

# Henry Souttar: man of many parts

Versatile, charming, distinguished, daring: meet Sir Henry Souttar, a pioneering London Hospital heart and cancer surgeon, literally decades ahead of his time.

**T**he young Henry Sessions Souttar was a chip off the old block. Like his father, Robinson (a highly-regarded engineer in India, who later became MP for Dumfries), Henry's first loves were mathematics and engineering.

Born in Birkenhead in 1875, but educated at Oxford High School, he graduated from Queens College, Oxford, with a double first in mathematics in 1898. Following university, this keen athlete and rower – he would take to the river even in his sixties – pursued an interest in physics and engineering, acquiring a basic knowledge that would prove useful later in his medical career.

By 1903, his focus had turned to medicine and he studied at The London Hospital, graduating in 1906. Older than most of his fellow students because of his earlier training, he quickly made up for lost time. In 1909, he became FRCS; in 1910 a surgical registrar; then an assistant surgeon at the West London Hospital; followed by the same post at The London Hospital in 1915.

## A grim picture of war

During the First World War Henry Souttar was appointed surgeon to the Belgian field hospital at Antwerp, an experience he detailed in a moving and graphic book, *A Surgeon in Belgium*.

In it, he spoke of the thrill and expectation of going to war, living through the siege of Antwerp, never far from the firing line, and, on his way, seeing a great cruiser roll over and sink, the victim of a submarine.

"These things are the mere framing of a grim picture," he wrote. "The cruiser has been blotted out by the weary faces of an endless stream of fugitives, and the scream of the shells has been drowned by the cry of a child. For, while the soldiers may fight, it is the people who suffer, and the toll of war is not the life which it takes, but the life which it destroys." Soldiers came from the trenches in a condition that was "pitiable in the extreme", and treating them required steady nerves as they suffered "ghastly injuries from which even the most hardened might well turn away in horror."

After the war, he returned to a busy life at The London Hospital and, in 1920, was appointed



Henry Souttar (second from left) operating



“Souttar went on to help pioneer the use of radium in treating malignant tumours, using his mathematical skills to assess dose and range.”

director of the new surgical unit. Five years later, he found lasting fame, becoming the first surgeon to open a chamber of the heart, the left auricle, to treat mitral stenosis in a 15-year-old girl, using his finger to stretch the damaged mitral valve.

However, although the operation was successful (she lived for another seven years), Souttar performed it only once, as his physician colleagues ruled out more procedures as too risky. It would be 1948 before the operation became standard – a year after his retirement from The London Hospital.

## Engineering talents

Undeterred by these obstacles, Souttar went on to help pioneer the use of radium in treating malignant tumours, using his mathematical skills to assess dose and range. He wrote books and chaired committees on radium, designing a 'gun' by which radon seeds could be implanted in or around a tumour.

His engineering talents extended to running his own workshop, where he developed new surgical instruments, including a flanged tube to overcome obstructions in the oesophagus, special tubes for intubation, and a craniotome to open the skull in brain operations.

He played a vital role in setting up the faculties of dental surgery and anaesthetists at The Royal College of Surgeons and held all the high offices of the British Medical Association. "Few can have been the chairman of so many important bodies," said a contemporary.

A happy personal life included a marriage of 55 years and two children. He was a churchwarden and pianist who mastered the violin late in life. Noted for his friendliness, hearty laugh, large impressive figure and bulldog face, Sir Henry Souttar died aged 88 in 1964, remembered as a man whose diverse background and life experience meant he would always dare to find a solution, no matter how difficult the problem.