London Landscape – Autobiography

An account of my life

John Horder

This is the third instalment of the autobiography of John Horder. He intended it to be read solely by family and friends. However LJPC persuaded him to serialise it for a wider readership. The autobiography as a whole is an important piece of history. It is remarkable for its humanity, perception and humility – much like the man himself.

John is a founding father of modern general practice. He was doing his medical finals when the NHS was founded in 1948 and has been an active advocate of whole person, family and community-oriented general practice ever since. He became active in the College of General Practitioners shortly after its formation in 1952 and before it gained its Royal Charter in 1967. He was one of the two founders of the Leeuwenhorst European Study Group that defined the job description of a general practitioner in 1974. He was President of the RCGP between 1979 and 1982. He assisted the setting up of general practice educational bodies in several Western European countries, especially Yugoslavia and Portugal. He has been a tireless supporter of interdisciplinary learning and founded the Centre for the Advancement of Inter-professional Education (CAIPE) in 1987. He lives in Primrose Hill with his wife Elizabeth June, who was also his partner in general practice.

Abridged by Layla Stock (Ealing PCT)

The Second World War and choosing medicine

In 1939 I made the two most important decisions of my life. June and I had committed ourselves to each other, and I committed myself to a career in medicine. Of these two commitments the first was easy, the second difficult and sudden.

I remember my first letter to June after our engagement. It was rather gloomy, warning her that she might be in for a difficult time with me. Whether this also reflected the difficulty of the time in general, I am not sure. The prospect for us was undoubtedly bad. Hitler had already occupied the Sudetenland and was already threatening Poland. Many people were convinced that war was now unavoidable, but June and I managed to bury our heads in the sand.

I had been studying classics at Oxford University for a year when June also began her studies there, as a medical student. I was still a few years away from my final examination in philosophy – ‘Greats’. Asked at that time about my intended career, I might have said: ‘Perhaps I will try for a college fellowship in classics. I had thought of being a musician, but I have just been told that I am not good enough, at least as a pianist. Maybe an organist, maybe a schoolmaster?’

A month later I was committed to a career in medicine.

Most central to my decision was the certainty that I would be called up for army service in the next year when I reached the age of 20. But the prospect of killing other fellow humans appalled me. I genuinely thought that I would prefer to be killed. My anticipated solution was to become a stretcher-bearer in the Royal Army Medical Corps. However, I was not considered suitable for this, and six months later I found myself a private soldier in the Oxfordshire and Buckinghamshire Light Infantry. I had not protested in the interval, because I was too uncertain about what was right.

Yet another thread leading to my career decision was the pressure which I had always felt from members of my family to go into the Church. In prospect, medicine, particularly in the form of psychiatry, seemed a suitable alternative. I saw it as another pastoral vocation and gave no thought to my lack of scientific or mathematical training.

Things happened quickly and I very soon had an appointment to see the Master of my college, Sir William Beveridge. ‘I hear that you want to change from classics to medicine. Well, that’s alright. But I shall have to take away your scholarship for one day. So go ahead.’ He was obviously pre-occupied at that moment.

Beginning medicine

To begin with I had to learn botany, zoology, physics and chemistry. I had not experienced any of these subjects at school. The syllabus must have been simplified because of the war, because I managed it all in the space of two terms. I remember almost nothing that interested me in any of the subjects and had for the first time, but not the last, a feeling that I had entered on an intellectually inferior course.

I knew now that I was going to be called up early in the next year, after passing my 20th birthday, but had no means of knowing exactly when. The undergraduates who had not already volunteered were starting to be called up. Medical students who had started their courses before the outbreak of war were required to finish a shorter course than normal. A very small number of them chose to withdraw from the University and to become combatants. Oxford was not the same place as usual.

Army service

I was duly summoned on 16 April 1940 to the barracks at Cowley. There we spent the days marching up and down with a sergeant shouting at us, then graduating to bayonet practice, attacking a line of sacks and making terrible noises as we did so, while the sergeant shouted at us even louder.

Within one month of this, the Germans invaded Belgium and France in a devastating campaign with aircraft and tanks. Despite two days clear warning, the French Commander-in-Chief refused to believe that the Germans could attack through the Ardennes forests. They did so.

At this point Cowley barracks was invaded by a large number of English and French soldiers who had been rescued at Dunquerque. The war became real to me for the first time, as I saw these exhausted, bedraggled men, some of whom were wounded.

Very soon after Dunquerque I was told that I would be going to Canada for further training. June and I decided that we would marry at once. The arrangements had to be made in a hurry as there was only one week left. However, one hour before the wedding, my lovely company commander told me that I need not go to Canada after all.

At the end of the service at South Hinksey church the vicar called for Mr Horder to sign the register. He then called for Mrs Horder and, in a loud voice, I called 'Mummy'. In retrospect, I think that there was more to this than met the eye.

I was now a lance-corporal, but reckoned fit to be 'officer material' and so found myself very soon that summer at Bulford on Salisbury plain, a bleak wasteland. One good thing about Bulford was its proximity to Salisbury, where June frequently joined me at

weekends. By this time we had bought a very old Singer car for eight pounds; it required much skill in changing gear and never managed to mobilise all four of its cylinders at the same time.

While I was at Bulford I was interviewed to join the King's Royal Rifle Corps as an officer. I faced an imposing, red-faced man, who asked me one question only: 'are you related to a Lord?' I answered 'yes' and that was enough to seal my fate for the next two years. Later in the war, much more exacting methods of officer selection were used.

In the early summer of 1941 I was posted to my final destination at Ampleforth, Yorkshire. I felt that I was going to a foreign land, because I had never before been quite so far north. It was much more difficult now for June to visit, but she managed some weekends, before eventually finding lodging in Ampleforth, where she could study for an imminent exam. The battalion remained in Ampleforth for a full year. Early in 1942, we left overnight without warning, but we only moved as far as Pickering, 20 miles away.

It was during this summer of 1942 that I started to become unwell, although I realised this only in retrospect. I was finding it increasingly difficult to do my job as a signals officer, because I could not concentrate as usual. I attach some of the blame for what proved to be my first experience of serious depressive illness, to my senior officer, whose name was Palmer. He was a hard man, probably destined to be a regular officer if he survived (I do not know whether he did). He probably perceived that I was not cut out to be a soldier – and in this he was right.

It was not long before I was sent to Muswell Hill and admitted to hospital, where I came under the care of Dr Robert Moody. I could not have asked for better care. Robert was a sensitive, artistic man with whom I immediately made a good rapport. Indeed he later became a friend and later still I became doctor to his second wife and children, by which time he himself was a consultant in charge of paediatric psychiatry at St George's Hospital, London. I was in hospital for about four weeks and was discharged as unfit for combatant service. But not long after that I was summoned to the War Office and interviewed by an officer, who offered me a choice – either to return to the army to train signallers or to return to Oxford and continue as a medical student, on condition that I would be recalled as a medical officer if the war was still continuing. I chose the latter, but not without mixed feelings. Had the war continued, I would have served in that capacity very willingly, any problem of pacifism eliminated. As it turned out, I was halfway through medical training when the war ended. The government paid for the whole of the training, because of my army service. But I fear that my contribution to the defeat of Hitler and of Japan had been minimal.

Oxford again

Even before the start of the war, I had wondered where the study of the classics – ‘Mods’ – was leading me. I was barely enjoying the work and failing to be excited even by such well-known lecturers as Cyril Bailey, Eduard Fraenkel or ER Dodds. Without the interference of the war, I would certainly have moved on to philosophy – ‘Greats’ – in 1940, because that was the normal sequence at Oxford. My notion of ‘studying human nature’ was more likely to find satisfaction in ‘Greats’ than it had found in ‘Mods’.

This notion had begun to crystallise into an interest in psychology, as well as in philosophy. I thought more and more of a future in psychiatry and by that I chiefly imagined psychoanalysis, despite a serious warning at the beginning, from the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Bristol, that psychoanalysis was not a valid study. This goal was now supported by Robert Moody who suggested that I should seek help from Gerhard Adler, a Jungian analyst, who was working in Oxford because of the war. I accepted this, in the belief that I was undertaking a part of my training. Robert more likely had in mind the prevention of further depressive illnesses. I saw Adler twice weekly for two years between 1943 and 1945.

Meanwhile there was anatomy, physiology, biochemistry and pharmacology to be mastered, without any of the scientific background of my fellow students. The only one of these subjects which I truly enjoyed was anatomy, presumably because I have a good visual memory. Overall, I began to think that I might have

made a bad mistake in entering medicine. It was in this situation that I found strong support in thinking of Albert Schweitzer, who, from a somewhat similar background in humanities and music, had managed to make the same transfer at the age of 30.

June and I had made our decisions to be medical students for entirely separate reasons, although at about the same time. Until the outbreak of war she had intended to read biology at university, but now there was obvious need for a more practical study. When I returned to Oxford, she was more than two years ahead of me. She had been one of the very first students to undertake clinical training in Oxford. In 1942 she was attached as a student to the ‘firm’ of doctors caring for the first patient ever to receive injections of penicillin. This was a policeman suffering from what would have been a fatal septicaemia. Within three days he made a dramatic recovery, but, despite penicillin being recovered from his own urine for re-injection, the supply ran out and he died.

We now needed a place of our own and we found one in a shop on Walton Street just behind the Radcliffe Infirmary. June, now 22, became pregnant not long after my return. Timothy was born in 1943 and spent most weekdays with his grandmother three miles outside Oxford, coming back to us at weekends. Without that help June would have had to give up her training.

The war with Germany ended in April 1945, and we headed for London in the following autumn. We had to find a new house, and I had to choose a new medical school for the clinical half of the training.