

Dr Francis Eagar sadly passed away in October 2009. This is an article he wrote about returning to Epsom in the 2008 OE magazine

Dr Eagar's Epsom check-up

Dr Francis Eagar, veteran of Carr (1966-71), came all the way from Canada to see his old school for the first time in 37 years. The occasion was the OE Medical Society Dinner...



Are you going to Lake Louise again for a few days' skiing Dr Eagar?" my receptionist asked, blocking off March 5-8. "No, I'm having dinner at my old school in England," I replied. Canadians think nothing of driving 100 miles each way just for an evening with friends or to go shopping, but this took her breath away. "Back on the 9th, must be some school!" she whispered. "Best anywhere," came my retort. "I'm going to see if it still is."

In 1952, after a long day at Blackfriars Skin Hospital and his Harley Street rooms nearby, my dermatologist father had a car accident on the A30 near Basingstoke. He died 12 months later. My mother, the only other person in the car and six months pregnant with me, was unharmed and delivered at term. I am grateful, way beyond words, to the Royal Medical Foundation (RMF) and Epsom for making everything possible for me, an Epsom Founder. I am similarly grateful to the Royal Medical Benevolent Fund (RMBF) for supporting my late mother.

I started at Epsom, in Carr, in 1966. I left in 1971 to pursue my burning ambition to be a doctor. That year, typical for Epsom at the time,

60 per cent of the Upper Sixth applied for Medicine and five per cent, Dentistry. We were ably guided by Chris Trehwella, who orchestrated our choices across the country to maximize our chances of placement.

After St Andrew's Medical School, post-grad jobs in Manchester and Community Medicine training in Edinburgh, I went into general practice in 1985 in Saskatchewan, Canada, to be nearer family from my father's first marriage. Going to Canada had been on my mind since my final year at Epsom when an exchange student from Montreal, Walter Raza (now a New York ER doctor), eerily appeared in Carr and attended all my classes. Amazingly, his mother reported they lived just five houses from my long-lost half brother and were friends. Walter's father was the Eagar family GP! What were the odds?!

I planned to go to the 150th Gala

“I've often wondered what happened to old school friends. Haven't you?”

in 2004, but donated my Albert Hall Box to the RMBF in Wimbledon that June on realising my youngest son Robert, then four years old and a year into chemotherapy for leukaemia, would likely be in hospital with Neutropenia, a blood disorder, that day (and he was). This spring marked his fifth year in remission, the official cure point, so I just had to go when the OE Medical Society was meeting at Epsom for the first time.

Extensively refurbished

This year, after a particularly brutal Canadian winter, I traded minus 27°C and three feet of snow on my lawn for England in wonderful spring. The College looks the same as 37 years ago, but with many new buildings. Inside little is the same, with the older buildings extensively refurbished. Truly, dear reader, I am your Dickensian time traveller.

To name just a few changes: the old gym is now a library; squash courts/rifle range now a drama/dance facility; no chalk boards in classes – even as used by Jimmy Edwards filmed on location in the class on the Quad; new computerised benches in the science labs; sadly gone, the live beehive window and Amazon giant butterfly exhibit in the Biology lab;

also gone, the swimming pool off the Quad – where Peter Benson with saintly patience dedicated so much of his time helping me with swimming; gone too, the long tables and benches in the canteen; Big School – motorised retractable seating – Wow! I am on overload! Headmaster Stephen Borthwick kindly organised a Carr student to show me round and I found that House too has changed and moved into Propert's former space in the Newsom building. Little has been sacrosanct to change, except for the College's commitment to providing educational excellence which remains abundantly apparent.

As an experiment in 1970, two girls were allowed into the Sixth form. I was one of 500 teenage boys, mostly boarders, excitedly waiting to see girls at school. Can you imagine?!

Those girls made the biggest of all changes at Epsom. Many followed, leading the school boldly in new directions. The 500 boys of my era have, today, become 726 co-ed students. Incredibly, well over 800 people can comfortably fit into Chapel.

With so many Epsomians going into Medicine, the turnout for the OE Medical Society Dinner was surprisingly small. Hopefully in future these numbers will grow. I reckon Epsom has produced over 2,000 medics since 1947, an impressive 35 per cent of total Upper

Sixth output. What other school can make such a magnificent claim? But wait, that is not all! Let's not overlook other OEs like my Carr friends, 'Adriano' Henney and Peter Parker, who pursued biochemistry PhDs and distinguished medical research careers. These medical frontier pioneers are also important to the unique and extremely rich OE medical story.

The medic evening was delightful, particularly seeing David 'Doc' Young. Regrettably I missed seeing Dr Roger White who, after my 1970 school ski trip to Obergurgl, got me through two weeks in the San so ill with full-blown measles that my mother was summoned from Southampton.

Psychedelic sunglasses

On returning to classes, due to photosensitivity (which lasted three years), I was given special permission to wear sunglasses. For several glorious days I went around wearing crazy, psychedelic, oversized Carnaby Street sunglasses. Until...my Housemaster, Murray Young, hauled me in and asked: "Are they suitable attire for an Epsomian?" I felt "YES", but he and apparently the entire Common Room thought differently! The school shop then provided an approved pair. For the rest of term I was transformed from a hippy into... Roy Orbison!

The food at the dinner was superb. The meal was created by the College catering staff – kudos to them. The evening was time well spent. Meeting various OEs, some with very different medical careers, was illuminating. Some OEs were unprepared for emotions the visit awakened. Not me – I have always been emotional about Epsom! It was a great pleasure meeting the Society President and his wife, Dr Hywel and Jane Bowen-Perkins, who are my era. We talked long into the night. The next day I just couldn't resist returning for another look round my alma mater.

Extremely well managed over the years, Epsom continues to go from strength to strength and remains a pure gem. Would I go to another OE medic dinner or a reunion for my 1960s decade cohort? Absolutely yes! I've often wondered what happened to old school friends. Haven't you?

March 9 – the refrigerated Prairie was a balmy minus 4°C. "How's England?" my receptionist asked. "Spectacular! All the daffodils are out," I replied. "The old school?" she quizzed. "Absolutely still the best anywhere," I beamed back proudly. "Will Robert go there?" she probed. "God willing and if they'll take him," came my riposte. "He's already talking about doing Medicine, you know!"



Society President Dr Hywel Bowen-Perkins (fourth from left), Headmaster Stephen Borthwick (second left) and guests from the Lower Sixth planning to follow a medical career



(Left to right) Richard Haworth (Crawfurd 1961-71), John Wong (Fayrer 2003-05) and Harpreet Sood (Forest 1999-04)



(Left to right) Geoffrey Robb (Hart-Smith and Wilson 1949-55), Alec Shaw (Holman 1943-50), Michael Salmon (Propert 1948-53) and Paul Salmon (Forest 1949-54)



Guests chat before the enjoyable dinner

Photos: Sue Croucher