

Tribute to my Uncle, Dr Geoffrey Willis

As a child we were very blessed with a number of aunts and uncles who took an interest in us as children and who provided good examples for us growing up. Geoffrey and Freda were outstanding members of this group of relatives and I have many happy memories of visits both to Buxton, especially at Christmas, and having the 'Buxton Folk' as we used to call them come to stay with us in London.

Geoffrey was certainly a favourite uncle when I was a child. However, in reflecting on his passing I have realised that he has always been something more than that to me. I realised that Geoffrey was actually a hero to me. Yes, in his humble and unassuming way, my Uncle Geoffrey was really quite a heroic figure, I am probably not the only person to feel this way but here are my special reasons. My mother is Geoffrey's older sister and they were always close. As well as knowing Geoffrey as my uncle as a child I also heard stories about him from my mother, I don't know if she always got the details quite right, but her tales impressed me.

I liked the story about how Geoffrey as a dashing young medical officer in RAF uniform and driving his sports car offered a lift to a young lady one wet evening when they were both heading home in the same direction. They got to know each other, fell in love and lived happily ever after, I have always thought that my Aunt Freda is a lovely woman so there was an element of the romantic hero about Geoffrey.

But there is far more than that. Geoffrey was a doctor and negotiating the arduous training and passing the exams is a triumph in itself. However, in my experience as a child doctors seemed to be perfectly nice people who sat in surgeries or sometimes came and visited you at home. They gave you good advice and prescribed some pills but it all seemed a bit tame. Geoffrey was in the mountain rescue and would go to the aid of those who needed him in inaccessible places at all times of the day and night and in all weathers. Of course when it came to the great outdoors there wasn't a fell Geoffrey wouldn't walk, a mountain he would not climb or crag he didn't want to get to the top of. I believe that my uncle was much less enamoured of holes in the ground. But there was an occasion, before I was born, when Dr Willis was called upon to assist in a cave rescue. A situation that sadly ended in tragedy yet my uncle had not hesitated to assist the suffering and gone deep underground to do what he could. To Geoffrey doctoring meant much more than surgeries and waiting rooms or cosy house calls and I know there are countless other examples of his selfless devotion to caring for those in need.

I was also impressed when we came to Buxton for Christmas and rather than just focusing on the family we would go and sing carols in the cottage hospital. Then on Christmas day go and help serve dinner to those unfortunate enough to be in the hospital over Christmas. I know that this was just one of the myriad ways that Geoffrey showed his devotion to the community of Buxton and surrounding area.

What I have described so far is a family man and servant of the community simply doing what he loved and doing it well. There was another aspect to Geoffrey and his family which is difficult to address but the full picture of this quietly heroic man would not be complete without it. I am talking about the tragic and untimely death of Freda and Geoffrey's son, my cousin, John.

I do know that the whole family went through agonies of grief and sadness and I can only speak of what I witnessed as a relative but still an outsider. I know that Geoffrey and Freda suffered the agony that only parents losing a son with so much promise ahead of him can feel. And I know that Michael and Katie had to deal with the loss of their brother too.

I can only speak of what I saw in Geoffrey over the years since John's death. His dignified courage in spite of his grief has been an example to me. The tragedy must have been a challenge to Geoffrey's faith and yet he used the experience to deepen his understanding of suffering. Perhaps it made my uncle more than just a doctor to the body but also someone able to minister to the soul as well.

Then there was the long period of illness. A burden carried with courage, patience and good humour. Even then Geoffrey still saw his opportunity to serve the cause of medicine by being

willing to undergo experimental treatments. Partly in the hope of prolonging his own life, but also as a final service to the profession he so loved and found so fascinating.

So, thank you Geoffrey for being my uncle, for being an inspiration to me over my whole life and for being a hero to me. In the grand scheme of things you were not a great man but in all the ways that really matter, as a family man, friend to many, servant of the community, man of faith, you were very special. You were a hero to me and I you set an example of love, courage and service which I will never be able to live up to but I do try.

Graham Butcher 19th October 2017