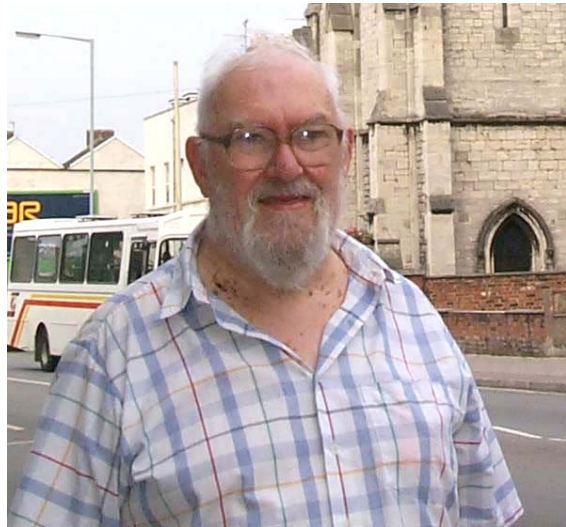


# Dr Michael Clift

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*by Ian Wilson, with the generous assistance of Dr. Clift's nephew Bruce Barnfield*



Physicians, with all their expertise for assessing the veracity of anatomical and physiological detail, are arguably the most valuable of the extraordinary diversity of professionals that the subject of Shroud attracts to itself. Which makes all the harder the loss of one of the most stalwart - yet quirkiest - of their number, in the person of Dr. Michael Clift, a most able, conscientious and dedicated General Secretary of the British Society for the Turn Shroud for nearly two decades.

Dr Michael Clift died peacefully in his sleep at the Hatherley Grange nursing home, Cheltenham, England, on February 14 - St. Valentine's Day, the serendipity of which would surely have amused him greatly. Back in 2010 a serious fall at his home, from which he was not found for nearly 48 hours, caused him to be rushed to the Gloucestershire Royal Hospital where he was found to be very severely dehydrated and with considerable damage to his kidneys. He was not expected to live, but eventually rallied, and although he had become impaired mentally, was transferred to the Hatherley Grange where he was given excellent care during his final years.

Born in Gloucester in 1928 Michael had a seriously troubled childhood. He was but five months old when his father, although a man of substance, threw out both Michael and his mother in favour of the housekeeper. As a result Michael grew up in penurious circumstances in a small, squalid flat near Gloucester's docks, hardships which culminated in the death of his mother when he was only twelve. Nevertheless in that very same year Michael won a scholarship to the Crypt School in Gloucester, proving to be such a bright pupil that after National Service in the Royal Navy he went on to study medicine at Bristol University, qualifying as a doctor in 1956. For the next thirteen years he worked as a ship's surgeon with P & O and with other cruise lines. It was one of the happiest periods of his life, and one which took him around the world. As Michael's nephew Bruce Barnfield recalls: ' My earliest memories of him were – and you

will have to believe me - of an impossibly handsome, tall and whip-thin man in crisp tropical whites, a deep tan, black-rimmed glasses and a jet-black crew-cut.. My sister has reminded me that he would send postcards from every pot of call, with whimsical cartoons (usually of cats).'

In 1970 Michael took up general practice in Gloucester, purchasing a new-built house on an estate in the town's Longlevens district where he would lead a cheerfully cluttered bachelor existence for the rest of his years until his hospitalisation at Hatherley Grange. Associated with MENSA from the earliest years of its existence, he became one of its Council members and edited its Newsletter. Mindful before his time of the needs of the disabled, he devised special means for those partially sighted or otherwise handicapped to be able to tackle MENSA tests.

When Gloucester's amateur boxing fraternity needed a physician to be in attendance whenever and wherever they held boxing tournaments, Michael dutifully answered their appeal. Although the region that Michael was expected to cover ranged from Birmingham to Cornwall, he supplied his services free of charge. He was also an assiduous prison visitor, according to his nephew specialising 'in the worst of the worst, seeking out those whose crimes were anathema even to other prisoners'.

Perhaps not unexpectedly, Michael was a devout Christian, serving as a churchwarden, and later as a sidesman, at two of Gloucester's Anglican churches, first St Mark's, Kingsholm and latterly Holy Trinity Longlevens. Exactly when and how Michael became drawn to the subject of the Shroud is unrecorded. Nevertheless there can be absolutely no doubt that it would have appealed to his keenly questioning intellect and his far-ranging interests, which included philosophy, astronomy, numerology, language, psychical research, local folklore, tea clipper races and much else. He gave talks on the Shroud to local societies such as Probus, and in his lecture on the subject for the British Society for the Turin Shroud, 'The Patient in the Shroud', delivered at St John's Church Hall, Hyde Park Crescent, London W.2 on April 28, 1993 he remarked:

Firstly, it is an almost paradoxical combination of the earthly with the divine... It bears a mystery still unsolved, an image of the spiritual looking out at us - as Christ himself, were he now before you, would be seen to be one of us in our human condition but with a compelling *je ne sais quoi* which is distinctly other, and speaks of elsewhere. Secondly it speaks of us individually as He would do 'Michael, it says to me, 'you are impatient and bad-tempered and a lot of other things besides. I am looking at you'

Whereas other medical professionals who have become drawn into the Shroud have ventured their own sometimes unorthodox ideas on the subject, Michael - cheerfully unconventional though he was in so many other respects - ranked as one of the staunchest supporters of Dr. Pierre Barbet's traditional medical

findings. For instance with regard to Barbet's explanation for how from the lance-wound in the chest first clear fluid would have gushed forth from the pericardial sac followed by blood from the subsequent piercing of the heart's right auricle (thereby readily corresponding to John 19:34), Michael commented warmly in his lecture:

It all fits. I cannot fault it - and even if I could I still could not argue with the fact that Barbet put all this to the test with cadavers of his time, and it came about just as his theory suggested.'

On the lighter side, Michael had an engagingly mischievous sense of humour. My earliest, albeit misty, memory of Michael is an occasion that would have been back in the 1980s when we were guests together for a talk programme on Radio Gloucester. I had come to talk about my latest book, Michael about the impressively large collection of lost plastic combs that he had assembled from his having picked them up - and taken them back home for assiduous washing - whenever he had come across them lying in the street, obviously accidentally dropped out of someone's pocket. Michael proudly produced this motley though multi-coloured collection, solemnly spreading it out on the studio table for the radio station interviewer and for myself to admire. Likewise only a Michael could or would dare to start the little booklet that he wrote about Saint Mark's Church, Kingsholm, Gloucester with the characteristically polite opening sentence 'Thank you for reading thus far.' He went on to chronicle a local squabble amongst the parishioners by giving the characters satirical pseudonyms, amongst these Candida Woadbottom, Charlie Stroatweasel, Miss Toadspanker and Canon Claude Treacleslide.

Back in 1993 Michael closed his lecture to the British Society for the Turin Shroud with the following:

Many years ago when I was a young and brash medical student I came across a wonderful quotation from someone called Trudeau. I don't think he was the Prime Minister of Canada, perhaps a medically qualified relative: 'The duty of a doctor is to cure sometimes, to relieve often, to comfort always'.

In today's so compartmented world of medical specialists, few of them would regard 'to comfort always' as amongst their topmost priorities. But for anyone who knew Michael well his lifelong commitment to that dictum cannot be doubted.

Michael's funeral service was held at Gloucester's crematorium on 15 March. Although he has few surviving family members apart from his nephew Bruce, Reggie Norton attended on behalf of the British Society for the Turin Shroud, together with around fifteen members of Michael's local church and an equivalent number representing the amateur boxing community. It was a sunny

day, and the mood of those attending convivial, which would have pleased Michael greatly.

Michael's closing sentiments in the booklet that he wrote for St Mark's Church may perhaps provide a fitting epitaph:

'This booklet ...is to inform you, to entertain you, to welcome you... but above all it is to say, whoever you are, whatever you do, and wherever you go, 'Peace be with you'

And also with you, Michael, a peace richly deserved....

*Note: Michael's highly recommended 1993 British Society for the Turin Shroud lecture 'The Patient in the Shroud' can be accessed on this website at: <http://www.shroud.com/pdfs/bstsmon2.pdf>. Articles by him can also be found in pre-2010 issues of the [British Society for the Turin Shroud newsletter](#) or simply by typing "Clift" into the [Website Search Engine](#), where you will get more than 90 results.*