours, and on call on alternate nights. I did that for maybe 12 to 18 months.

In 1979, Eleanor was pregnant again, with Isabel. I managed to build up a good private practice in Bedford, which started to pay for things. I mainly did abdominal surgery. I became a general surgeon in Bedford, and loved it. We moved into Matron's Cottage in Clapham Hospital, which had rising damp, coal fires, and an unsafe chimney. We had two chimney fires there. By the time of the second chimney fire, Isabel had been born. So we had our three kids under four years old hovering outside the house. The chief of the fire department called the hospital manager to attend the scene, and said to him, 'Look at this - it's a disgrace, and the second time. The fire has occurred

because you haven't done what I told you to do last time, to stop this happening again. And so you've nearly killed all these kids.' I thought that was a bit strong, but he was right, and it did the trick. The chimney was fixed the next day.

Then we moved into bijou Biddenham, or should I say Queens Park, West End? I used to upset the blue-rinse brigade, because I pointed out Biddenham Turn had street lights, and a 'real village' doesn't have lights. It was part of Bedford, you see, so it wasn't really 'pukkah', but it was a lovely 'arts and crafts' house in a nice spot.

By then Eleanor had given birth to Thomas, our fourth child. All the kids were under 6, when I was about 40. It was all a bit tense, I thought.

These days, Elizabeth is in publishing – she's an editor. James has recently qualified as a doctor. Isabel is head of drama at Westminster Girls' School, a state school. Tom's going to be a lawyer; he's currently on sabbatical in Sweden, having a lovely time. He's a good guitar player too, and has perfect pitch.

We're up to the mid 1980s now. We moved into a lovely Victorian house in Biddenham Close, Biddenham, overlooking the river. It was idyllic really, with a couple of acres. My wife's poorly aunt was living with us. Eleanor's twin brother was a lecturer at Glasgow University, and a bachelor, and he'd come down to spend his vacations with us.

In 1995, there was just Thomas still going to school – Bedford School – and Eleanor announced she was fed up with the school run, and she wanted to live in Bedford. She wanted a house in Rothsay Gardens, a lovely road, but I didn't like the house. There was just something about it I didn't like; I wasn't sure what. Eleanor said, 'You're being Cornish and fey.' She went on and on, and eventually, for an easy life, I gave in. We

spent a *fortune* doing the house up, and I mislaid Eleanor shortly after that. I went to live with Val for a few years; she also worked in the hospital, as a nurse. Then I met Hailey, and mislaid Val.

I met Hailey in 1999, when I was 57. She was 20, a student nurse on the Shuttleworth ward at the hospital. I met her at her ward's Christmas party. We went for a drink a few days later, and it went on from there. We married in Christmas 2005. We lived in Park Avenue in Bedford, and moved to Little Staughton before we married. We married because Christopher - now 20 months old - was on his way. Hailey later also had Edward, now six months old.

Let's go back to the music for a bit. I've been into bluegrass music for a long time. In the early 1960s, artists like Joan Baez were becoming big names - the folk song revival. A band called Clarence Ashley's Band was dragged out of North Carolina, again in the early 1960s. Clarence himself must have been about 80 at the time. In his band was a guitarist, Arthel 'Doc' Watson, nicknamed Doc after the character in the Sherlock Holmes books. Now Watson was blind, but he basically transformed the way that acoustic guitar players played country music and bluegrass. He mainly did flat picking (with a plectrum), but also some finger picking. So instead of singers having fiddles as the main instruments backing them, for the first time they'd have a bloomin' acoustic guitar.

Over the past ten years I've gone regularly to the 'Merle Fest'. Merle was Doc Watson's son, and used to accompany him on tours. Merle was named after Merle Travis, a finger picking guitarist, a fantastic player, and another of my heroes. Unfortunately, Merle fell off his tractor - no, that's not a euphemism for something - he just fell off his tractor and died. So that's how there came to be a festival in memory of Merle

Watson, the Merle Fest. It's three or four days of non-stop music, in North Carolina, about 100 miles north of Raleigh. I can't remember the name of the town - I haven't been for two or three years, as Hailey keeps having babies. But I'm going to have to go next year, Doc Watson will be 87 then.

In 1990, when I was 48, I became one of the first laparoscopic surgeons in the country. The surgery is more commonly known to the public as 'keyhole surgery'. I travelled to Nashville to learn the technique from Eddie Joe Reddick, who had written the first paper on the topic in English the previous year. I had the choice of training in Toulouse, France or seeing Eddie Joe Reddick, and, well . . . Nashville is a nice place, so I went there. I learnt the surgery during the day, and enjoyed bluegrass music at night. Someone gave me a few bluegrass banjo lessons.

I went to the Cambridge Folk Festival once, in 1997, and now sometimes I go to the St Neots Folk Club. I have an excellent guitar tutor, Richard Calleson. He's a classical guitarist, but also a very good folk guitarist. He's not a performer though.

I play in the St Neots Folk Club every now and again. When we lived in Bedford I used to play quite a lot in The Ship on St Cuthbert's Street. I like it there. I used to play at The Wellington Arms before that, with an Irishman called John Kelly, who later died. I used to play the banjo or guitar with him. A chap called Graham Prigmore played the fiddle.

I probably now play the guitar more than I've ever done, for my own pleasure, several times a day, but not for great lengths of time.

What else do I want to talk about? Oh yes. I was telling you about purchasing guitars. I had a really cheap guitar when I was about 15, as a reward for passing my O levels. For my 21st

birthday, my dad said he'd buy me another guitar. I'd set my heart on getting one of the big Levin guitars. They were made in Sweden, and were all the rage back then. We went up to some very posh music shop in London. The new Levin was £85, but a second-hand Gibson was £50. The Gibson looked pretty grubby, but sounded better than the Levin. It had been made in 1942 or 1943; it had come over during the war. It's a Gibson J45, and it's been a brilliant guitar. I've just had it tarted up, to get it to the condition you see now. But it's now less valuable, having been tarted up. One of my partners hit it with a hammer, hence the hole that's been repaired.

These are Collings guitars, made like Martins were made before the war. They're made in Texas, and they have *the* most exquisite tones. (Bob spots a songsheet on a chair). This is the sort of stuff I'm learning now, it's called *The Fields Have Turned Brown*. It's by The Stanley Brothers, one of the earliest bluegrass groups. (Bob plays the song – excellently.)

Now, like a lot of medical people, I'm a bit of a hypochondriac. One day, a couple of years ago, I was about to go to work when I had some funny pains in my chest. Hailey was pregnant with Christopher at the time, and we were shortly to get married. I told Hailey about the pains, and she said 'Oh, for Christ's sake, there's nothing wrong with you. Take some Gaviscon.' So I plodded into work, where the first operation I had to perform was a colonoscopy, what I used to describe to patients as 'a big black snake up your bum'. I didn't like doing that sort of operation as it was always smelly, so I definitely had to have a fag beforehand.

I used to smoke 50 to 60 fags a day at that time. If I got to a difficult point in an operation, when I had to have a bit of a think, I'd take five minutes out and have a fag. Actually, it was

very useful. You see people struggling when they're doing something difficult, and they don't stop when they really should. I'd have a cup of tea and a fag, and feel rejuvenated. And what had been a problem before no longer was. It's quite fascinating.

But this particular morning, despite what Hailey had said, I suspected something was wrong. So I went to see my gastroenterologist friend, Rory Harvey, and he said, 'Bob, you're a bloody fool. Go to the cardiology unit.' So I did, and the ECG showed some ischaemic changes. I didn't have a heart attack, but there was some blockage in the coronary artery, near my heart. The next thing I knew, I was in an ambulance with its blue light flashing, being driven to Papworth Hospital, near Cambridge. Hailey drove behind.

At Papworth they put a stent in my coronary artery, to open it up. I would probably have had a heart attack that day if they hadn't done that operation. Doctor Petch was my cardiologist at Papworth, a real country gentleman. He was so fantastically reassuring. He asked Hailey if she wanted to watch the operation, to which she replied, 'Ooh, yes please.' They don't normally allow relatives into such operations; after all, I could have had a massive heart attack on the operating table. But she was glad she was present.

The operation was a success, and I haven't smoked a fag since. I chew a lot of Nicorettes though. A friend, who was married to my anaesthetist, was having a stent put in the same day, as a planned procedure, in other words not an emergency procedure. The first thing he did when he came round after the operation was to have a fag. I can't understand that - he smoked before the operation, but never as much as I did.

The joys of becoming a father again at 64? It was a little strange, but it was quite a revelation, really. I'd seen so little of

my first brood, as I'd leave for work at eight in the morning, coming back at eight, nine, ten o'clock at night. Apart from when they got up for a pee, I never saw them. I was a father by proxy, really. Whereas with this lot, who are still very young, Hailey just tells me I'm looking after them, and then she goes out on the razzle.

With our first, Christopher, I was probably a bit frightened, and wasn't very hands-on at all. At first Hailey was reluctant to leave him alone with me, because I'm old and might have set fire to him. But as he got older, we've become very close. He's definitely a daddy's boy. He calls me 'Daddy', and Hailey 'Hailey', which annoys her no end. And I'm hands-on with Edward.

Am I looking forward to many years with Hailey and the boys? I'm going to do the best I can. What's that, Hailey, there might be a third? Oh God (laughs).