

From surgeon to scholar: the remarkable life of Philip Stell

BY PATRICK J BRADLEY

Professor Philip Stell was an extraordinary man: following an astonishingly illustrious career in ENT, he excelled as a medieval historian. With the Philip Stell Prize due to be awarded in May, his friend Pat Bradley looks back at his remarkable life.

Philip Michael Stell (PMS) was one of an elite group of professors in otolaryngology, head and neck surgery in the UK in the 1970s. He was a full-time head and neck surgical oncologist who worked in Liverpool until retiring early in 1992 due to poor health, but began a second career in medieval history at the University of York until his death in 2004. PMS excelled in academic excellence as a clinician, surgeon, researcher, editor, publisher, linguist, historian, friend and confidant, as well as career advisor, and became a hero and mentor to his residents who worked in Liverpool during his time. I was accepted as a trainee registrar in 1977, with early training in general surgery and the intention to specialise in head and neck surgery. I was appointed senior registrar in ENT, completing my higher surgical training before being appointed consultant ENT in 1982 at The General Hospital, Nottingham, with a special interest in head and neck surgery. Following the establishment of a medical school at Nottingham University, the hospital later became part of Nottingham University Hospitals.

Born in Dewsbury, Yorkshire, on 14 August 1934, PMS was the son of Frank Law Stell, a tailor's manager, and Ada nee Davies. His early education was at Archbishop Holgate's Grammar School at York (1945–1952), where he was awarded a State Scholarship (1952), and he graduated from Edinburgh University Medical School

“Philip Stell was an unusually talented man, an uncompromising but kind hearted professor, and a wonderful companion”

Alan G Kerr, ENT, Belfast, BMJ Obituary [1].



Precious moments in contemplation

in 1958 (MB ChB). His first house surgical job was in 1958 with Dr I Simson Hall, an ENT surgeon at Edinburgh Royal Infirmary (a renowned otologist and author), for three months. He returned to pursue a career in ENT with Simson Hall as senior house surgeon for nine months in 1959, continuing his ENT training up to 1962. He obtained his FRCS Edinburgh in 1962 and FRCS England in 1966.

PMS credited Simson Hall for his advice to pursue a career in ENT. He had admired the work of Alexis Tumarkin (1901–1990) and Harold Zalin (c1925–2005), both otologists. PMS was appointed senior ENT registrar at Alder Hey Children's Hospital in 1963. In 1964, he won a scholarship to be assistant surgeon with Dr Joseph Ogura (1915–1983), Barnes Hospital, St Louis, USA. On his return, he was appointed senior lecturer in the department of ORL and honorary consultant surgeon, promoted to reader in ORL in 1977–1978. He was awarded Master of Surgery (ChM) Liverpool on design of skin flaps in 1976 and ultimately promoted to professor in ORL-HNS three years later.

PMS was a pioneer, keeping detailed outcome data on his cancer surgery patients, initially recorded on computer-

perforated punch cards, which were reviewed weekly on Friday afternoons. All of the data was transferred to a computerised database by Dr Randal Morton, New Zealand, during his visiting fellowship in the late 1970s.

During his career, PMS published some 346 articles in peer-reviewed journals, edited 12 books and contributed to a further

“More important than the sheer volume of his contributions is their quality, which has set a standard to which we all aspire but none of us reach”

*John Hibbert,
Editor Clinical Otolaryngology [2].*

“His election as a Fellow of both the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Historical Society were both very rare honours for an amateur historian”

Society of Antiquaries of London, Salon 93 [3].

39. He became a member of the Institute of Linguists in 1975 by examination and translated some 11 textbooks in otolaryngology. He was fluent in Dutch, German, French and Spanish and delivered several of his overseas lectures in the local language. PMS has received 19 eponymous lectureships, honorary or life memberships in societies including AHNGB (now BAHNO), the Laryngeal Cancer Society, Dutch and Irish societies, as well as Sefton Rowing Club. He was also appointed Hunterian Professor in 1976 (RCSEng) and has received many prizes and medals, including the Semon Medal (1996), Yearsley Medal (1980) and Walter Jobson-Horne Prize (1989).

From 1968 to 1991, PMS and Arnold Maran ran the legendary annual Stell and Maran Head and Neck Course residential at the Old Course Hotel in St Andrews, Scotland – designed for consultants and senior registrars. Arising from this course in 1972 was the publication of the first edition of the *Stell and Maran Head and Neck Surgery* textbook, which is now in its sixth edition in 2025, edited by Professors Vinidh Paleri, Terry Jones and Prathamesh Pai. PMS and Arnold Maran also co-authored the textbook *Clinical Otolaryngology* in 1979.

PMS founded the journal *Clinical Otolaryngology* in 1975 and the Otorhinolaryngological Society (ORS) in 1978, serving as secretary (1978–1981) and president (1984–1986). He was also president of the Sefton Rowing Club (1985–1989), Liverpool Medical Institute (1986–1988), Association of Head and Neck Oncologists of Great Britain (1986–1989), Royal Society of Medicine, Section of Laryngology (1990–1991), North of England ENT Society (1991–1992) and British Academic Otolaryngology Society (1991–1992).

Following early retirement aged 57 years, in 1996 PMS was appointed honorary research associate in the Centre for Medieval Studies at the University of York. He learned medieval Latin and paleography in the process, as well as writing text- and speech-recognition software for his computer that enabled him to work more quickly and process more records than traditional note-taking and transcription

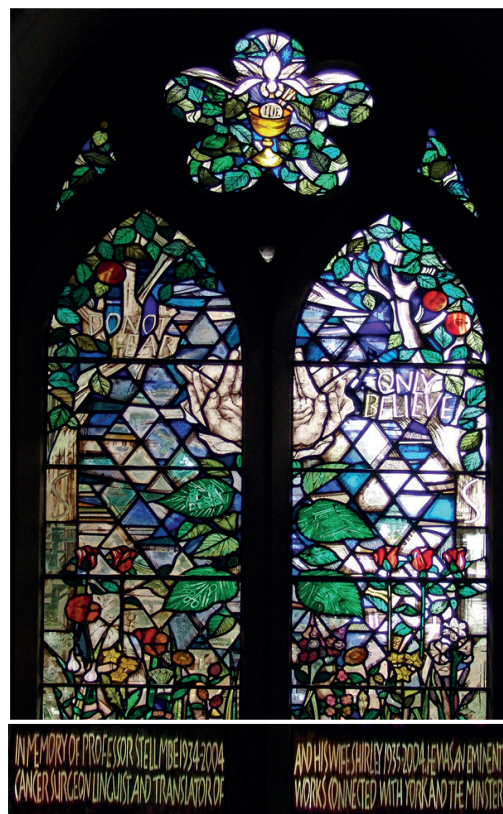
would allow. This system enabled him to publish six volumes of translation from the untranslated medieval documents held at York City Archives and the York Archeological Trust. His initial research was in medieval medicine and was published in 1995 under the title ‘Medical Practice in Medieval York’, for which he was awarded an MA in history. At the same time, he compiled a database of the medieval population of York, which included names and biographical information. The funds generated by this research tool continue to fund two postgraduate research posts in the department of medieval studies at the University of York. His work is available in the Borthwick Institute for Archives at the university. PMS authored and / or created more than 300 manuscripts, 26 of which he co-authored with his wife, Shirley Stell. Of these, 254 were in English, seven in Latin, two in French, one in Dutch and one in German. He was elected a fellow in 2003 to both the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Historical Society. In 2004, he was awarded an MBE for ‘services to history’.

Today, his contributions to otolaryngology and cancer research are honoured by the North of England Otolaryngological Society through the Stell Lecture, inaugurated in 2000 and awarded annually to an otolaryngologist who has made significant contributions to the field. Additionally, the annual ORS, now known as BOARS, awards the Philip Stell Prize for the best oral research presentation.

PMS was predeceased by his wife, Shirley in April 2004. He died in May 2004, leaving a family of four sons and a daughter. The family donated a stain glass window in St Mary’s Church Haxby, the village where Philip and Shirley Stell lived.

References

1. Kerr, A. Philip Michael Stell Obituary. *BMJ* 2004;**329**:860.
2. Hibbert J, Maran AGD, Stell PM. Philip M Stell. *Clin Otolaryngol* 1992;**17**(5):371–2.
3. Salon 93 Obituaries. Society of Antiquaries of London. 2020. <https://www.sal.org.uk/2020/02/sal93/>



A stained-glass window commemorating Philip Stell and his wife Shirley, installed in 2005 in St Mary’s Church in Haxby, near York. Images published with permission from the church.

“Installed in memory of a great man who is missed by many”

Louise Hampson, University of York, commenting on the Haxby Window.

Further reading

- The Royal College of Surgeons of England. Plarr’s Lives of the Fellows: Stell, Philip Michael (1934–2004). 2005.
- Philip Stell. *The Times*. <https://www.timesonline.co.uk/to1/comment/obituaries/article451473.ece>
- Bradley PJ. The Oro-rhino-laryngological Research Society (ORS). *Clin Otolaryngol* 2020;**45**(4):445–9.

AUTHOR



Prof Patrick J Bradley, MBA, MB, BCh, BAO, DCH, FRCS Ir, FRCS Ed, FACS, FRCS (Hon), FRACS (Hon), FRCSLT (Hon),

Head and Neck Oncologic Surgeon, Department of ORL-HNS, Nottingham University Hospital, 1982–2009; Emeritus Honorary Professor Department of Medicine, The University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK.