

Trust Me, I'm a Mallam by Jonathan Mallam-Clark

Fact:- In Nigeria it is an accepted honorific, bestowed on an individual as an equivalent to "Doctor" in its non medical usage. In England it is a surname held by a gifted few. It is of course "Mallam".

Henry Parr Mallam was born on 29th November 1838 in Oxford. His father, rather impoverished in many ways, had in his later years been a feather-dresser. Not surprisingly his son sought an alternative career.

It is not certain when Henry became a Member of the Royal College of Surgeons, but he was certainly in practice by 1864. The Trade Directory of that year records him living at 19 High Street. The owner at that time was an Oxford gun-maker, and it is probable that Henry rented his living space. However, not three years later he had married Mary Ann Margetson and they moved into a new house at number 91. Indeed, the previous owner had himself been a Doctor, and was surely an acquaintance. In his capacity as Medical Officer to the Union Workhouse, and as certifying factory surgeon, he prospered. At the time of the 1881 Census he employed five servants, including a Page. But unfortunately his wife, the daughter of a prosperous merchant, died four years later at the young age of forty-four. Dying within two weeks of the birth of her last child, it is likely she incurred infection during labour. From this point her seven children were brought up by the eldest sister, Amy.

Not surprisingly, her younger brother Ernest (1870 – 1940) followed in the footsteps of his father. He matriculated at Magdalen College in 1888, and four years later gained first class honours in physiology. In 1897, at the age of 27, he became a house physician at the Radcliffe Infirmary. Shortly afterwards, in 1905, he progressed to a consultant physician. He was a huge influence in many Oxford clinics, and became very well known for his work in the field of dermatology. However, as his grand-niece recalled, "He may have become famous for his work if he had not taken to drink."

His son Patrick Mallam (1900 – 1973) was similar in many ways. Attending Queen's College, he amassed a startling collection of medical qualifications, and took an active interest in rowing. In 1931 he started at the Radcliffe Infirmary as a junior physician, and like his father, eventually became a consultant.

In conjunction with this, he also took a vested interest in the University Boat Club, and for many years acted as coach. However, he appears to have shared the same problem as his father. Rupert Mallam recalls that he was "usually drunk", and in one incident before World War II, he "ended the day at Bow Street police station." He had been rowing for Oxford in the boat race, and the next day, when he appeared in court, the national newspapers exclaimed, "Bow at Bow Street!" (his position in the boat was bow).

When he died in 1973, the Oxford Mail claimed that Ernest and Patrick, as father and son, had served the Infirmary for 83 years. This is quite an achievement, and two years later Mrs. Mallam (as yet unidentified), donated £1000 for the foundation of the Patrick Mallam Memorial Prize. Students at Oxford still compete for this even today, and they state "The prize is awarded to the clinical student who is considered to have cared for his or her patients in the most exemplary fashion."

Whether our current doctors, William and Isobel Mallam (the last I heard the latter was in training) treat their patients in such a way we do not know. But one hopes that despite the personal difficulties of the son, the father and the grandfather, the Mallam doctors would fulfil the requirements of their lasting memorial.