

Headington Hill Hall - The Forgotten Years

1939 to 1958

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Chapter Five – The Invention

Something that subsequently changed the lives of people all over the world, started off by making a huge difference to many of The Boys' and their families' lives. It is fair to say that it has had a far reaching affect on many lives.

By the time I was 12 years old, I had reached the height of 5ft 6in. It turns out that I wasn't to grow anymore than that. My father said that, because of this, he wanted me to help them with something he had built. He said he had made it because so many of The Boys had gone home, and moving them around from bed to wheelchairs was very difficult for their wives and families. He was hoping this would make it easier for them.

He had invented something that should be able to lift a person from a bed to a wheelchair, without a carer hurting themselves in the process. He explained that he wanted me to try it first, because I was about the size of an average adult and, if it should collapse, I was young and agile enough not to get hurt. This was the first I had heard of it. He did say there would be a lot of people there watching, including Dr Ritchie-Russell. That didn't bother me, as I knew most of them anyway.

My father, being a furniture maker, had built it entirely out of wood. When I first saw it, I remember thinking: 'that is one big bed'. There was a post at the bottom of the bed, with an arm going up into the air. Dad explained to me that the bed was so large, as he needed to have something substantial enough to counterbalance the weight of the person being moved. I got onto the bed, and they put a sling underneath me. They then hooked the straps to the arm. Then a lever beside the post lifted me up, and swiveled me into a wheelchair at the side of the bed. Everyone seemed very excited with the success. All I know is that it didn't collapse with me in it. What it meant was; that I was the first person every lifted by a mechanical lift.

What Dad was concerned about, was the canvas material they were using for the sling. It was rough and he wasn't sure how strong it was. He spoke to Mrs Barber, my friend Hilary's mother, who was a tailor, about his concerns. She told him there was a new kind of material called Nylon. It seemed very strong and had different properties. She got some for him, and made some slings to his specifications. They worked perfectly, and the same type was used for many years throughout the world.

Dad was also concerned about the size of the bed and lift, because it would not fit into most of the homes he knew about. He said it would be better if there was a way of making it out of metal. In 1955 he contacted, and started collaborating with, a man call John Payne who had a metal shop, to see if it was possible to make the lift out of metal. I went to John Payne's place, with my Dad, a couple of times. They spent a lot of time going over drawings, and Dad seemed to be really pleased with these meetings.

The outcome was, that they came up with a lift that was made out of metal piping. At least, that's what it looked like to me. This lift could either be attached to the bed at the top or bottom, or alternatively stand alone with wheels for easy movement with the person in it. Another was developed to be attached to the wall behind the bed. Once these were built, then they started showing how versatile and strong they were. At this point patients were used to show how good they were. During all this time Dad was collaborating with Dr Ritchie-Russell.

By this time, many of The Boys had already been discharge to the homes. So, over the next few months, Dad was travelling to their homes with the lifts, setting them up in the homes and showing the families how to use them.

From my understanding there was a big call for these lifts throughout the country, and production was going well. Between John and Dad, I gather they improved on the original models, making them easier to use. Dad said that the staff at the hospital had come up with the name of 'The Oxford Lift' because it was started and made in Oxford.

Sometime in the late fifties, around the time that HHH closed, John and Dad had a huge falling out. I never really knew what it was all about. All my Dad would say was: "You wouldn't expect a friend to do what he has done to me." Dad walked away from it – John continued producing the lifts.

Nowadays you will see similar type lifts just about anywhere there are heavy things to lift. Hospitals, Nursing Homes and people's private homes have benefited immeasurably from them. I think Dad would be so pleased that his invention has helped so many.

Griffis, D., 2012. *Headington Hill Hall The Forgotten Years 1939 to 1958*. 1st ed.: Lulu Publishers.