

**Sarah Meyrick**  
hears about the  
extraordinary  
life of Dr Bill  
Frankland

# From Penrith by pony to Saddam's palace

**I**F YOU are a hay-fever sufferer, you will almost certainly keep a close eye on the pollen count, published throughout the summer by the Met Office. For this, you have Dr Bill Frankland to thank.

Dr Frankland, a sufferer from seasonal hay fever for the past 90 years, thought that he had finally grown out of it. "But it seems to have started again," he says, apologising that the room is stuffy on a summer's day because he needs to keep the window closed. An allergy specialist of distinction, he remains fascinated by the subject.

Dr Frankland, who is 107, lives at the Charterhouse Infirmary in London. He finally moved out of his own home a year or so ago. He is in considerable pain because of cervical spondylotic myelopathy, and describes the challenges of getting around London by taxi with his wheelchair, but is otherwise cheerful. He recently visited The Queen's College, Oxford, where he is a Life Fellow, and has just published an academic paper on fungi, good and bad. His PA scheduled 45 minutes for our meeting, but, two hours later, he is still in full flow.

**T**HERE is a lot of ground to cover, of course. To start at the beginning: he was born in 1912, and is a twin. (His brother Jack died in 1995.) He also had an older brother, Basil, and a sister, Ella. His childhood was spent in Cumbria, where his father, the Revd Henry Frankland, was Vicar of St Andrew's, Dacre, near Ullswater.

He remembers a happy, if Victorian, country childhood. There were outings to Penrith by pony and trap, and cycle rides to Pooley Bridge to buy gobstoppers. "If the barometer was good, our mother would make sandwiches and we'd go out on our bicycles and cycle terrific distances and climb mountains," he recalls.

Faith was an important part of family life, and has remained a constant ever since. "We were nearly always late, because the church was a mile away. The vicarage pew was near the front, and I vowed then that I'd never again be late," he says. "Now I'm always there at 9.30 for a 9.45 service."

The seeds of his future career were sown when the twins and their sister became ill with bovine tuberculosis. The doctor was called in from Penrith. "He just kept us in bed. He had no idea what was wrong with us, just that we had a fever. I asked myself, 'Why should this silly old man be a doctor? He doesn't know how to deal with children,'" Dr Frankland says now. He decided that he could do better, and would treat all patients as people.

**A**FTER school, Dr Frankland left for Oxford with a scholarship to study medicine, while Jack went to Durham and was later ordained. His last year at Oxford was overshadowed by tragedy when Ella was taken ill. "She had scarlet fever when she was young, and then de-



Dr Bill Frankland celebrates 107 years of age



Dr Frankland in 1950



On his wedding day, May 1941

veloped kidney failure and lost her sight," he says. Dr Frankland returned home to care for her, staying with her through the night because he was the only person she could bear to have in her bedroom. She died of pericarditis.

He returned to Oxford a few days afterwards, having done no academic work for six months. Summoned by his tutor to give account of himself, he considered giving up his studies, but was persuaded that he owed it to his parents to finish his



Student at St Mary's Hospital, 1934



Introduced to Queen Elizabeth the Queen Mother by the Nobel prizewinner Sir Alexander Fleming in 1954

degree. He made up for lost time and graduated in 1934.

He finished his training at St Mary's Hospital Medical School, qualifying in 1938. But war was looming, and he enlisted in the army as a civilian medical practitioner on 1 September 1939. "I wanted to get

into uniform," he says now. Two days later, Britain was at war.

For the first year, he worked at Tidworth Military Hospital, which entailed 16-hour days and responsibility for 120 hospital beds and an isolation hospital. Then he was posted as medical officer to the Royal Warwickshire Regiment. In 1941, he married his fiancée, Pauline. They met before the war when she was working as an orthoptist at St Mary's; Dr Frankland got himself assigned to the outpatient department where she worked for the sole purpose of seeing more of her.

In September 1941, Dr Frankland was "sent off to Aldershot for a two-day course in tropical medicine that should have taken six months". Two months after setting sail, a ship carrying 35 doctors arrived in Singapore, just a week before the critical events of Pearl Harbour.

He and a fellow officer were offered the choice of two hospital postings. "The officer got a coin out and said, 'Frankland, you call.' And it was heads, which meant I went to Tanglin." The other doctor died in the operating theatre of the other hospital when the Japanese killed everyone, including the unconscious patient on the table. "It was one of the occasions when the spin of a coin literally saved my life," he says.

**A**FTER the Japanese invasion, Dr Frankland became a prisoner of war. For the next three and a half years, he encountered the most appalling brutality. He was responsible for 200 patients, but, after the first year, there was little in the way of medicine. "We ran out of supplies," he says. "We were all starving. We all had beriberi and dengue." Dr Frankland had to assess whether men were fit to work, but if his sick parade got too large, he would be overruled by a Japanese non-medical private. "If a man could stand up for a minute, he was judged fit for work."

For a long time, Dr Frankland refused to talk about the experience. "When I got back, I thought: I'm alive, this is marvellous. I decided I was going to forget everything I'd gone through, and I would not speak about it; so I never spoke to my wife or the children. I wanted to start again."

He has forgiven the Japanese. "I am a Christian who was taught to love, not hate," he says. "When I was nine, I had a fight with Jack. We each had our own garden, and he was growing some strawberries and I jumped on them. I said, 'I hate my brother.'

"My father said to me, 'Never use the word 'hate'. It does you harm. As Christians, we have to love, love, love.' That stayed with me."

It was on the way home, weighing just six stone, that Dr Frankland had an inkling of his future career. A Red Cross worker asked him where he had trained. At the mention of St Mary's, she said that St Mary's had a good reputation "because of penicillin". "I said, 'What's penicillin?'"

Just a few years later, he was working as clinical assistant to Sir Alexander Fleming, who won the Nobel Prize for the discovery of penicillin in 1945. But he found his way into the field of allergies almost by accident. His first job after the war was in dermatology; he added some part-time hours in the allergy clinic, and he found he much preferred it there.

A distinguished career ensued: his wide-ranging research revolution-

**“**He was summoned to treat a VIP. The patient's name was Saddam Hussein

ised the treatment of hay fever and asthma. There is now a William Frankland Award for Outstanding Services in the field of Clinical Allergy, and the allergy clinic at St Mary's Hospital is named after him.

**I**N 1979, Dr Frankland was summoned to treat a VIP in Baghdad who was reportedly having trouble with asthma. The patient's name was Saddam Hussein. On examination, Dr Frankland concluded that it was nothing to do with asthma. "When he wasn't eating, praying, or sleeping, he was smoking, and that had ruined his chest," he says. "I told him if he didn't give up smoking, he wouldn't be head of state in two years' time."

As he prepared to leave, Dr Frankland was greeted at the airport by a man who told him, "Someone you are interested in is doing exactly what you told him." He says: "I thought he was far too addicted, but he stopped smoking that day." He heard later that, when Saddam had a disagreement with his Secretary of State for Health, the man was taken out and shot. "Maybe I was lucky."

He retired from St Mary's at the age of 65, in 1977, but this was followed by 20 years as an unpaid consultant at Guy's Hospital, working on peanut anaphylaxis and paediatric allergies. Aged almost 100, he appeared as an expert witness in court in a case involving a driver who blamed a wasp sting for his loss of control at the wheel. Dr Frankland's evidence led to the man's conviction.

These days, Dr Frankland leads a necessarily quieter life. He reads the Bible every day, ever since his then vicar suggested that this was a good Lenten discipline. "I've had a happy life," he says. "I see so many people who seem to get depressed. I think I have been very lucky. I sometimes say that I must have a guardian angel looking after me."

*All black-and-white images are taken from Hell Island to Hay Fever: The life of Dr Bill Frankland by Paul Watkins, published by Brown Dog Books at £20 (Church Times Bookshop £18).*