Clifford Allbutt, the inventor of the clinical thermometer (2007), and Sir Francis Fraser, who shaped British medical education after the Second World War (2008). Alick Bearn must have felt a strong fellow feeling with Sir Francis as he wrote of this great man’s view that ‘Medicine is not technology,’ and that the then British Postgraduate Medical Federation he led aimed to provide doctors ‘with what they want in addition to what we think they need – experience of human beings.’

Professor Niall D.C. Finlayson, who worked with Alick Bearn remembered him well: “My first recollection of Alick was from the Thursday morning Grand Rounds, which he chaired. Grand Rounds on this scale I had never experienced before (or since). A large lecture theatre, packed with medical house staff in crisp whites, attending physicians, many of whom had national and international reputations, well-rehearsed case presentations and discussions, and lectures, often by household names in medicine. Alick presided over all of this with a combination of firmness, fairness, humour and urbanity. In due course, as Assistant Professor, I found myself leading the discussion on one of our Division’s case presentations. My extensive preparation did nothing to prevent a sinking feeling as I rose to discuss the case, and I suspect that I would have been ‘blown away’ by the questioning if Alick had not curbed the talons of the hawks in the audience, leaving me to deal with the doves. He was the kind of man who would protect you as a junior faculty member, but who would not hide your ignorance. Grand Rounds at this level demanded standards, and Alick was quick to maintain them. On one occasion, all three faculty staff of the Gastroenterology Division were away on a Thursday morning, and when Alick asked for a gastroenterological comment on the case of the day, there was a deafening silence. Thankfully we were all away on University business, but even so Alick’s ‘request’ that we be better organised in future was firm…..and icy !”

"His most outstanding contribution was to show that Wilson’s disease is a metabolic disorder inherited as an autosomal recessive...because of his work, Wilson’s disease became a good example of a genetic disease that you could diagnose and treat."


Alexander Gordon Bearn (1923-2009) [Epsom College 1936-1942] was one of the most distinguished medical men to have received their education at Epsom College. He was the son of Edward P. Bearn, C.B., C.B.E., Under-Secretary at the Ministry of Health. He received his medical training at Guy’s Hospital, graduating M.B., B.S. in 1945, and gaining his doctorate in 1951. After qualifying he served as a medical officer in the Royal Air Force, before working in the Rockefeller Institute for Medical Research, New York. It was there that he first worked on rare metabolic disorders. Between 1957 and 1964 he was an associate professor and physician at the Rockefeller Institute before being appointed professor and senior physician. In 1957 he established the human genetics laboratory at the Institute and, in 1966 he was appointed Professor of Medicine at Cornell University and Chairman of the Department of Medicine at Cornell University Medical School, Manhattan. Between 1977 and 1979 he was the Stanton Griffis Distinguished Professor of Medicine at Cornell, finally being appointed Professor of Medicine Emeritus. In addition, between 1979 and 1988 he moved into the pharmaceutical industry as a senior vice-president in the international division of the prestigious pharmaceutical company, Merck.

Alick Bearn was a pioneer in the study of human genetics, and by defining the genetic roots of the rare inherited metabolic disorder, Wilson’s disease (hepatolenticular degeneration), he helped to lay the foundations for the field of human biochemical genetics. His research demonstrated that the disease was inherited as an autosomal recessive, meaning that the patient would have received the same abnormal gene from each parent. Transmission of the abnormal gene from just one parent would not cause the disease. This research was done in the 1950s and “because of his work, Wilson’s Disease became a good example of a genetic disease that you could diagnose and treat. Today, a patient can be tested for the disease and treated with drugs to combat it.” Professor Bearn received many honours. He was elected President of the American Society of Human Genetics, membership of the American National Academy of Sciences, a Fellowship of Christ’s College, Cambridge, and between 1997 and 2002 he headed the American Philosophical Society, a society that had amongst its membership some 260 Nobel Prize winners. He was also awarded the Alfred Benzon Prize in Denmark, the Benjamin Franklin Medal, and the David Rockefeller Award.

Alick Bearn’s interests extend well beyond medical research and medical education, and indeed well beyond medicine. In an age of increasing medical specialisation, he was something of a Renaissance man. His interests include writing, art, travel, music and aristology (the art and science of cooking and dining). He wrote three biographies of distinguished scientists: Air Archibald Garrod, the founder of medical genetics (1993); Sir