

Interviewee: Dr George Gordon (GG)	Interviewer: Caroline Buck (CB)
Date of Interview: 3 November 2014	Ref: DG35-5-1-1-T

CB

I am interviewing Dr George Gordon at 32 Irish Street. Dr Gordon where were you born?

GG

I was born in Markinch if Fife.

CB

And if you don't mind when?

GG

1936. I can remember the onset of the war in 1939 because we came home from church on a lovely sunny day and my mother was in tears because they had just heard the news that war had been declared so I remember that quite clearly and the very room we were standing in. If I live to be 105 I shall be able to be brought out to say that I remember the onset of that war. [laughter]

CB

So did you grow up in Fife then?

GG

Yes I grew up in Fife. I went to school in Markinh, a small junior school and Bellbaxter School in Cupar, Fie. My father was a GP in the, it's not a village it's a borough really in the borough of Markinch. There was two GPs. He was singlehanded so he brought up five of us so it was a busy time shall we say.

CB

Are you the second generation of doctors?

GG

My father was the first generation and now going to my parents, great grandparents generation I think there are 15 doctors somewhere either attached or as descendants of these 2 so he was the first in our kind of set up. So now there's 15 my brother's a doctor, and my wife's a doctor.

CB

So there is quite a medical dynasty.[laughter]

Can you describe the house in Markinch?

GG

Oh yes, funnily enough we have just visited it earlier this year for the first time in about 60 years because now none of us, 2 brothers and 2 sisters, we hadn't been back to it, certainly not as a group, since we left it in 1963 I think it was, around the time Kennedy was shot. Anyway we said lets go and have a last visit. So we went and the person who had it was very pleased to see us and she let us have a look round everywhere and we looked in all the corners and I said that's where I used to hide this and do that, it was marvellous. And fortunately the person who has it now is a family person and she was obviously cherishing it as much as we cherished it as a family home. So it was a really, really nice outing and we feel we have done that and we can go back now. It wasn't a particularly impressive house it had been upgraded as a surgery by the doctor before my father so it had the premises stuck on as it were separate from the house to a certain extent the waiting room and the consulting room and the house was next door as it were.

CB

So you went to Bellbaxter School. What subjects did you study there?

GG

Ah well I could rattle off I managed to get highers in English, Latin, French, Maths, Science and lower Geography. So that was a sort of clutch of things that you did. Five highers and a lower. I was very lucky.

CB

Did you have a career in mind when you were still at school? Did you want then to follow in your father's footsteps?

GG

Yes, my father was dead by that time and the next doctor took over the practice and used the consulting rooms which were attached to the house and between the house and the consulting room there was a two way door thing and I must confess occasionally I was quite intrigued by what went on and I used to listen then I used to go through afterwards and speak to this doctor so I think I was hooked even then.

CB

Indeed, indeed

GG

I don't know if other people take up their parents pastimes or interests because of genetic affinity or because it seems to be the thing to do but you know one gets a sort of feeling, you get drawn into it.

CB

Where did you attend university?

GG

Edinburgh, six years.

CB

When did you graduate?

GG

1959.

CB

And where was your first employment?

GG

The Western General.

CB

And what post

GG

That was houseman, that was junior stuff. Then I went from there to the Royal Infirmary as a casualty officer, then I went to St Joes Hospital as a paediatric houseman and then I went to the Simpson for a year with Professor Keller and I don't know I seemed to get taken by that and I quite enjoyed the atmosphere and everything and my father always enjoyed, seemed to enjoy, obstetrics or delivering babies at home and so on. Anyway I got involved and was offered a job further up the scale so I thought oh I'll go on a bit further. And it went on from there and I stayed in it. I was in Edinburgh right 'til '69 then I came down here in '69. So I was 10 years in Edinburgh.

05:00

CB

What was the life of a houseman like in 1959 {door bell rings in background]

GG

You just took it, you didn't think about it. I should think by today's modern standards what you did would be crazy really in fact. There were 3 of us and then when you

looked after a casualty, but the casualty bit, the ward bit and the out patients and the orthopaedic bit and when the other two knocked off at 5 you were on as it were for the other 3 bits and you could be called at any time of the day or night then you had to work the next day at 9 o'clock so conditions were poor. But on the other hand you got a lot of experience because you saw cases from beginning to end and I think that if you haven't admitted that is if you haven't clerked them in then been to their operation and seen them afterwards then its the only way you can get the continuity of what's going on. Nowadays because of the shift system its all a bit fractionated and the patient sees one person who sees the into the hospital and another person sees you know, it's broken up and of course they are not in very long now in these days the used to be in a week or 10 days for major operations but now they are in so quickly and through the system you don't really get the grasp. In terms of hours of duty it was probably shocking but in terms of interested experience I think it was probably better i would say.

CB

I think they probably were quite shocking.

GG

Oh yes it was a sort of obstacle race, if you survived and still had your head up then you were a good chap but if you went under and messed things up and didn't have this done and that done, then of course it was next please, so it really was an obstacle race.

CB

So in 1969 you came to down to Dumfries and what post did you take up?

GG

I was a consultant. I was appointed consultant here and actually I was the youngest appointed consultant in Scotland at that time. I was 32 and the BMJ had listed the ages of consultants especially and it said 33 and under 1 and that was me. So I was quite pleased with myself, I have a copy of that. So I was appointed here and there was 2 others here Dr Shaw and Dr Train who was very well respected and well known. Dumfries was looked upon as a place to go to. It was attractive and it was very good standards of medicine and obstetrics and surgery and everything so it was a sought after job. In fact when I went there there was numerous applicants. I think there was 4 of us short listed so it was a quite good thing to achieve to get that job.

CB

Absolutely. Changed days

GG

Oh Yes

CB

Can you describe the hospital set up in Dumfries at the time?

GG

Yes They were split. The maternity unit was Cresswell Hospital which had been, an interesting thing how good things come out of bad things. When this war came in '39 or '38 because it was obviously coming they thought it would be a bombing war that the cities would be destroyed so they said to the people look you'd better get the important people out if the country survives a lot of the children were evacuated and some of the very bright ones were sent to America. A lot of the women who were pregnant were it was decided to send them to the country to have their babies out of the cities so the future of the country would survive. And so a very bright chap in Edinburgh Bruce Dewar was told by his professor John Stone to go and have a look at Dumfries and see if he could set something up and he came down with his wife and he toured round the town and he saw this building up on Cresswell Hill which was the

Poor Law Hospital I think or the Poor Law Institution and he said well that's not a bad looking building let's see if we can requisition that. So they cleared out the inmates who did badly when they were cleared out I may say a bit like the people who were sent off the island, what do you call it? On the west coast

CB

St Kilda

GG

St Kilda and they didn't do well once they were moved out, shaken up. They were moved to various places, anyway that's another issue. But he and his wife and his helpers and a local minister called Finlay, I think, all of them cleaned the place up, cleaned it down with Dettol and Lisol and scrubbed it and turned it into a maternity unit and these women came down from Glasgow and Edinburgh but of course it was a phoney war up to the middle of 1940 'til Dunkirk and so on and so nothing happened so all of them got fed up and they went back home so it was never actually used that much for the influx of city people. But of course he was such a clever and bright chap this Dewar fellow he managed to show the GPs that he was really experienced with some tricky cases rather than having them delivered at home if they got into difficulty they would send them into him and he would deal with it in Cresswell. So that's how Cresswell came about actually so it's interesting how good things come out of bad things. 10:00

CB

Very interesting indeed.

GG

Sorry the gynaecology was done in the old infirmary which at that time was just at Nithbank which wasn't too far just around the corner, you could almost walk it. But of course when the new infirmary went up the distance between where Cresswell was and the infirmary was trickier there was roundabouts and traffic was difficult and it was difficult for paediatricians to come for babies and for anaesthetists to get quickly between the two so that helped the pressure to move the maternity stuff into the one unit rather than having separate units which was old fashioned and risky so that's why they changed it about.

CB

When did that change come, can you remember?

GG

Good question [some whispering] 2001 or something like that.

CB

So late on

GG

Yes late on it took a long time to get it through the throes and priorities and stuff but eventually and of course we didn't have what was called an epidural service that was to relieve pain in labour and other civilised places had that so that was another reason to get that and they have that now.

CB W

When did your association with Moat Brae begin?

GG

1973. I'd been here about 4 or 5 years and the chap in Edinburgh I'd worked for the man McGregor who told me to look smart always said it's quite a good thing to do private practice because it means you behave well in public because the public know you're a decent chap you know reliable and good and all this and might want your services and what not. So under his guidance I said we'll have a go so I had a go and it

all seemed to work out quite well and I did it right up until I retired in 1997. So I was there for twenty odd years.

CB

What were your first impressions of the private hospital?

GG

Well the people who used it, the surgeons, Neilson and Seright were very good surgeons and my colleague Dr Train was excellent and myself were pretty good at what we did and they had a very good matron who was a widow of the local Dinwoodie clan, Mrs Dinwoodie she was high standards. So it was cosy and it was pawkish shall we say but it was well kept, well run and very clean. The theatre was old fashioned in a way but safe, it was safe and the patients seemed to do alright we didn't have wound infections and things like that because it was separate rooms. So it was cosy! I had been used to helping this chap McGregor in Edinburgh and in Edinburgh they had a whole lot of nursing homes. There was one called St Raphaels which was rather swish but there was ones in the new town for the civil service and so on and so forth, there were 3 or 4 of them and they were similar, they were old Georgian Edinburgh houses converted into nursing homes so it was you know, it wasn't built as a nursing home but functioned and this was very much the same.

CB

Indeed. What was the range of surgical procedures carried out there?

GG

Well at that time they did major stuff. Abdominal stuff and prostatectomies and stuff and on the gynae side we did majors and minors so we did a full spectrum really of what was done in the infirmary more or less. Some of the things, big things, very big things could not be done there but abdominal things and gynaecological things on the surgical side, there was no medical input at all, there were no physicians. Physicians patients at that time were much longer in hospital and would have blocked the beds. People didn't seek private medicines as much as surgery tended to and people went in for major stuff it was good.

CB

Were there babies actually born there?

GG

Not in my time no. There had been in the past, when it first started it seemed to be used as a place for having babies as well as doing surgery. I think I mentioned one of these things was this famous GP called Gordon Hunter who was the nephew of the local MP and he was lord high everything, he was quite a, if you speak to older people about it, Oh Doctor Hunter, he wore yellow kid gloves and always wore a bowler hat or a homberg hat and he always looked very serious. He was a very bright chap, I think he had been the brightest chap in his year at Edinburgh so he was clever and because he perhaps thought himself a cut above the other GPs and was keen on doing surgery stuff he was consulted when GPs {??} said get Gordon, get Gordon and Gordon said oh yes I'll deal with that and he did surgery, appendicectomies and stuff in Moat Brae and he also supervised confinements there and looked after deliveries. So we met one or two people in the early days who had been delivered there who had had their babies there so it was quite a well known place to have a baby, 15:00

I think one or two rooms on the top were used for the midwifery but not in my time.

CB

Not in your time and you didn't carry out caesareans either?

GG

No in '39 when this chap Dewar set up Cresswell then all the complicated obstetrics and caesars were done up there so Moat Brae would stop then I think about '39 having the maternity hospital.

CB

Yes. You touched on there really weren't medical patients

GG

No physicians didn't really have inpatients and they weren't consulting at that time although the home got better and I mentioned somewhere there that they did a big appeal and they really souped the place up, the theatre was done up to a good standard because a chap came down from the hospital to check that it was safe the health boards were having to check on everything that was going and he was very impressed with what we had because the anaesthetist that we had, there was only two or three did anaesthetics, and they were the more senior, more experienced and high standards so they had safety first but standards of equipment was good and the rooms were all done up and all made en suite and stuff and the consulting rooms improved, and the whole place was done up such that we were able to do orthopaedic operations and they were doing hip replacements and bigger things were being done because it was so well appointed and that would be in the 1980s.

CB

I believe, am I correct that Moat Brae was refurbished in the 1980s?

GG

Yes that's right after this big appeal that Sir David Langdale organised.

CB

Right

GG

It was all re-jigged, the whole thing. There was some awfully poor sort of hut type prefab things at the left hand side where the empty ground is and they were substandard they were taken down and the top flat, which had been used for something else I forget now, was converted into a consulting area. And a lift was put in a modern lift, an Otis type lift was put in and the theatre was done up and it was all just refurbished and brought up to a reasonable standard, a good standard.

CB

And how was that financed?

GG

An appeal, it was headed up by what was the Earl of Dalkeith, now the Duke of Buccleuch and Langdale(sic) and his secretary Mrs Blackwood put their backs into it and people coughed up and they got the money in.

The building had been painted a ghastly grey colour and had a sign above the lintel on the outside saying Moat Brae which looked like a sort of Blackpool bed and breakfast, dreadful, and so that was taken down. [laughter] The stone was dealt with by a chap who does the gravestones and stuff, Eddie what's his name? and he pressured hosed and cleaned the whole thing off so the whole sandstone was cleaned at the front. At the back he didn't do the back and you'll see that miserable grey paint at the back of the house. The whole thing was that colour, it was very boring and it made a difference too, it looked very good.

CB

Was it at that time that that part of the garden was sold?

GG

No, no, no that was, Oh wait a minute, yes, no that was before that, that generated some finance too. They sold off what would have been the coach house, coach bit and

the coachman's house which was as you were standing looking at the building like that was at the far away left hand corner of the garden there was a collection of coachman type house blah, blah, blah along that road which is still there and that was sold off so the Barrie House could be put up on that site and that generated a bit of money. And the bottom of the garden was cut off a bit there too. That started the improvement but the appeal brought the whole thing to a head.

CB

When and why did Moat Brae private hospital close?

GG

Well really it closed because doing major surgery and being away from the hospital it was the risk factor, if anything went wrong not that it did because I never remember ever transferring a patient in a bad state from Moat Brae, nobody else did it's just that younger surgeons weren't prepared to get involved and take the risk. Secondly we weren't getting as much through put as we should have done. My end of things kept up quite well but some of the other specialists weren't getting as many cases to do and not such big cases, not generating and of course the orthopaedics stopped because the chap who did that, he wasn't prepared to do them any longer there for his own reasons and they were good producers of finance and stuff. Plus the fact that the difficulty of getting from Moat Brae should anything
20:00
arise, a heart attack or something like that, the traffic and roundabouts and stuff it was really too far away. We tried to get various places to take it over, the people running Murrayfield, they came down and had a look and they said not really. Then the people Westminster Health Care that ran Loch something or other they were down. We nearly pulled it off to convert it into a nursing home like a BUPA nursing home but it's just this feeling that there wasn't a good enough business case, the weren't enough surgeons prepared to put patients into it and the result was the books weren't balancing and we had to stop. That was the main thing, lack of people taking it up.

CB

Could you perhaps share some more memories of the doctors, nurses and ancillary staff associated with Moat Brae.

GG

Well this fellow Hunter was famous because before, another thing again it's funny what war produced but there had been no consultants around in Dumfries and Galloway prior to '38, '37 so, so and for the same sort of reason the physician a chap called James Laurie came who was a local chap, a very bright chap, he'd been the brightest chap in his year too, he came back as a physician and a man called Clayson who was a great chest physician in Edinburgh, nearly a professor there, he came here and my friend Bruce Stewart I was telling you about ended up here in the late 30s and of course this chap Hunter suddenly found consultants that he'd never had before, he was the consultant and he'd never had a problem! And I'm told there's a story there when Neilson who was one of the surgeons, he was no longer there, was coming down with a man called Beveridge, that was a surgeon that came he was good too an excellent surgeon, first class. He and Neilson were coming down the stairs and Hunter, who of course had had his eye put out by this Beveridge chap who was excellent, were coming down the stairs and Hunter was coming up the stairs and he looked at the two of them, looked at Neilson and said, "morning Neilson!" and walked past ignored this chap. [laughter] I think that gives a picture of the kind of shall we say conceit of the man but he must have been a bright chap and did all types of fantastic things for people always with the yellow kid gloves and the bowler hat. You need to speak to people who experienced him to get the picture of him.

CB

Are there any nurses you particularly remember?

GG

Well there was Mrs Dinwoodie who was London trained and as I say she was the widow of one of the Dinwoodies of the shop and so on and she was very good and then she was taken over by Mrs McInnes who was a hard worker and enthusiast and she was good in theatre because she had been a theatre sister at the infirmary so she did a lot of the theatre and she was very well liked and the nurses liked her and she had no difficulty getting staff and she kept the place going. She was good. And then she was followed by Carol Bell who was an excellent matron too. She came from the Dumfries system, a girl from Stewartry somewhere or further along, and she was excellent too for the last 5 or 6 years before the place closed it was very well run I must say she was first class. Oh there was other characters of course who come out in this poem here that Mr Bracks who was the general handyman and I think I mentioned there that he was most officially kept the garden what else were his jobs? I forget now, but he had certain duties and he tried to keep everyone right. I mention him there he was the chap who was the children's pelican crossing superintendent at Maxwelltown yard for the children going to Maxwelltown Primary School and I think he just loved coming out you know the whole of the Euro traffic before the roundabout coming all way back to Barbours and he just loved [?] "STOP" and the whole of the United Kingdom so one child, come on, come on could get across the road. [laughter] He was a character and there were lots of characters. Some of the auxiliary nurses were good fun too, they were good people, they were captives it was full of characters the place it really was.

CB

Somebody told me that Mr Brack checked the nurses in in the evening after they had been out. You know when they lived in Castle Street. I think in the '60s some of the nurses lived in Castle Street, some of the cadet nurses and Mr Brack was in charge of keeping an eye on them.

25:00

GG

Yes that's right it would be personal to himself. He was a character.

CB

Are there any other recollections from your time at Moat Brae or indeed any memories of your interesting life that you'd like to share?

GG

That's quite a question. Well Dumfries is as good as I imagined it to be before I came and I think that it is actually getting better. I know the centre of the town is being Tescoed as they say but there is a lot of quality and goodwill and activity and things going on which sure are quite stimulating. As I say I mentioned there that when we came there were a lot of these, shall we say residual institutions of a previous age which one by one all disappeared. Miss Trotters little school and the school up on the hill with the nuns place up the hill, the convent school and places like Beatties the grocers and Johnsons the grocers and Jardines the ironmongers, there were 3 or 4 ironmongers and all these little institutions gradually over the [??] was another institution they were from a previous age lasted a little longer down here but they all disappeared and that's really sad in a way but it was inevitable and people will travel now for private medicine some of the surgeons here operate in Carlisle or at Ayr or people will go up to Edinburgh access is easier and people will travel. So its a different world but it's been wonderful. The great beauty of being here is that it's relatively central in the country so we do day trips to Edinburgh two weeks ago we

did a day trip to Newton Moor, we've done day trips to Cambridge, our daughter was at university there. We've done day trips to Liverpool and round there, Newcastle, Glasgow you know it's actually a very handy place to be you can get out of it and get back quite nicely. So from that point of view it's excellent.

CB

Now you composed an elegy on the closure of Moat Brae would you be willing to read it?

GG

[laughter]

Well I think I should maybe precognose you with some of what it refers to because some of them will be obvious but some of them were, yes, there's a reference there to a lady, the second one and she was in for a long time with a stroke I forget now but I think she had 52 descendants that's under attached or with partners and she had photographs of them all along the wall of her room and that mentions her. There were cats. The cats unfortunately were a bit of a problem with their intermarriage shall we say. They were all cousins and second cousins and they were all a bit feral shall we say but they kept the mice down that's for sure. Then the intercom system that I've mentioned there was this bellow in the hall "Matron!" rather than ringing through. Oh yes there's old Brack he kept the nurses under control, yes you're quite right. And on that famous night that you recalled maybe I shouldn't mention it but Margo, she was a character, she was a auxiliary, and she opened the door and here was the firemen coming to check the fire regulations and she thought Oh my god we've not checked that for a while, you know with these things so quick as a flash she said, "can we have identity please?" and of course he didn't have any so very sorry you can't come in and the firemen pushed off and they were all ticked off. So that was clever. Yes that's the matron Dinwoodie, Mrs McInnes, Carol Bell who had the key to the very end and the food was excellent that was one of the good things. They had an Aga and it was replaced and after all the money came in and Mary Burns who was the cook and another Mrs Hunter the food was excellent you know, super. And then the physio he was there doing he was a physical dermatologist and another, what do you call them now? a podiatrist, what did they call them them?

CB a chiropodist

GG yes podiatrist, so there was a lot going on. That's one of the other things I should have mentioned. Then the list here Murray Kerr he was the former GP in Castle Douglas that was his grandfather I think who was the first surgeon to work here. He lived in Castle Street and he used to come through the Moat Brae garden to Moat Brae and he used to go back home again. And Hunter, I mentioned him there and Bev, that was Beveridge the surgeon I was telling you about and Neilson and Searight I told you about these people. There was ENT done here too people got their tonsils out here that was a great thing. Tonsillectomies now gone by the board because it's now reckoned to be probably a viral infection that people have and not suitable and not done so often.

30:00

Done in adults mostly but in these days T and A s was a standard thing, you got your Ts and As done and that was done in Moat Brae by the ENT surgeon who came from Carlisle.

There was Dewar that was my predecessor, Train who trained along with me, Stuart Keiran Stubbs he was an anaesthetist and yea that puts it to the background. Do you want me to read it out?

CB

Yes please

GG

Right

Elegy for Moat Brae December 1997

Dear caring place no more could you stay

Now 83 it's farewell Moat Brae. (1)

Dignified sandstone in Locharbriggs red

What will Newall's townhouse become now instead? (2)

A home from home and tears she cried

In any other home she'd have long since died.

She's loved Moat Brae tears covering her face

The care that was there was the soul of the place.

We'll miss all the fun and the food and the chats

We'll miss the neat garden with its too many cats.

The intercom system, that little brass bell

More often it was, "Matron," in an almighty yell!

We're enjoying a smoke, we're enjoying the craic

The basement doors opens it's the ghost of old Brack.

He clears out our smoke den and scowls as we sin

"You'll get cancer you lassies. Is the matron in?"

The doorbell it splutters it could do with some aid

"My god!" from an auxiliary, "the fire brigade!"

"Are the fire doors wedged open?" "Wedged open?"

"Have the alarms been checked?"

"They'll close the place down, our licence they will wreck!"

But quick as a flash as she thinks on the hoof

"Aye yea cannae come in here, your identity, where's the proof?"

With querying eye he recedes from the logbook

Foiled clearly written on the fire masters look.

There was Dinwoodie, McInnes, then Carol, then Kate

And sisters and auxiliaries too many to relate.

The cleaners, the cooks with their fine three course dinners

No wonder most staff are attending Scottish Slimmers!

The was Alan the physio with humour so drawl (3)

Four orthopod surgeons to make up the role call.

There was Alison the foot girl, the dermatologist John Norris.

Matrons and anaesthetists and surgeons long gone.

Murray Kerr first, then Hunter, then Bev were installed.

Then Neilson and Seright and Walls and Seaward

There was Venters, then Bedford and Joshi and Flint

They all pulled together, they all did their stint. (4)

There was Dewar, Train and Gordon gynaecologists three

And Stewart, Keir and Stubbs and last Watson B. (5)

No surgery, no appointments, no old folks to cajole.

The theatre is dark, the steriliser's cold.

All these and our patients gave Moat Brae its heart.

With joy its replacement may soon make a start.

For change has to come, change has to be faced

But our memories of Moat Brae will never be replaced.

CB

Thank you very much for that.

GG

Right is that it?

CB

Yes that's great there's some real

GG

Stuff there

Notes for poem above

1) It's 83 years since it was set up as a nursing home because it was 1914 so 83 onto that should come to about the right stage I think.

2) Of course Newall built it for this chap Threshie, this must have been his townhouse he lived in Barnbarroch and of course he'd come into town to do his business and his lawyer.

CB He was Postmaster as well I believe.

GG He was a lawyer he had a lot of fingers in a lot of pies and he would come up, and it was quite a distance in these days, by horse and he had a gig or whatever he had and he would come to his townhouse here I think and stay here and do all his business and then go back down there because the Stewart's of Shambellie had a townhouse which was the Mechanics Institute at the bottom of Nith Place at the bottom of Shakespeae Street on the right hand side, it was taken down in '60s, '70s and that was the Stewart's townhouse. So it seems crazy having a townhouse living in New Abbey or Barnbarroch in these days it was quite a long journey. So anyway that was Newall's townhouse he built it a townhouse.

3) Alan Williamson, a good sense of humour

4) Oh yes and Bedford who was the ophthalmologist he did lens replacement but again short stay

5) That was Bryce Watson

