

HENRY de L.



Henry was a 54-year-old barrister specializing in personal injury. He lived in London with his wife Anita and their twins Andrew and Kate.

He developed a painless lump in the left side of his palate in 1987, which proved to be a malignant adenoid cystic carcinoma of one of the minor salivary glands at this site. Despite surgery and extensive radiotherapy, the tumor recurred in 1991, when he was first treated by Iain Hutchison. Over the succeeding fourteen years, Henry underwent fourteen major operations, losing his left eye, upper and lower jaws, eye socket, frontal and temporal skull bones, and the bones separating his brain from his mouth and nose-effectively the whole left side of his head.

His face was reconstructed on many of these occasions with bone from his shoulder blades and ribs, and skin, muscle, and fat from his back and side. This was done using microscopic techniques to join the tiny blood vessels to branches of the carotid artery and jugular vein in Henry's neck.

However, whenever the tumor recurred, some of the reconstructive efforts were destroyed. The tumor began to invade the brain and grew around the right optic nerve, rendering him blind. Emergency surgery restored his vision by decompressing the nerve, but after the procedure was required three more times, his vision eventually succumbed. Henry died in 2002 from pneumonia, a complication of his relentlessly progressive cancer.

Obituary of Henry de Lotbiniere

From The London Times, 8th October 2002:

'De Lotbiniere refused to be cast down by his condition and his portrait by Mark Gilbert proved inspirational.'

Henry de Lotbiniere, barrister, was born on September 20, 1945. He died on October 1, 2002, aged 57. Barrister who defied disfigurement from cancer, continued working, and astonished all who met him with his pleasure in being alive.

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Henry de Lotbiniere became widely familiar when his face was devastated by the effects of cancer, and his portrait was painted by the young Glaswegian artist Mark Gilbert. His was perhaps the most memorable and certainly the most remarked upon portrait in the Saving Faces exhibition shown at the National Portrait Gallery earlier this year. The exhibition had toured the country and was seen by thousands of people, whose attention was thereby drawn to the skills of the maxillofacial surgeon Iain Hutchison, and to the courage of his severely disfigured patients who agreed to sit for their portraits. Because he was still a practising barrister, de Lotbiniere's elongated frame was painted by Gilbert wearing his wig and gown. In the portrait he sits with legs crossed, gazing unflinchingly at the artist, slightly amused, the caved-in skull giving him a lopsided look. De Lotbiniere, 6 ft 2 in tall, lean and handsome – by common consent “the best-looking man at the Bar” – was only 42 when an ulcer on the roof of his mouth proved to be cancer of the salivary gland.

Over the next 15 years, in 17 operations at the Royal London Hospital, Iain Hutchison removed almost every part of the left side of de Lotbiniere's head – lower jaw, upper jaw, eye socket, forehead, part of his brain – reconstructing the face with skin and muscle grafts from other parts of his body. “It's trite, when talking about henry, to speak of courage,” Hutchison said. “This is something more. This is a man who says: I am alive, and I am not going to let this tumor get in my way.” Mark Gilbert said that whenever people met de Lotbiniere, he lift them with a smile on their faces. Successive interviewers were staggered by de Lotbiniere's air of joie de vivre, and his reiterated reminder that “you only have one life and you must get on with it and not think of what might have been.” With a plate inside his mouth to enable him to talk with his palate gone, he professed himself unperturbed by the way he looked. It was wonderful, he said, simply to be alive. He always refused antidepressants, insisting that his brain and his character had not altered and that “what you look like is a seriously minor part of the person you are.” He had, as he pointed out, the good fortune to have had a happy childhood, no difficulty in getting through his education, an interesting job, two splendid children and a loving wife who tolerated his passion for cricket and never allowed him to be cst down. Solicitors continued to send him briefs, and colleagues at Dermod O'Brien's chambers, 2 Temple Gardens, were amazed by de lotbiniere's unquenchable exuberance, courtesy and sense of fun. He was the colleague everyone turned to for a commonsense answer to a question of legal judgment. After having his left eye removed in 1993, de Lotbiniere took to wearing an eyepatch. It was his wife's idea to match his eyepatches with his colourful ties, which brightened the subfusc courtroom. The eyepatches were widely admired, and gave friends and strangers alike something to comment on when they met “because you don't want your friends to be miserable”, as he said. One eyepatch matched his red and yellow MCC tie.

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Henry Joly de Lotbiniere, whose name came from his French Canadian grandfather, was born in London, the only child of Seymour de Lotbiniere, known as Lobby, a director of the BBC and pioneer of outside broadcasts. He went from Eton to read law at Trinity College, Cambridge. There he met his future wife, Anita, who was reading economics at Girton. He joined the chambers at 2 Temple Gardens, and started out doing criminal cases on the Western Circuit, but switched to civil work, which enabled him to spend more time at home in Highbury, North London, with his wife and their twins, Andrew and Kate, born in 1974. In recent years, when he met a doctor he would say as a joke, "I specialize in medical negligence." In fact he specialized in other cases of professional negligence, and in claims for compensation for personal injury: it was remarkable to see him cross-examine those who had, for instance, lost an eye and claimed they could never work again, for he was working proof that they could. His most important professional negligence case was probably Investors in industry v South Bedfordshire District Council, in 1986, which was a landmark in the recent evolution of the duty of care owed by local authorities.

Out of court, his lifelong passion was for cricket. He played, until eight years ago, for several clubs including the refreshers, the Bar cricket XI, on Sunday afternoons against village teams. At home he possessed an almost complete set of Wisden and a W.G. Grace inkstand, and would send his wife to salerooms to secure cricketing treasures. He was also a music-lover and never missed a performance of the Chelsea Opera Group, with which his wife was involved. In March this year, after an operation to remove a tumor growing behind his right eye had resulted in his losing his sight altogether, he began teaching himself to touch-type from audio tapes. His initial word-processing efforts were limited to the second row of the keyboard, with hilarious results. His wife would unscramble his efforts into e-mailable form, and when he acquired some "talkback" software, the family became accustomed to the Dalek sounds of a mechanical voice reading his words back to him as he typed letters at his desk.

To the end, his considerable intellect remained intact – solving crossword puzzle clues and writing doggerel verse to entertain friends. He continued to be an inspiration to others. Last spring, de Lotbiniere's chambers organized a tetrathlon on the Loire, in which participants ran a marathon, cycled 95 miles, walked 50 miles or canoed great distances to raise funds for Iain Hutchison's Facil Surgery research Foundation, to finance research into maxillofacial deformity. Such was the affection for Henry that the raised about Pounds 150,000. De Lotbiniere remained a lively party animal, and a few days before his death he hosted his 57th birthday dinner at home. Then, during a family holiday in Devon, at the seaside village he had gone to every year since childhood, he caught pneumonia, of which he died in a Plymouth hospital.

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He is survived by his wife an their son and daughter.