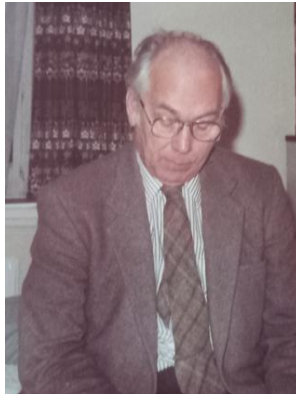


Dr Albert Petterson & Coxhoe of the 1950s to 1980s
through the Eyes of a Child & Adolescent

Michael G Petterson



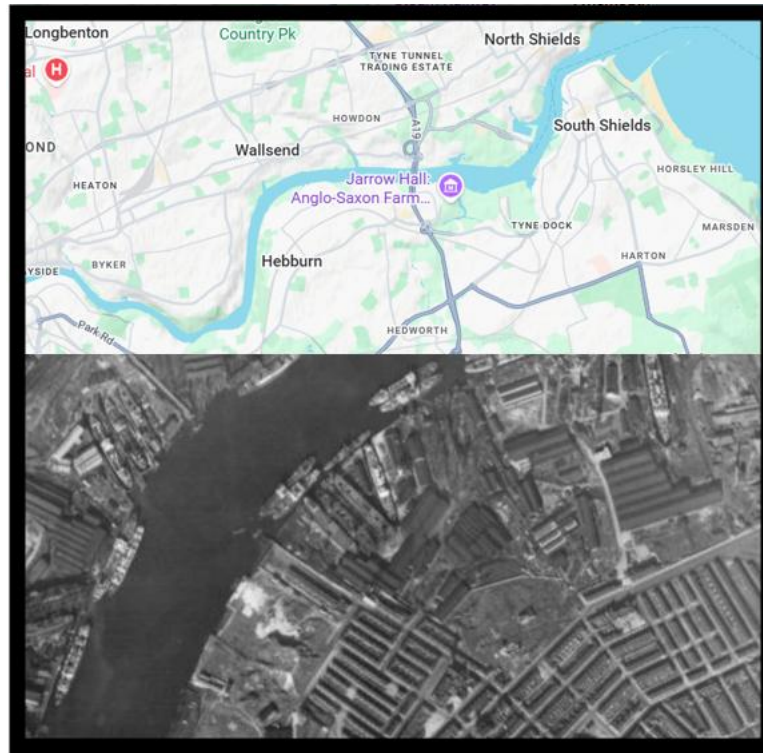
Albert Petterson (1926-1987) spent half of his life in Coxhoe and surrounding villages. He was part of the early, pioneering National Health Service (NHS) days, following its creation on July 5th 1948. The ethos and idealism of the NHS closely suited the personal values of Albert.

Albert was born and raised in Hebburn, South Tyneside, from the 1920s to the early 1950s, then a part of County Durham. Hebburn at that time had a population of around 21,000, although it is, and was, a part of the much larger Tyneside conurbation. Coal mining, shipbuilding, and heavy engineering dominated the industrial landscape of the region during the 1920s-30s. South Tyneside experienced acute economic depression at this time: so acute it is difficult to imagine in most parts of modern-day UK. The 1920s and 30s saw national unemployment levels varying between 10% and 20%. 1926 saw a national General Strike, calling two million trade union workers out on strike for 9 days. The strike failed, and led to a Conservative Government backlash, lowering workers' wages, extending working hours, and banning mass pickets. Trade Union membership declined, but active support for the Labour Party dramatically increased, leading to a later Labour majority within a coalition government in 1929. In 1933 the local Hebburn and Jarrow Palmer's shipbuilding company closed, taking local unemployment levels to over 80%. The Government of the 1930s, led by Ramsay Macdonald, is remembered in-part by the implementation of harsh, intrusive means-tested dole policies, and its impacts on desperate poverty. The famous October 1936 Jarrow March to London was inspired by the South Tyneside economic depression, some arguing



that, whilst the march didn't bring immediate tangible dividends, it did contribute towards the revolutionary socially reforming policies of the post-1945 Attlee Government.

Albert Petterson was brought up during these times of hardship. His surname was given to him by his Swedish immigrant father: many North-Easterner surnames end in *son* as a legacy to more ancient Nordic invaders and settlers. As an immigrant man who sometimes held a job when others didn't, Albert's father must have experienced at least occasional local resentment from time to time. A family with four children were brought up in a two-up, two-down, terraced house, typical of time and place.



Map of Hebburn and surrounds and lower satellite map of Hebburn from 1945, displaying the strong presence of shipyards amidst terraced houses

It is hard to convey these times of such high local unemployment, characterised by acute lack of money, social-deprivation, and under-nutrition, even malnutrition. My father rarely spoke of those times: they possibly traumatised him to some degree. He gave me the impression that he *never-ever* wished to return to the land of want. There were general stories of the pre- and early post-World War Two days that highlighted tough times, including talk of surviving on bread and dripping as the standard fare. One story that has stayed with me, which father once recounted, revolved around football boots. Probably my requests as a kid for a pair of football boots brought back memories for him. He told me *'When I was a kid, I too asked my father, (me dad), for football boots. I saw my mates (me marrers) playing football in the park and noticed some had beautiful football boots! I probably didn't realise that many didn't have boots. I only saw the boots. So, my father listened to me. He told me that perhaps it was*

possible for him to buy me football boots: BUT...if I get you football boots you will own them as the only footwear you have for at least a year or many more. It's your choice. Shoes or football boots, not both'. In 1974 the Jarrow-lad musician, Alan Price recorded his Jarrow Song (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=198t_7lOjpg), looking back through the lens of time of almost 40 years, lyrically, poetically, cogently, and emotionally, documenting the Jarrow March in words and melody. Albert loved this song. He wasn't one for many records, but this one he played again and again reminding him of days gone by, especially as now he lives in a relatively pleasant Coxhoe era.

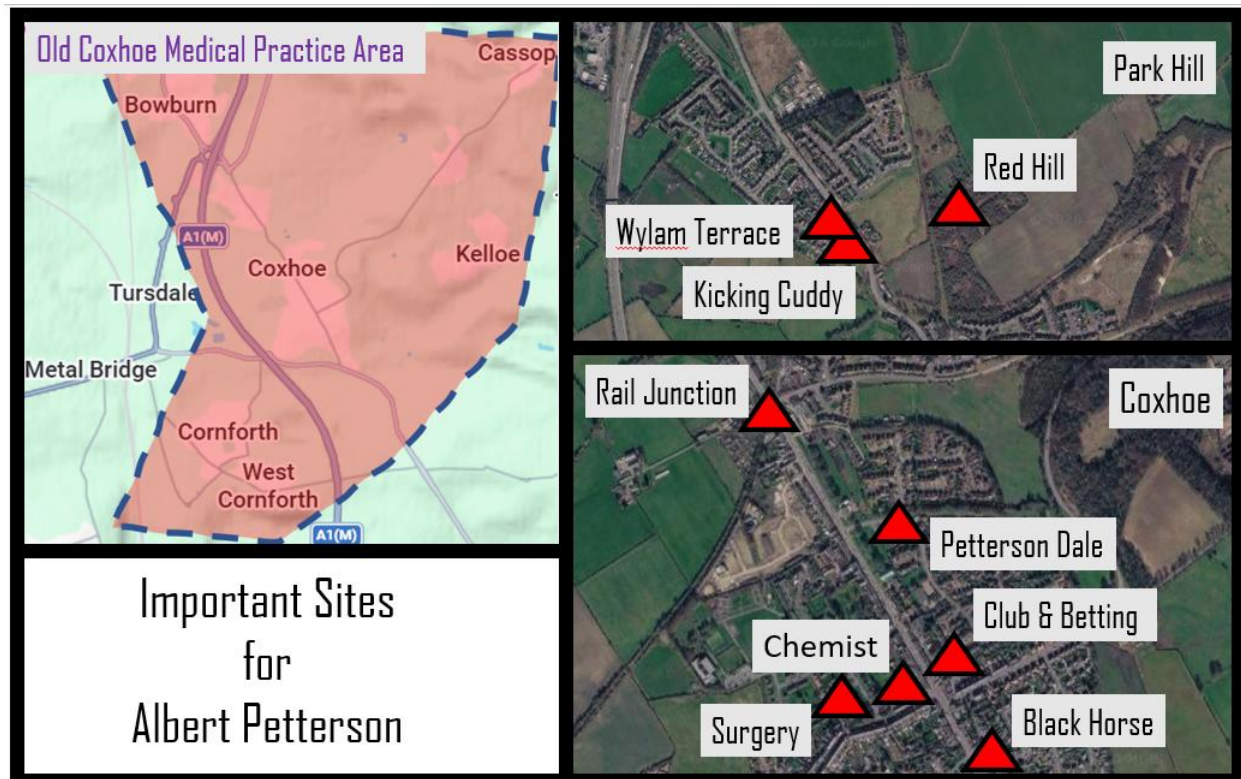


The Jarrow March of 1936 captures the times of pre-WW2 South Tyneside

During the bombing of Tyneside in 1940 and 1941 many children were evacuated across Northern England. Albert was evacuated to Wolsingham, Weardale, County Durham, and was partly educated at the town Grammar School. He excelled academically at school and achieved high grades in the School and High School Certificates. Albert loved education and learning: all subjects were to be devoured in reading and study. He always encouraged others to learn, recognising how education revolutionised his own life. After a spell in the Navy towards the end of World War 2 and during National Service, Albert won a scholarship to put him through Medical School. He studied at the Kings College, Newcastle, then part of Durham University. He graduated with an MBBS (Dunelm) medical degree after 6 years, moving onwards to postgraduate qualifications and professional accreditation, working in hospitals and General Practice, subsequently choosing to become a part of the Skehan, Knaggs, and Petterson Medical Practice, based in Coxhoe from the mid-1950s. Albert also set up his family in Coxhoe after previously marrying his Byker-wife called Margaret Elizabeth (better known as Betty) and raising four boys (Lawrence, Michael, Timothy, and Jamie). Albert's wife, Betty, played a critical

role throughout his life in Coxhoe, not only as a loving wife and mother, but crucially handling patient issues out of hours, mainly by telephone, and some via house-calls.

As with any significant move in peoples' lives, the change from Tyneside to Coxhoe involved a range of cultural adjustments for Albert and Betty. Although the distance between Hebburn and Coxhoe is only 20 miles, they are very different environments. Tyneside was, and is, a densely populated urban area, whilst Coxhoe and surrounds comprise a series of small to medium sized mining villages, set within a green and industrialised rural environment. A life as



a General Practitioner was a brand-new challenge, with the extra zest of understanding local 1950s mining village ways, in its myriad forms. Five Wylam Terrace was selected as the family home.

Albert joined a medical practice that had been initiated by Dr Skehan, operating out of a residency in Cornforth Lane, later moving to a purpose-built Medical Surgery (as practice buildings were known then) in Lansdowne Road. At its peak, the practice served around 12,000 or more patients living in Coxhoe, Kelloe, West Cornforth, Bowburn, Cassop, and Quarrington Hill. In 1960 the population of the Skehan-Knaggs-Petterson Medical Practice area was around 12,500, which stayed static or declined up to 1990, recently growing with additional housing to around 15,000. Whilst it may be difficult for many people today to truly appreciate the impact of the National Health Service, it is good to remember the revolution it brought, and how these changes fell on the shoulders of Albert Petterson and early NHS Doctors, Nurses, and a wide

range of medical-related staff. The UK NHS was the first ever national, universal, free to all medical service in the world: perhaps one of the greatest ever contributions to human welfare in the world. Prior to the NHS (*as remains the case today in much of the world*) access to healthcare was dependent almost entirely on ability to pay, supplemented by charitable medical institutions. The NHS took away the worries of paying for medical attention, opened access to modern medical care, and dramatically improved the health of the nation.



5 Wylam Terrace, circa 1980: the home of the Pettersons



View from the Kicking Cuddy, looking towards main Coxhoe Village. Circa 1980.



The Kicking Cuddy with the signboard showing a man in a cap looking anxiously at a kicking cuddy. Unfortunately, tragically, the pub lost the beautiful dialect name. Younger Jamie Petterson and dog Tiger also present in the photograph. Circa 1980.

For Albert medicine was a life. It wasn't a job. It was far more even than a vocation. He lived, breathed, and existed in almost every moment within the GP world of County Durham. Albert was highly driven, motivated by patient care and reducing physical pain and suffering as much as he could. Life was hard and demanding, and not always easy at times for his wife, who deeply understood and supported the vital importance of his work. Modern GP contracts did not apply in the days of Albert Petterson and colleagues. The service offered 24/7 medical provision. Surgery hours were 9 to 6-ish, although these were flexible, dependent on demands. The Surgery was closed on Sundays and Saturday afternoons. Doctors took a rota of being 'on call' for after hours. This would mean several sessions a week of being 'on call', and continuing working as normal at *the Surgery* the following day. Being 'on call' meant that you were available by telephone and making home visits, following a medical judgement to decide whether or not a home visit was necessary. I can only speak for my father, but I'm sure it was similar for other Doctors: he always erred on the side of caution with respect to home visits, more often than not attending to patients at their home address. The worries and stresses of the job took its toll on Doctors, supporting staff, and wives (unlike today, the medical profession was male-dominated in the 1950s, 60s, and 70s). Medicine was not a job you could switch off from, as there were always cases of acute need and suffering, including palliative care for those in the latter stages of a terminal illness. Albert went out at the drop of a hat, any time of day or night, when he was the Doctor in charge, to those in need. He nursed many back to health, and guided some compassionately towards their final days on this Earth. The emotions took their cumulative impact, as they did for many in the NHS.

Another remarkable statistic, probably almost unbelievable to modern day readers, concerns land line phone ownership. Between 1955 and 1970 only 20% to 35% owned telephones nationally, across the UK. Most families had landlines only from the mid to late 1980s. In the Coxhoe area landline telephone ownership was at a lower rate than national ownership. Some had party lines, sharing with neighbours, but the vast majority relied on public telephone boxes. In 1960, only 30% of UK families owned cars, rising to 50% by 1975. The Coxhoe-Kelloe-Cornforth-Bowburn area had lower than national levels of car ownership from the 1950s to the 1980s. These statistics reveal the additional hurdles most people had to jump over to call for, and physically access, medical help when needed, compared to the situation of many UK people today. Doctors had dedicated telephone lines in their houses for use when they were 'on call'. *The Surgery* out of hours medical telephone number was 215, later 770215. Even as a young kid I was trained to answer the medical phone and it was drilled into me to obtain and record accurately the vital information: name, telephone number (if they had this), address, and symptoms of the illness. Of course, my mam answered 99.9% of the calls, but sometimes, for whatever reason, she wasn't available at that phone call moment. When I answered the phone, I was nervous, didn't always remember the vital information (and was severely chastised if I failed in my job), but mostly got things right or right enough. I always remember mam saying '*please caller can you press button B?*'. Can anyone remember the old payphones with buttons A and B? I think button B released the coins you'd placed in the phone to allow the call to be connected. It was quite an ordeal for many patients to communicate their essential information from their side. They were not (mostly) particularly used to making phone calls, some were pretty ill and not thinking straight, and many were nervous at getting through to a doctor, wondering about the potential reception, hoping they'd hear a kind and helpful voice on the other side, to guide them through the essential information they needed to communicate.

Life wasn't all work for Albert and his family. Albert enjoyed an active social life. Many Friday nights involved a gathering of friends at Wylam Terrace for sandwiches, and onwards to the *The Kicking Cuddy* nearby pub for games of cards and dominoes, and friendly chats over local interest and wider issues. Many Saturdays and Wednesday evenings involved supporting the Magpies at St James's Park. The *Black Horse Pub* attracted weekly or biweekly visits of Albert, plus or minus family, to chat with Landlords Bob and Ellsie Heron, who ran the pub for many years. One main focus of *Black Horse* discussions revolved around horses and racing tracks as both Bob and Albert enjoyed the occasional light flutter on the horses. Albert enjoyed visits to live racing for both horses and dogs, as well as trips to see the occasional cricket Test match, mainly at Headingley, Leeds, and, on one occasion, to Old Trafford in Manchester. At that time there was no First-Class Durham County cricket team. As a young child and teenager, I very much enjoyed walks and explorations around Coxhoe. My favourite haunts included '*The Red Hill*' area (now designated a nature reserve), the Steetley industrial area, Bowburn Colliery waste heaps, and wanderings up and down the Clarence railway track, avoiding the occasional train that was always an exciting sight to behold. I was a chief shopper for the family, often

going to the local Park Hill grocery shop, the shops around the Railway Junction, including Beck's General Store, Elsie's newspaper shop, Laing's sweetshop, and further uphill to the Co-Op, the butchers, Gatenby's furniture shop, the Wilson sister drapery shop, the bakers, and Whitfield's Chemists. One of my first jobs, with Coxhoe friend Anthony Johnston, both aged 16, was at the Coxhoe Workingmen's Club. This was an experience and a half to teenage eyes, serving beer and drinks to a wide range of Coxhoe and District society. The bar was for men-only. Some chairs were 'earmarked' for specific people who came in at the same time, drank the same drinks, and left at the same time: woe betide those who interfered with the daily routine, or inadvertently occupied the 'reserved' table. Saturday discos livened the place and attracted younger audiences. Cornforth Workingmen's Club was very successful at attracting numerous excellent live rock bands. Other pubs included the *Red Lion*, *Three Tuns*, *Cricketers*, and the *Railway*. Even during the 1970s there were remains of closed pubs, sites of previous lively days and even livelier nights. The once numerous Coxhoe pubs dwindled in number.



Coxhoe and District Working Men's Club (missing its 'X') and adjacent betting shop. Circa 1980.



Railway Junction Area with Jamie Petterson and dog Tiger, circa 1980.



Coxhoe High Street from the Railway Junction, circa 1980.



Ralph (Rarfie) Lloyd

The Wylam Terrace and Clarence Street area was a lively hub for a range of typical Coxhoe and District activities. *The Kicking Cuddy*, like many pubs of the 1950s, 60s, 70s, and 80s era, was a centre of a social activities, including pool and darts leagues, draws for plates of meat and other foods, and local societies booking rooms for meetings. A highly active gardening club ran out of the Clarence Street area supporting gardens and allotments far and wide, with gardeners sharing tips (and hiding leek growing secrets). Albert was often asked to garden produce competitions, as a prize-awarder, for the biggest and best leeks, the tastiest carrots and turnips, and the prettiest flowers. These competitions were highly competitive: gardeners took them extremely seriously, as they did their gardening. Being outside under the open sky, in the sunshine and the rain,

provided solace, therapy, and contrast, for miners spending much of their lives underground, banished from sunlight. Ralph (more commonly known as *Rarfie*) Lloyd lived with his family in Clarence Street. Rarfie was a highly skilled and enthusiastic gardener and keen supporter of the Clarence Street Gardening Club. I became a close friend of Rarfie, even though our ages were far apart. Rarfie had received a major leg accident at the pit, and eventually retired from Colliery work engaging in numerous assorted 'handyman' type jobs, such as painting and decorating, gardening, ground management, and whatever the local community needed and could afford hiring Rarfie for. I learned a lot from Rarfie, who loved pontificating at great length about whatever subject took his fancy. Subjects of tuition included gardening tips, building bird tables to attract as much wild life as possible, and helping me with a small shed construction to house a 4-inch reflector telescope I'd saved up for over one year, and bought from Charles Frank, in Glasgow. Geeky-me greatly amused my father with stories of sunspots (he asked laughingly if I'd cleaned my lenses properly...I wasn't amused. Albert became particularly jovial when I relayed the tale of how the 2-stone telescope once fell on my head, knocked me out cold, and allowed me to see many stars from that unconventional method). I was introduced to Coxhoe-style political philosophy from Rarfie, who told me *'This country goes to the dogs under the Tories, recovers a little under Labour, and goes back to the dogs under the Tories again'*. First-footing on New Year's Eve was no event at all, without a lump of coal and cake in hand, and crossing the threshold of Rarfie's famous New Year's Eve parties. Rarfie loved playing Geordie tunes on his accordion, singing, laughing and merryming with a great number of fellow-revellers. Wylam Terrace hosted the Evanses, Steele's, Blyth's, Trewick's, and Rutherford's during the 1950s-80s era: a friendly and supportive local group of people.

As is the case for all of us, life has its ending. In the latter part of 1986, Albert Petterson became terminally ill, dying in January 1987 at the age of 60 years old. This is an age considered 'too young to die' today, but, of course, we can die at any age. Albert's relatively youthful departure from this life left much sadness and grief behind. Grievors included his wife and four children, by then grown-up, many hundreds from the local community, and a huge void to fill across the medical and social services of Coxhoe, Kelloe, Cornforth, Bowburn, Cassop, and Quarrington Hill. Albert was particularly fondly remembered for his dedicated service and home visits, day and night, for over 30 years. Albert tended the needy, the weak, the ill, and the dying, never giving up on any case until he ...just had to. There were many times during his own free time when he visited patients, particularly those in acute pain and need of palliative care. Albert constantly worried and fretted, always thinking there's something else he could do to alleviate pain and suffering. I recall the great kindness of patients showing their appreciation of Albert's tender medical care. Regular knocks on the door with home-made bread and stottie cakes, home-made biscuits and scones, flowers, and so forth: whatever people could afford. It was very touching. Christmas was a non-stop time of doorbell ringing, and people bringing bottles of whisky and wine, gratefully accepted and consumed in the year to come, replenished again during the next Christmas period. Not long after Albert's death, the door rang again. A number of people from the Coxhoe Planning Committee came to see Betty Petterson. Betty was informed that there was to be a new housing development halfway up the Coxhoe High Street. The Committee had unanimously agreed to name this development after Albert, so long as Betty agreed, and thought it a good idea. Betty of course loved the idea, treasuring the kindness behind the suggestion, and the great esteem in which the Coxhoe and District community held her husband, and his dedicated, tireless work. Whilst as a son I may not be believed, I say the following as a human being who has survived longer than his father's age, and lived and worked in many countries around the world. For the record I say that, in all my travels, and the thousands of people I have met, I have met few, if any, who have so tangibly and believably, embodied true compassion, as Albert Petterson, who delivered his form of compassion in his own modest, quiet, and unassuming manner.



Petterson Dale, with Michael (Petterson). 2025.