

THE SEVENTH IN OUR “TALKING HEADS” SERIES TOOK PLACE ON THE 18TH OF MARCH 2021



Senior Warden, Dr. Kathy Seddon, introduced the conversationalists for the evening: Past Master and Almoner, Emeritus Professor Ron Eccles BSc, PhD, DSc, Former Director of the Common Cold Centre at Cardiff University in conversation with Emeritus Clerk Dr Claude Evans MRSC.

Claude began the evening by asking Ron about his early life. Ron replied by first marvelling at the new technology that made the meeting with so many Livery friends possible. He then recalled his birthplace Leigh in Lancashire, a small cotton and coal town, where he lived for 18 years. He attended a Methodist School and Sunday School and then went to Leigh Grammar School, established 1614. Ron stated that he was a great believer in Grammar Schools because he had benefitted so much as he came from a relatively poor working class background. Many other boys were sons of professionals in particular research scientists, because of the nearby Nuclear Physics Research Centre. Ron felt that the school really brought him on though he didn't shine until the sixth form - when he became a swot! That got him eventually into Liverpool University.

Claude asked about the switch from Zoology to Pharmacology at University. Ron explained that he chose Zoology because he was interested in animals but once at university he found it rather dry. He felt he was very lucky that his degree course was modular, so he was able to study other disciplines. He became fascinated by Pharmacology and learned how tiny amounts of chemicals have a huge effect in the body. He switched courses and this affected his career choice.

Claude noted that Ron graduated with First Class Honours in Pharmacology and then gained a PhD working with key academics in his field. Claude asked about the move to Wales and to Cardiff. Ron had spent weekends as a student in Snowdonia and really enjoyed North Wales. Cardiff was the first job that Ron applied for (just before gaining his PhD). Ron had a good interview and was offered the job of lecturer when only just 25 years old. He thought that he would stay for two or three years!

Claude asked about Ron's part in the 1988 establishment of the Common Cold Centre, where he became the first director. Ron described how his PhD was on the nose and in Cardiff he

continued to work in that area with ear nose and throat (ENT) surgeons doing a lot of clinical research with them. He supervised more than thirty young ENT surgeons through their post graduate degrees. He was becoming more and more 'Clinical' being approached by companies such as Vicks to set up trials. This wasn't difficult with a large population of students with colds. *"For a few pounds they would do anything"* Ethics were less stringent, and Ron recalled studying the effects of alcohol on the nose. Students drank, then saw how blocked their noses were, they were paid too. This led to a contract between Vicks the University and Ron, to establish the Common Cold Centre. Just as the contract was being signed Procter and Gamble took over Vicks. They continued their support and started the centre. Over some 30 years they conducted over a hundred clinical trials and much basic research, and the Common Cold centre became known internationally attracting research from all the major pharmaceutical companies interested in coughs and colds. Ron was awarded a DSc for his prolific academic contributions.

Claude then asked about Ron's meeting with Khawla his wife. Ron described himself as left wing in those days and "Red Ron" was his nickname. Khawla joined the department to study prostaglandins with Professor Pickles. She already had a medical degree and masters and was there to complete a PhD. Her first presentation to the department saw Ron entranced. She was warned off him - but love triumphed and after three years of asking she agreed to marry Ron and stay in Wales. Ron described his wonderful marriage and family. Khawla was from a well-off Iraqi family and they visited frequently but after the 1985 war this was not allowed, and she missed them very much. Tourists couldn't visit Iraq, but Ron managed to become a visiting lecturer. His first visit was in 1985. Ron went alone, as Khawla was due to give birth. Ron described the amazing hospitality he experienced. The Ministry of Health then invited Ron and all the family for a five-star visit. He felt these were some of the happiest times in his life.

Claude asked about 1990 when Iraq invaded Kuwait. Ron described how he was still employed by the University but spent summers and a few weeks around Christmas lecturing in Iraq. Staff were enthusiastic and polite. They showed Ron great respect and worked very hard. Suddenly though they were all in military uniform.

Ron described how the soldiers thought they were going to Israel. Things carried on as normal in August. But the Embassy alerted them to a potential war situation. Saddam wasn't listening to International demands to leave Kuwait, where much looting was taking place and foreigners were being arrested and brought back to Baghdad. Eventually in September the embassy said, *"your wife and children must leave on the last flight to London"*. The ministry told Ron to continue, and he was stuck. He was staying in the Rashid five-star hotel. Where two Irish men were planning escape, they plotted in Gaelic as they feared surveillance. Ron became depressed and suffered from Rheumatoid Arthritis in his knees. Visits to his in laws were closely watched by the Secret Service. His wife's mother thought he only needed a new wife, but Ron explained he just wanted to go to Khawla. She arranged an escape with a friendly lorry driver. Ron was worried about the repercussions on his wife's family which could have been punitive. The day came and the telephone rang, and it was the head of surgery in the lobby *"Ron, I hear you are leaving us"* you should come with me. He took Ron to the fifth floor of another good hotel where he was closely guarded but well treated. One night after a lot of noise he was given his passport and put on bus with others, Ron was fearful that he was about to be sent to a military centre to become a human shield but behind him he saw the family car following the bus. It was the 23rd of October, and he was taken to the airport given an exit visa and put on a plane. It was called the Scarlet Lady. Inside was Richard Branson and Edward Heath. There were twenty people on board, and as they left Iraq air space he was taken up to the bar to be photographed drinking champagne with Edward Heath. An absolutely fascinating story!

Claude then turned to Ron's association with the WLCOW which he joined in 2003. Clade mentioned the Radyr members including David Suthers who encouraged him and proposed

him. Ron progressed and became master in 2013, ahead of his time, even though he was in full time employment. Ron described it as a great privilege. He went on to talk about Roisin Pill and Keith Lawrey who drove the process to gain the Royal Charter, ably assisted by Ron and Charles Slatter. This was awarded in 2013 with a wonderful banquet in the following year. Ron then described becoming our Almoner just as he thought his time was winding down! When he heard what the role entailed from the Membership Committee he was delighted to accept. He has had a wonderful reception from those he approached with offers of help from the Company. Reaching out to people makes them feel valued. Ron said it makes him very happy to be able to help other people.

Claude then asked about the pandemic. Ron said it was inevitable, but all the warnings focussed on Influenza “*whenever you have large number of animals gathered together it was inevitable*” Claude asked about annual boosters and Ron replied that since we don’t know the infection trajectory this may well be likely. Successful viruses adapt to live with us, and leave us well enough to spread infection. Ron expects the Corona Virus to become less virulent leaving us with a need for a ‘joint vaccination’ with the annual flu vaccine for the vulnerable.

Claude finally asked if you were in charge would you have done everything differently. Ron responded that it was easy to comment from the ‘side-lines’ but did feel that saving the economy was vital. He felt that the ultra-cautious approach in Europe was a mistake as the incidence of blood clots has been very low and the pause in vaccination could result in many deaths

Claude thanked Ron for a fascinating evening and handed back to the Master for a vote of thanks. The Master, Peter Coleman noted the huge range of roles that Ron fulfilled and said that it had been a huge pleasure listening to Ron. He also thanked Claude for his well-judged questioning. We all clapped Ron and Claude and toasted “*the future and all out friends*”.

