

Interview with Tony Waites

Chairman of County Durham and Darlington NHS Foundation Trust



The editor recently interviewed the Chairman of the Trust, Tony Waites. Here is an edited version of their conversation:

Ed: Can you tell us a little bit about your background and where your roots are?

TW: I was born in Darlington and grew up here and went to the local grammar school - I was the first person in my family ever to rise to such heights - and then on to King's College Newcastle, which was on the cusp of becoming a University. Then I went to work for Patons & Baldwins who were at that stage a very large Darlington-based company. I was amongst the last of the management trainees that Patons & Baldwins took on. They made all kinds of yarns and were Europe's largest hand knitting manufacturer but they had already been acquired by J & P Coats, who were the largest cotton thread manufacturer so these two together were a very major world company.

Ed: What was your degree and was it directly related to this?

TW: It had nothing whatsoever to do with this - I read economics and law, but I joined as a management trainee in the first instance.

Ed: So how long were you with them?

TW: With Coats Patons for many years, around 30 years in various capacities. I had been in several departments learning things and then the company decided it was going to invest in a computer! At that stage, we are talking vast sums of money. Everybody under the age of 30 was tested as to their aptitude in computer programming and systems analysis. To my surprise I was found to have a remarkably high aptitude and so I diversified into computing for a number of years. This was part of the activities known as management services,

which would at one time have been undertaken by the old stopwatch approach. I seemed to be quite good at those things so I progressed fairly rapidly to become head of management services.

Ed: Were you still based in Darlington?

TW: By this stage I was going all over the country, at one level based in Darlington but over the years I was involved in lots of the Group's operations and activities in the UK and beyond.

Ed: What happened then?

TW: Then I came to a career stop so I was taken out of management services and put into the Group's senior management training scheme. Because I had read economics they decided that I would make a good Finance Director and so I was trained as a Finance Director for 18 months or so. This included being sent to London Graduate School of Business Studies and I had a secondment in Canada and worked a little bit in the USA. When I came back I was given a job as Financial Manager of a sub-group of the Patons group of companies and then appointed as Finance Director of Patons, aged 32. I later became the Managing Director of the Patons group of companies and ultimately Chairman of Patons and Baldwins Limited.

Ed: Were you still based in Darlington?

TW: In part - Darlington was still a base but I spent a lot of time away with the other companies. I was on the Board of some Germany companies and Chairman of a Danish company, an Irish company and a French company and so on. In the latter

part of my time with the Coats Patons Group I was the Managing Director of a group of companies and so I had eight companies that I was running at that time. But of course all of this is against a background of the textile industry in the Western world which was in a very big decline and this meant some parts of the job were very difficult because they were about closing companies.

Ed: Are you still involved in Coats Patons?

TW: No I am not, I left Coats Patons after 30 years and took a number of jobs as a Non-Executive Director or Chairman of various companies. Because I still had a reputation in the textile industry I also did a fair amount of consulting work in various countries.

Ed: Do you still have any involvement in textiles?

TW: No, because in recent years I have shed all of my jobs other than being an NHS Non-Executive Chairman. It is a matter of age of course and capacity. Sometimes when I have been here and had a 14 hour day, as occasionally I do, I go home very weary. Twenty years ago I thought 14 hour days were for wimps!

Ed: So how did you first get involved with the NHS?

TW: At the stage that I was doing various consultancy assignments in the textile industry and had two or three non-executive roles on various boards - again mainly things associated with the textile world - I was approached by someone who said that Darlington Memorial Hospital was going to become one of these new-fangled Trusts, and "it has got one or two problems". In its separation from the then Darlington Health Authority it was going to have about £1m deficit and also it had

some sort of strange thing called a "HISS" - apparently some sort of computer system. I was asked: "it is one of six pioneer sites in the country but it all appears to be going a bit pear-shaped and knowing of your background as a Finance Director and somebody who has had considerable involvement in IT and so forth, I wonder if you would like to think of becoming the Chairman of this hospital Trust when it's set up. You might have to give a day or so a week to this, but there is just this couple of problems - the sort of thing that you may be able to sort out."

I very foolishly acceded to this request. Not only was it more time consuming than I had been led to believe, but one gets very, very involved in the NHS and so I have remained an NHS Chairman for approaching the last 18 years.

Ed: So how long were you Chairman of the old DMH Trust?

TW: Roughly four years. Four years as Chairman of Tees Health Authority and another four years as Chairman of the County Durham & Tees Valley Strategic Health Authority. I have now been here for around five years as Chairman of this Trust.

Ed: So you have been Chairman of this Trust since it became a Foundation Trust?

TW: Just before it became a Foundation Trust, but I was not Chairman at the time of the first merging of the North and South. I came here a little before the application to become a Foundation Trust - in fact it was my intention and I was very, very anxious to see this organisation become a Foundation Trust.

Ed: Has it made much practical difference to the Trust, being a Foundation Trust?

TW: The differences I suppose - if you are

talking about practical differences - just to be called a Foundation Trust, not a lot. Because although you have various apparent financial benefits in the form of certain financial freedoms they are very carefully regulated and they are not as real as they seem. The crucial issue of course in being an early Foundation Trust was to demonstrate the capacities and the capabilities of the organisation and that I do think was very important. The financial regime under which Foundation Trusts operate is a much more demanding one than in the general NHS context. The governance arrangements are altogether more demanding too and of course if you can achieve these things it really does raise our status and it places demands upon the organisation. I don't see those ultimately as financial issues, I know I have a financial background, but if you can make the books balance, and you want the books to balance, it shows the strength of the organisation.

In terms of what we do, which in this instance is the delivery of health care in a wide range of ways, the crucial thing of course is to deliver high quality services and balance your books. However, I do not see the high quality service and the balancing of your books as things that are in competition, I see them as highly complementary.

Ed: Presumably when everybody is a Foundation Trust in a year or two then it will cease to be a big deal?

TW: Yes it will I think. To be called a Foundation Trust will cease to be a big deal, but the discipline, the focus and so forth that have been required in organisations to become a Foundation Trust, one hopes that will persist.

Ed: In industry you spent a lot of your time

as an executive director do you find it difficult being a non executive chairman? Do you find you have itchy fingers?

TW: As I indicated, I have been a non-executive Chairman for around 18 years and the transition at the first instance was really difficult as one really wants to get on and do. Of course that is not really the role of the non-executive chairman and I guess that over the years I have hopefully become a better non-executive chairman than I was initially, but it is difficult.

Ed: Presumably in industry a non-executive is not the only model, you do get executive chairmen?

TW: Yes, I have been an executive chairman as well and the differences are not dissimilar to being a Chief Executive, plus presiding over the Board, ensuring that the Board is focused and so on. But not actually being the one who then gets up from the boardroom table and rushes out and says "do this", "do that" - it is sometimes quite difficult not doing that even now. At the time of transition from being an Executive, whether being a chairman or Chief Executive, to a non-executive is really quite difficult initially.

Ed: What proportion of your time is taken up as Chairman of the Trust? Do you still have interests in business outside?

TW: No, as I indicated I steadily reduced those and from the ages of 60-65 I was dropping off various things other than the NHS. I do have some other interests outside of the Trust and even before I was first involved directly in the NHS I was a Trustee of Teesside Hospice and I continue to be a Trustee. I chair their Audit Committee and their Investment Committee and that is an interest that I have continued for many, many years. I am also a local magistrate

so that also takes some of my time.

Ed: So what proportion of your time is taken up being a magistrate?

TW: To ensure that I meet the minimum requirements - and that has sometimes been difficult for me - I will sit no less than one day every two weeks. Because I am a Family Court Chairman, there are occasions when sometimes I can be sitting two or three days on a single case, which can sometimes be quite difficult to fit in.

Ed: When did you start being a magistrate?

TW: At roughly the same time as I joined the NHS. Once I had moved into having a variety of different jobs, I took that on thinking it was another good community-based thing to offer one's time to.

Ed: Did you get much legal training before you took up your duties?

TW: In those days magistrates didn't, but I did all the necessary training. The training these days is quite intensive, given that we are all volunteers and there is no remuneration and we give our time. Magistrates have to attend courses throughout their career. They are appraised every three years in the practices of whatever courts they sit in. Everybody has to sit as an Adult Court Magistrate in the Criminal Court. Others sit on Youth Courts and others, such as myself, sit on Family Courts, so whichever of those you sit on, you have to go through your appraisal system and compulsory update training courses.

Ed: So would you recommend being a magistrate to other people?

TW: Yes I would, not everybody I think would necessarily find it rewarding, many people do, but I am sure not all would and certainly sitting in the Family Court as I do can sometimes be quite harrowing.

Ed: Do you have any other interests - do you do any "fun" things?

TW: I am not sporty. I used to walk in a fairly demanding kind of way, and now I amble rather than ramble, in the walking sense, which I do enjoy. Both my daughters live away from this area and so seeing one's adult children and my one grandson take up a certain amount of time and provide a lot of pleasure.

Ed: So presumably you must spend quite a lot of time travelling if you have family in different places?

TW: Yes of course around the country quite a bit but I love travelling and when you asked what I do for fun, my wife and I do travel quite a lot internationally.

Ed: Do you have any favourite destinations?

TW: I guess so, in recent years - which is one of these awful signs of getting old - we go a great deal to Madeira.

Madeira of course, if you are familiar with it, provides some wonderful walking opportunities and is very calm and restful so we go there about three times a year. In terms of other places, I very much like Quebec. San Francisco would rate quite highly on my list of attractive cities to go to and Boston is another of my favourites. You will notice that there is quite a strong American link, as in my working career I spent a lot of time visiting and working in the United States; and in Germany but I guess I prefer the United States.

Ed: A strange question perhaps to somebody at your stage but have you got any ambitions, is there anything that you have not done yet that you would like to do?

TW: I am sure there are lots of things. Why didn't I do this, why didn't I do that, but no, nothing really pressing that I feel

like that about. I don't have any burning ambition to climb to the top of Mount Everest for example!

There are still one or two places in the world - for example I have never been to India and my wife and I keep contemplating going to India. But one of the difficulties around the NHS role is that one can't take substantial periods of time away and so I think whenever we do that we would want to take quite some time.

Ed: So should an NHS Chairman be given a sabbatical do you think?

TW: I think that is a wonderful idea, I am sure I must have earned one by now! For a period of years NHS Chairs were selected and appointed by the Appointments Commission and the terms and conditions for the Chairs and Non-Executives were incredibly vague and those terms and conditions carried across to Foundation Trusts. But of course we have a Board of Governors and it is the Governors who carry out my appraisal every year and they appoint the non-executives. I actually proposed to the Nominations & Remunerations Committee of our Governing Council that the terms and conditions for the Chair and Non-Executive Directors should be altogether more clear. So I now have a contract, which in one or two points I find somewhat onerous but it is all my own fault because I pressed them to do this and they did!

Ed: So this isn't a national thing, this is just something this Trust decided to do?

TW: Yes just something this Trust decided to do. It seemed to me that the governance arrangements didn't seem to apply to the Chairman and Non-Executives. It seemed to me that there were no formal arrangements in place for their appraisal

and assessments etc and that was not proper. So there are now very clear appraisal procedures and assessments for myself and the Non-Executives.

Ed: Throughout my Consultant career and I guess it has been the same for you being a Chairman, we have had constant change - mergers and de-mergers and re-mergers. Do you see this process continuing? Is the NHS in this part of the world going to look very different in five or ten years to how it looks now?

TW: At one level I might say it ought to. The NHS despite this sense of it always reorganising itself in one way or another doesn't change very much at all. To someone with my background that is somewhat disappointing. We get very agitated, for example when some measures suggest we are actually becoming marginally less efficient, despite all the changes and all the innovations and so on. One looks at it and thinks "my goodness me this, that and the next thing could be done so much better". There is an enormous inertia within the NHS and that can become very frustrating. Sometimes even the smallest gains and advantages can give an enormous sense of achievement if you see something genuinely improve. So when you ask me will it change significantly in ten years - well probably the names over the doors will, but whether the actual practice has changed as much as it would for private industry over a ten year period, I am a bit doubtful. This is in spite of the fact that the current Bill before Parliament is really very, very dramatic. Perhaps you are aware that the Bill itself is significantly longer than the Bill that introduced the NHS in the first instance! It is a dramatic set of changes - some significant and some just tinkering - and you wonder why for example there is a reference to Boards

of Governors. The original legislation referred to them as Boards of Governors, our Governors chose to be called the Governing Council but it is technically a Board of Governors and the Bill requires it to become a Council of Governors. One does rather wonder why Parliament is spending its time on a change of that huge dimension, but there are some profound differences arising in these proposals and whether or not they bring about discernable significant changes in practice we wait to see.

Ed: Do you think this Trust will look very different in 5 or 10 years?

TW: It is already starting to look different is it not? The merger first of all that brought Bishop Auckland and Darlington together and then the south and the north together has led to a far greater degree of integration of the services than was there at one time; nothing like the pace at which you would have expected it to take place say in a private sector context, but it is clearly happening now. The resolution of what we are using Bishop Auckland for has moved us on. Strangely some of these are really not earth-shattering events but they have been very difficult to bring about in an NHS context. There will be further issues along similar lines; yes I am sure we are going to see those, as we are on the verge of merging together with the Community Services.

At one level that is going back to something that has been there before, but never quite on this broad a canvas and there really are such opportunities in terms of improving the pathways of care to change the way in which services are delivered and I would argue, because there isn't much point in doing it if you can't see genuinely why it is to the benefit of your community, and I

really do believe that that benefit exists. Breaking down barriers is important. It is one of the areas where the NHS, by never having overall coherent IT policies and strategies and implementation, missed so many chances because the application of IT really does facilitate certain things.

Ed: On a more personal note before we end, if you were on an island - say Madeira - and you could only take one book with you which book would it be, the Bible and Shakespeare being there already?

TW: I may well take David McCullough's biography of John Adams¹, a complex and at times extraordinarily difficult man but who had belief in the rule of law and the importance of law and a vision for society. Somebody who was an historical figure, despite some clear flaws. I just hugely admire the way in which he developed from a quite humble background to become second President of the United States. Despite being clearly a founding father of the United States, he had defended British soldiers accused of firing on a crowd, for the law provided for their defence. A man whom I, from a great distance, greatly admire and I think I would find in his triumph over various adversities in his life some inspiration on my desert island. If it has got to be Madeira, as you kindly said Richard, one of my favourite restaurants anywhere is Il Gallo d'Oro, which is the only Michelin starred restaurant on Madeira. Please assure me it is going to remain open.

Ed: We will allow it to stay open especially for you!

Reference:

1. John Adams by David McCullough, Simon and Schuster 2001