

Neil Lawson Baker

Neil Lawson Baker (1952-1957) began his career as a dentist and dental surgeon, going on to specialise in facial reconstruction. He has since become one of the country's leading sculptors, is Executive Chairman of the National Open Art Competition and also runs a not-for-profit registered arts charity, The Chichester Art Trust

Christened Neil Anthony Lawson Baker, I was known at school as Neil Baker. My two brothers Stewart and Colin also had the name, Lawson, but none of us used it while at Merchant Taylors'. The three of us were born in 1938, 1943 and 1947 and from 1952 onwards we all thoroughly enjoyed our life at school and our time in Hilles. My uncle, the late Raymond Lawson, had also been in Hilles in the early 1930s and my brother Stewart was a very successful school cricket captain for some years.

I joined the school in Upper 4B, I was definitely a B streamer! I well remember certain masters; R.B. Hawkey who was in the English Squash team and ran the Naval Section; 'Prick' Thorning whose form I was in twice in the Science Lower 6th and then Science 6B; Hodgetts our house master; Cliff Lummis who used to scream at us and throw lumps of chalk; Rags Stokes who taught me Chemistry so brilliantly; John Steane, erudite and Pickwickian; Mr Beech in the woodwork department; RSM Bell who ran the Corps like a well drilled private army, Jacques Brown in the gymnasium and many others.

I biked to school every day with friends from Watford past a huge asbestos factory but I don't think the wind blew the toxic dust towards us, thank God! It was about 5 miles each way and on some days when I arrived

home I used to deliver the local post around Watford for my father's estate agency business. They paid me two old pennies (2d) per letter delivered, it saved them 1/2d and so I earned my pocket money. I was taught the value of money from a young age and it kept me very fit, adding a few miles to the ten I had already pedalled.

At school I loved sport but never hugely excelled, although I played rugby and squash fairly well and captained the tennis team. I was passionate about jazz, and later when a student at Guy's Hospital ran The Lawson Turner Big Band, a 12-piece mainstream jazz band in which I played saxophone. Dick Wilcox, then at the BBC library, wrote our scores and whilst at school, together with Terry Brady and some other boys, Dick organised a lunchtime jazz concert with Humphrey Lyttleton and George Melly in the Great Hall. Can you imagine the furor after that coup! It had all been arranged in secret and took the school by storm.

Hugh Elder, our Head Master, summoned me to his office in 1956 to tell me, with my parents present, that the chances of my going to university were virtually zero as I was not academically suited. He was almost right. I failed Physics at A Level but managed to persuade Guy's Hospital to take me as a first year student, where I re-sat the Physics exams, and ended up a few years

later with an honours degree in Dental Surgery. That was when I became Neil Lawson-Baker BDS LDS RCS (Eng) and lived off the King's Road, Chelsea. It was 'the Swinging 60s'.

I made the big decision to carry on studying rather than immediately going into an NHS practice despite the resistance I encountered, this time from Fred Warner the Sub Dean at Guy's who once again advised against further academia. I accepted a place at St George's and five years later had an honours degree in Medicine MB BS and won the London University Brodie Prize in clinical surgery.

During my time as a student and later on the staff at St George's Hyde Park Corner (now the Lanesborough Hotel), I had some amazing experiences. I was privileged to have a clinic next to the pioneers of pacemaking in Heart Surgery. Aubrey Leatham taught me cardiology. I assisted in the development and the first use of laparoscopy with Patrick Steptoe, who invented it, during the months that I was doing an elective and delivering babies at Oldham General. I observed heart operations when both Michael De Bakey and Denton Cooley separately visited St George's from the USA and I well remember watching Lord Brock at Guy's with Donald Ross in 1957 packing the chest with ice before the invention of the bypass. Those were pioneering days.



Mrs Thatcher and Neil in her office

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Armed with a decent undergraduate education from two of the great London hospitals I had house surgeon's posts at Charing Cross in Ear, Nose and Throat; Plastic Surgery and then Radiotherapy before progressing to Registrar in Oral Surgery at St Georges; The Royal Marsden and The Royal Dental Hospitals.

The next step was leading towards being a consultant in Oral Surgery but I had been fortunate to meet a colleague who was the President of the Student Union at the Royal, one Michael Furness, and our careers were to come together and take a different path. He had a similar training and we had met at King's in the Strand doing our 2nd MB. We decided to practice dentistry in the evenings at No 6 Lower Sloane Street to fund our medical studentship. He and two other students then joined me in a flat in Sloane Square. My dear mother had given me £2500 to buy somewhere to live when my father

tragically died in Guy's Hospital on the very day I qualified. It was a tough time. We ran an emergency dental service at night linked to all the London casualty departments who had no such cover and took home £10 per treatment usually from patients who had been in extreme pain.

Our flat at No 12 Eaton Mansions became well known for its dinner parties where we even entertained the hospital consultants and one night we had even invited dancers from The Eve Club to do a cabaret for them. After that dinner I walked one of the consultants, Terry Blennerhassett, back home across Belgravia to No 31 Wilton Place, where he also practised. He too had both qualifications. I had already done a locum consultancy for him at Charing Cross and I think I must have impressed him because out of the blue he offered me the opportunity to buy his dental practice because he had decided to retire early.

It was a golden opportunity to run my own private clinic, actually a very serious business involving huge overheads, and at that time of course all on borrowed money. But I would be able to do all the dentistry and oral surgery I wanted to, to the very best degree of excellence with no restrictions from NHS bureaucracy and committees - this was right up my street and I invited Michael Furness to join me there as a professional partner.

I managed to raise the money to buy the practice for the princely sum of £15,000 - exactly the sum I had managed to sell my flat for. I guess 31 Wilton Place is now probably worth more like £15M but I have long since sold, after 38 years in practice, and changed career which I did when I was just 70. The practice is still there of course and is one of the oldest dental practices in London having started out at No 1 Hanover Square in 1842 and moved to Belgravia in 1954.

Life in practice was wonderful. We built a brilliant team, invested in the best of equipment, worked ourselves to the bone, did a multitude of post graduate courses and after nearly 4 decades ended up with a huge international reputation. I was also an active City of London Barber Surgeon and rebuilt the company library and helped redesign the Gerard Herb Garden.

Implantology arrived and I was one of the first to use it. Crown and Bridge technology blossomed, bonding metal to porcelain and later finding porcelain strong enough to need no metallic support and all the while I kept up the oral surgery by operating in the evenings in many of London's private hospitals often taking out wisdom teeth.

We began to do extensive oral reconstructions on badly damaged mouths, making major changes to people's lives. We could offer superb aesthetics with the backing of the Regent Dental Laboratory. The days of inevitable full dentures, which we had all been trained to make, was on its way out. All these technical advances had to be based on good dental hygiene so I pioneered prevention too and in 1978 launched a new clinic in Devonshire Place, near Harley Street, with two

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Oral Hygiene Centre franchise but the dream was somewhat thwarted by both politicians and the profession. In the USA, where I also introduced the idea, state laws only allowed hygienists to work one to one with surgeons and under their direct supervision. I think I was a few years ahead of my time; most dentists now have their own hygienists and I believe they are the most important part of any practice.

Not long after the start of my career in 1972 I had been unfortunate enough to experience synchronous bilateral malignant seminoma and was advised I might only have a short time to live. It was only 6 months after my first marriage to Sue. I was lucky enough to be completely cured by two wonderful surgeons and aggressive radiotherapy, and while recovering I took up riding. Sue and I bought a weekend cottage in Wiltshire and I took to horses like a duck to water, ending up riding one and three day events. I even owned Monacle, an amazing horse that came second at Badminton in 1979 and was selected for the 1980 Moscow Olympic Games. Sadly, Mrs Thatcher asked our team to withdraw as a protest against Russia's occupation of Afghanistan – somewhat ironic in hindsight – but I still can't live without horses in my life.

other colleagues. It was called the Oral Hygiene Centre and was the first of its kind in the world. The idea was to provide the services of a large team of Dental Hygienists under the supervision of one Dental Surgeon to make prevention the priority and lower the cost of providing better dental health.

Hygienists, I explained to the politicians, are cheaper to train; they require minimal equipment, and the fear level for patients should be less too, with no drilling. I imagined a worldwide

But now it was 1987 and I suffered a second setback. I contracted Hepatitis B from a needle stick injury. Bright yellow and feeling very ill my doctor informed me that if I didn't clear the virus I wouldn't be able to practice again! I recovered, but during the 4 months away from practice, I had taught myself how to make sculpture. It is a similar hand-eye skill to creating beautiful crowns in dentistry. Rather than a dental laboratory you use a foundry; rather than casting a gold inlay you cast a bronze.

I had collected art for my home for many years. Sue was a PA to a director at Christie's so I spent a lot of time in the auction rooms just looking and acquiring know-how. Earlier in my life my father was awarded an FRPS as an amateur photographer. He often let me help in the dark room, developing and printing black and white photographs and I can well remember his first coloured print. He had taught me to put objects on the thirds in a photographic field and to view a scene through a pin hole

made with my fingers before taking a photograph. I had, without knowing it, developed a seeing eye.

Later that year and fully recovered, I was introduced to the Burleighfield Foundry at Beaconsfield who began to cast in bronze for me using the lost wax technique. The directors there had made Barbara Hepworth's work and I met Elizabeth Frink and Lynn Chadwick (another OMT) and became surrounded by great sculptors, many of whom became friends.

I soon had the unique situation of having a wonderful practice full of interesting patients with my own art works decorating the house and people beginning to collect my work. Suddenly commissions came flying in. I thought about retiring from practice but I hadn't quite got the will to be a full-time artist and what was happening suited me well - I had the ideal day job and the night time and weekend one too. I remarried and my wife Auriol joined me, designing and making sculpture. Many of our heroic works were made in partnership.



Portcullis and Crown at No 1 Parliament Street



The Race for Ridlerless Horses



Mother Superior



The Keris

We got a commission to make 'Sterling' for a building by Albert Bridge. It was a contemporary work, and controversial as it depicted the pound fighting the ECU (European Currency Unit), the name first given to what later became the Euro. Mrs Thatcher, as she then was, our Prime Minister, called me to her office. She wanted a bronze maquette of the work for her desk and commissioned me to design and make similar works depicting the currencies of all 9 (at that time there were only 9) Common Market countries. She was intending to have these sculptures with the flags of the nations in a lovely curve, like the front of the UN in New York, as the forecourt of the European bank in the City. Then the bank went to Frankfurt!

We went on to make a 17-metre high Keris (dagger) as a national monument for Malaysia, designing the entrance to the Commonwealth Games stadium, the fourth largest in the world. Then a Portcullis and Crown for the Palace of Westminster; the Runnymede Magna

Carta Fountain; an Open Outcry trader and a Globe for LIFFE in the City of London and a sculpture dedicated by HM The Queen with President Mitterrand to open the English end of the Channel Tunnel on June 6th 1994. Many other commissions followed.

Now aged 76, and very happily married to my third wife Grace, I am still hard at work. I am executive chairman of The National Open Art Competition NOA and its Exhibitions, (www.thenationalopenartcompetition.com). I also run, with a small and dedicated team, a not-for-profit registered arts charity, The Chichester Art Trust. We get more than 3500 entries from artists and photographers across the entire UK and give over £60,000 of prizes every year all supported by sponsors, patrons and those who wish to encourage creativity and want to give young and emerging talent a chance to succeed.

I adopted Auriol's son Tom and Grace has Michael, a teacher of 32, so we have two lovely sons and a young granddaughter, the light of

our lives! I am usually to be found in my West Sussex studio or my office near Chichester at work with NOA or from time to time at a bronze casting foundry making work for those who have commissioned me. Occasionally you may discover me in a classic car as I drove the Monte Carlo Classic in 1999 and Around the World in 2000 in two rare Facel 6's, which you can see in the photographs.

I don't believe in the word retirement; you do that when you die.....career change is much more fun!

I rather hope that this story can inspire other Merchant Taylors' boys. I believe two valuable lessons are that tenacity and hard work usually pay off and in the face of adversity it is often possible to turn bad into good. There are opportunities at every turn in life. Learn to see them, grab them, run with them, and never take no for an answer. The groundwork put in by my teachers at Merchant Taylors' played a huge part in whatever success I have enjoyed.

www.neillawsonbaker.com



LIFFE Trader



Sterling



Opening of the Channel Tunnel, 1994



Cordon Bleu crossing the Sahara in the 2000 Around The World in 80 Days rally

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