

Doctor

by James Platt

Across the bottom of Trewetha Lane from the pump on a high tamarisk fringed bank facing St Peter's Church across Back Hill, was the home of Dr Sproull, local GP, family counsellor and friend to the multitude. His house was a rambling building with a gravel-covered yard, big by local standards. The doctor's surgery, a meeting place for those both sound and halt of limb, was appended to the house like a squat afterthought.

Dr Sproull was a pragmatic Scot to whom malingerers and Conservatives were anathema. His apparent dourness masked an intensely caring nature. He was unequivocally on the side of any social underdog. Church and chapel were all the same to him. He brooked no nonsense from man or beast, was without guile and was the very soul of discretion.

No call for help was too late in the day to warrant his immediate attention, no house too humble or too far away for him to visit when he was needed, no weather too inclement for his rounds. The comfort, assurance and well being of his patients was his sole objective. His patients were his priority.

He was known to everyone as 'Doctor'. This was not used in the sense of due title, but rather as a sentiment of affection, as with a nickname or an endearment, in recognition of his being something quite special. Since his day in Port Isaac there have been and still are other doctors but there was, and will ever be, only one 'Doctor'.

Doctor had longish wavy dark hair held down by his glasses and tucking neatly behind his ears out of the way. There was a touch of Churchill in his features although the parallel was one he would not have welcomed.

My grandmother and my mother both did domestic service for Doctor and in the process developed a regard for him which was appreciably close to hero worship.

My mother once told me in a shocked voice that Doctor subscribed to the magazine 'New Statesman'. She didn't like to pick it up – danger lay in touching such a publication, let alone reading it! The Labour Party was, to all intents and purposes, either unknown or otherwise unwanted in the village. The Conservatives had adherents but their grip on local political life was precarious. They were smug people regarded as 'our betters' and, as such, Conservatism was not 'for the likes of we'.

Liberalism, rooted so much in tradition that all sense of objectivity over the reason why had long since taken flight, was the endemic local political persuasion. What had been good enough for forebears was deemed good enough for their descendants.

His outlook on life might be classless, but Doctor's social glass was undoubtedly elevated as far above that of the majority of his patients as it was above any stereotyped ruck of grimy necked Labourites. Doctor was a professional, drove a car, had a telephone, wore a tie regularly and ate turkey at Christmas. The latter, a luxury of a kind which was so rare as to be only imagined in most homes of the village, placed the hallmark on Doctor's status as a man for all seasons.

Doctor's surgery was open almost every night except on Sundays. The surgery door opened directly into a small waiting room which was bright and welcoming in any season of the year. A heavy



The house and surgery where Dr Sproull lived and worked - this photograph was taken in the 1970s, long after he lived there

door adjacent to the fireplace led into Doctor's office and consulting room – a place of dark wood, glass and leather.

Chairs were set around the walls of the waiting room. The chairs were always occupied during surgery hours. A small proportion of those present had genuinely come to see Doctor, but they were in the minority.

Gossip between the genuine, the would-be and definitely non-patients in Doctor's waiting room revolved almost exclusively around respective medical histories, each intent on outdoing the other. A reported complaint was immediately trumped by something more serious. All of them wallowed self indulgently in a warm sea of shared misfortune and were happier for the experience. Much of what was learned was destined, with suitable elaboration; to be passed on to chance met acquaintances on the morrow.

Heavy though the door to Doctor's office was, and muted though his 'bedside manner' tone of voice might have been, privacy was constantly challenged by the questing ears of those who had spent a lifetime perfecting the art of eavesdropping.

Doctor's diagnostic technique was nothing if not direct. Faced with a patient complaining of an ache or a pain, his first action was to probe or manipulate the allegedly affected part of the body. The patient's reaction, was measured by the volume and duration of the ensuing anguished yelp, was considered by Doctor to be in direct proportion to the seriousness of the ailment.

When I once visited him with a sprained ankle he took my foot in his trained physician's hands and gave it a sharp clockwise turn while at the same time asking me if it hurt at all. The question was rather redundant, partially drowned out as it was by my anguished scream.

On the mantelpiece over the surgery waiting room fireplace, flat fronted bottles and squat jars or medicinal remedies which Doctor had prescribed, and in many cases mixed with his own hands, stood in a proud row waiting for collection. They were cork stoppered and labelled in ink with the recipient's name and the recommended daily dosage to be taken. The medicines were coloured pink, white, orange and brown. Many of them tasted unpleasant but as far as the patients were concerned the worse the taste the more effective the remedy was likely to be.

Doctor Sproull. If there be glory in medicine, let it be on a man like this.

Printed in Trio, December 2000