



Blood brother: the Rev Neil Fairlamb hopes to continue donating for years to come

HEALTH

‘It’s a great British thing – giving blood’

For half a century, the Rev Neil Fairlamb, 72, has made 150 donations over the odd pint of Guinness

On December 2, I will take a train into London from my home in Surrey. I’ll meander through the streets of Soho to a building on Margaret Street before heading on to All Saints Church down the street. It’s a familiar routine; I’ve been coming here roughly every 12 weeks for 50 years.

In the early 1970s I’d leave having had a fascinating chat and a glass of Guinness. These days, the conversation is still on offer but the tuck tends to be a glass of water and an orange Club. I should say, my quarterly trip into town does have a purpose – I’m a regular at the West End Blood Donor Centre, and December 2 will mark my 150th donation.

It’s always struck me as a great British thing, giving blood. One of those small acts of service most of us can offer. We can’t do a great deal about most of the ills facing modern society; but this is one thing we can do.

People don’t realise you can carry on donating after 65, if you are in good health I’ve been giving blood every few weeks since 1968 and without wishing to sound pious, I consider it one of the greatest privileges of my life to be able to go on doing it at 72. People

don't realise you can carry on donating after 65, but as long as you are a regular donor (and are generally in good health and have a sufficient iron count) they are happy for you to continue.

I first donated blood at a new mobile clinic when I was a student at university in Bangor. When I came to London to work as a teacher I wanted to keep up the habit. I sought out the drop-in West End centre and have been going there ever since.

You can't just drop by now – like everything else, it's become more bureaucratic so you have to make an appointment – but the routine is just the same and unlike some I haven't had any trouble booking.

Over the years I have had so many interesting conversations with people in the centre. I've met nurses from all around the world.

When you have given blood, it gets dispersed around the country. They will write to tell you which hospital your blood ended up in. It just makes the world feel a little smaller, a bit more connected.

I did wonder if I was getting too old to donate, but I'm reassured I can carry on. In fact, one of the last times I was there I saw my blood was going in a different vessel to everyone else's and wondered if it was because I like a nightly glass of wine – perhaps they were researching the effects of drinking wine and donating blood? “No no, Mr Fairlamb,” they said.

“Didn't anyone tell you? You're on the baby panel.” Apparently, most adult blood isn't suitable to donate to babies but mine seems to have the right levels of antibodies. I asked if my glass of wine could have a residual effect, but they assured me they'd “sort that out”.

It's a shame the glass of Guinness isn't on offer anymore. You used to go in, stick your arm out and be handed a cold glass of the dark stuff – a pint for a pint or a half. At Christmas, Marks and Spencer used to donate turkey sandwiches too, though they went the way of the health and safety police too.

These days, they're very keen on you to drink water – a gulp before and another after. And if you require a pick-me-up, there are Clubs and crisps. An incentive if ever you needed one, though that's another thing I like about our donor service – in many countries, donating is incentivised in some way.

In Britain, as far as I know, it never has been. I have always felt that it's a point of pride that we can get enough blood for our needs through this voluntary service.

After donating, I go to William Butterfield's great church All Saints to give thanks for this opportunity to be a help. With any luck, I'll be able to repeat my little ritual for many years to come.

As told to Eleanor Steafel

The Daily Telegraph, 19.10.2022