

Sir James Learmonth

surgeon & pioneer in nerve surgery

James Rögnvald Learmonth was born on 23rd March 1895 at Fleetview, Anwoth, in Gatehouse of Fleet. This house is now known as 31 Fleet Street.

His father was William Learmonth - recorded as 'headmaster of a public school' on James' birth certificate. William was the head of Girthon Parish School on Castramont Road. *Girthon School does not seem to have had its own schoolhouse and the Learmonth family lived in rented houses during the years that they lived in Gatehouse. Fleet Street is in the neighbouring parish of Anwoth.*

Although father William was born in Edinburgh in 1860, his family were from Orkney. He and his parents returned to live there for a period in the 1860s
His Orcadian heritage is reflected in his son James' middle name - Rögnvald - a name of Norse origin, which means 'Earl of Orkney'

James' mother was Kathleen Craig (born in 1863 in Ireland). She and William married in 1893 at Crossgar, County Coleraine. The couple moved to Gatehouse soon after their marriage.

In 1896 Catherwood Craig Learmonth was born at Fleetview - a brother for James.



James' parents William & Kathleen Learmonth

By 1901 the family had moved to 'Hill Cottage' - on the The Cut - the road into Gatehouse from the east. This house is now known as 'Lochlyoch'.

About 10 years later the family moved to Laurelbank, on the Brewery Brae (now 77 High Street), which the Anwoth & Girthon School Board purchased as a headmaster's house.



Fleetview, Fleet Street



Lochlyoch or Hill Cottage



Laurelbank

James' early education was at Girthon Parish School where his father was headmaster. He later moved to Kilmarnock Academy to complete his schooling. *This was not unusual - a number of local lads with bright*

prospects finished their education at schools that could provide a higher level of education prior to university entry.

James entered Glasgow University in 1913 to study medicine. He did very well in his first year, being assessed as an 'outstanding medical student'.

With the outbreak of World War I in 1914, he interrupted his studies and enlisted as a 2nd Lieutenant in the K.O.S.B. and served in France. During his time in the army, he used his medical knowledge to study the effects of gas warfare and helped to develop more effective gas masks and ways of training troops who faced the hazard of a gas attack. Later in the war, he was the officer in charge of the Anti-Gas School at Scottish Command headquarters.

By the end of the war he had been promoted to Captain.

James returned to his medical studies at Glasgow University in 1918 and in 1921 he graduated with Honours as M.B. ChB.

His brother Catherwood, a law student, also joined the army (R.A.M.C. & Royal Fusiliers), and survived the war before continuing his studies.

After graduation, James continued his research and studies in both Glasgow and at the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota, USA. While he was at the Mayo Clinic he met his wife Charlotte Bundy in 1924. They married in 1925.

James returned to Scotland and graduated as a surgeon (CH M) in 1927.

In 1927 James and Charlotte had a daughter Jean Katherine Bundy Learmonth, born in Hillhead, Glasgow. He was again invited to join the permanent staff at the Mayo Clinic between 1928 and 1932 working on problems of the nervous system.

In 1932 he was appointed to the Regius Chair of Surgery at the University of Aberdeen.

In 1935 he became honorary surgeon to H.M. King George VI when he was in Scotland.

In 1938 James and Charlotte had a son James William Frederick Learmonth, born in Aberdeen.

In 1939 he was appointed as Professor of Systematic Surgery at the University of Edinburgh. The Second World War had broken out and he and his staff contributed to the care of the wounded by organising a special unit at Gogarburn Hospital for treatment of peripheral nerve and vascular injuries.

In 1945 James Learmonth was awarded a C.B.E. for his wartime services.

In 1946 he also took over the Regius Chair of Clinical Surgery at Edinburgh University and was engaged in the teaching and administration of both areas of surgery. He organised units specialising in several types of surgery e.g. vascular, paediatric and urology and encouraged forums of discussion between the specialities.

Story of John Fergusson

John Fergusson was born in Gatehouse in 1916. When World War 2 broke out, he joined the Royal Engineers and served in Europe and North Africa. On the second day of the D-day landings in June 1944, John was badly wounded in the leg and sent back to Britain where he was hospitalized for 5 months. There were fears that he might need a leg amputation, but one day James Learmonth visited him in hospital. Learmonth recognised John as a Gatehouse lad, like himself. He suggested that he operated on John in an attempt to save his leg. The operation was a success and John was able to return to the army.

Later John learned that it was only the second time that Learmonth had performed the operation and that the first attempt had been unsuccessful.

(story related by John Fergusson's son George.)

On 12th March 1949 Learmonth was called to Buckingham Palace to carry out a lumbar sympathectomy on King George VI. The King had impaired circulation in his right leg. This was the same operation that he had performed on John Fergusson as above. The operation was a success and the King rewarded Learmonth by awarding him a K.C.V.O. (Knight Commander of the Royal Victorian Order). The award ceremony took place in the King's bedroom.

By now he had gained an international reputation for his work and was awarded many honours in different countries such as Australia, USA, Norway and Denmark.



Sir James Learmonth

Learmonth had an intellectual appearance, studious and alert, not tall but of sturdy physique; purposeful, quiet-spoken with a quick wit and a dry humour. His eyes had a quizzical, if at times a searching and slightly disapproving look, often modified by a shy disarming smile. If under stress he seemed austere and even brusque, in his relaxed moments he had a boyish gaiety and was warm-hearted and kind. He was held to be supremely competent as a surgeon of the academic type, his skill being based on his profound knowledge of anatomy and pathology and his wide scholarship. Meticulous and painstaking to a degree, he was careful and delicate in the handling of human tissue. He was gentle, reassuring and courteous to his patients. He was a fine teacher and gave much encouragement to research projects, not only in the subject under investigation but on the literary standard to be attained on publication; if his comments were sometimes outspoken, they were always fair. He maintained the highest ethical standards of the profession.

His hobbies were few and he never indulged actively in sports, but he played an occasional game of golf; he had the rare pleasure once of doing a hole in one at Spey Bay. He also enjoyed watching cricket.

*Ex Royal College of Surgeons of England
Plarr's Lives of the Fellows*

In 1956, aged 61, he retired from his medical work and moved to the village of Broughton, Peebleshire where he enjoyed reading and gardening. He died in 1967 in Broughton. His wife Charlotte died in 1984.