

# Day to remember

Monday  
6  
Jan

News, sport and entertainment that have shaped lives on this day in history.

## THE CHRISTIAN FESTIVAL OF EPIPHANY

871 Alfred defeated the Danes at the Battle of Ashdown.

1066 Harold was crowned King of England in succession to Edward the Confessor. Ten months later he died at the Battle of Hastings.

1412 St Joan of Arc, known as the Maid of Orleans, was born. She believed she had a divine mission to expel the English from France.



1540 Henry VIII, left, married the "Flanders Mare", Anne of Cleves, his fourth wife.

1838 US inventor Samuel Morse gave the first demonstration of his electric telegraphic system.

1880 Tom Mix, US actor who made his name in early westerns, was born. He was one of the silent screen's most popular cowboys, appearing in more than 100 films before retiring in 1934.



1928 Four people drowned when the River Thames flooded parts of London.

1931 The new Sadler's Wells Theatre in London opened.

1945 The Battle of the Bulge ended.

1964 Pope Paul VI finished a three-day tour of the Holy Land, the first Pope to visit there since Christianity began.

1997 John Major's, pictured, majority in the House of Commons ended as Conservative MP Sir John Gorst withdrew his support for the government.



## ON THIS DAY LAST YEAR:

The condition of Chancellor Gordon Brown's daughter Jennifer deteriorated after she suffered a brain haemorrhage.



## TODAY'S BIRTHDAYS

- PJ Kavanagh, novelist, 72
- Sylvia Syms, actress, 69
- Terry Venables, football manager, pictured, 60
- Barry John, former rugby player, 58
- Syd Barrett, ex-rock musician (Pink Floyd), 57
- Anthony Minghella, film director, 49
- Rowan Atkinson, comic actor, 48
- Angus Deayton, TV presenter, 47
- Kapil Dev, former cricketer, 44
- Paul Azinger, golfer, 43
- Joey Lauren Adams, actor, 32



## Monday's spotlight:

Nearly 13 years ago ten-year-old Simon

# One family's

## PART ONE

Dr David Flavell and his wife, Dr Bee Flavell, lost their son to leukaemia in 1990. Since then, they have built up the children's research charity Leukaemia Busters to support national clinical trials for the treatment of children with incurable forms of leukaemia. In a series of articles written for the *Daily Echo*, the Flavells share their inspirational story

**A**T ALMOST precisely 6pm on June 8, 1990, ten-year-old Simon Flavell, my only child, opened his eyes widely, arched his back and took one final and lasting deep breath.

As I held on to one of his little hands, and my wife, Bee, the other, his heart stopped beating and he was suddenly and irretrievably gone from this world forever.

At that moment, the moment of our greatest loss, our life's direction and the determination that would be needed to steer it over the years ahead were firmly set.

We were to embark on a journey that would, we hoped, improve the chances for other children like Simon in the future.

More than anyone, we knew that something had to be done and he himself had urged us on to do this just days before his death.

Despite the fact that we had been anticipating his death for months, nothing had really prepared us for this moment.

The leukaemia which we, as a family, had been fighting for almost two years had finally won its war of attrition.

As we sat with his limp lifeless body in the gathering gloom, the preceding fight that we had all put up against the disease lay heavily on our minds.

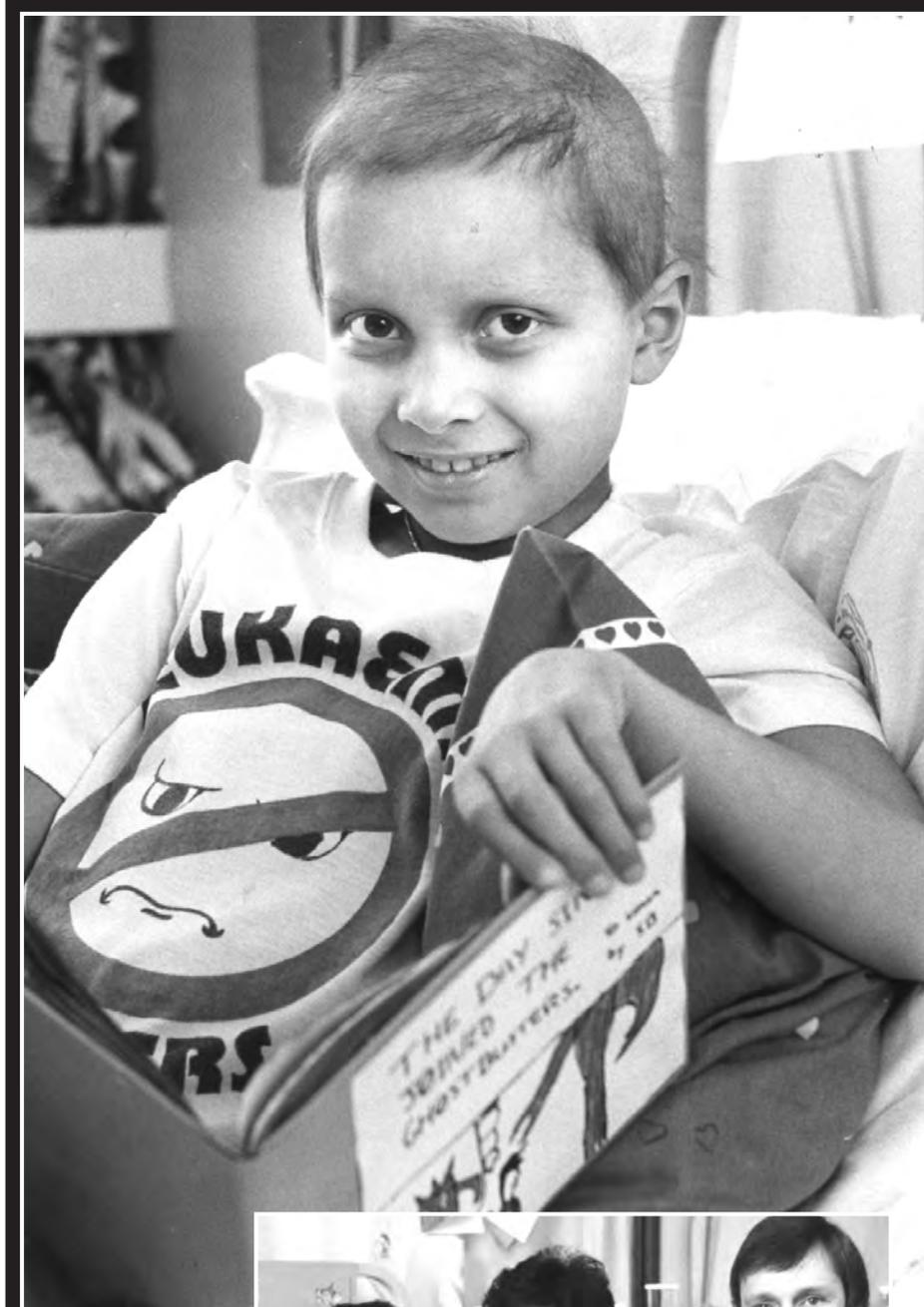
**T**wo years of continuous and arduous treatment, daily routines centred around pill-taking, hundreds of injections, bone marrow biopsies, lumbar punctures, radiation treatment, blood counts, needles, poisonous drugs by the bucket-load, general anaesthetics, weeks and weeks spent in isolation both at home and in hospital had now culminated in this supreme moment of futility. And for what?

This single thought was to come to dominate our lives as it does for so many parents who have lost children.

However, in our case this burning question became a beacon and provided the powerful motivation that was needed to achieve something that had never been done before in this country for children with leukaemia.

Simon's struggle against the disease that eventually consumed his life was a courageous one for more reasons than you might imagine.

Just two years earlier he had been



Simon in his Leukaemia Busters T-shirt (above) and with his parents, Bee and David Flavell



just like any normal eight-year-old child, terrified of going to the doctor for routine injections, refusing to take his medicine for some minor ailment just like most normal kids.

Bee and I were totally immersed in our work at this time, successfully producing new antibodies for diagnosing leukaemia and lymphoma, balancing the responsibilities of parenthood with the demands of the job which most days kept us working into the early hours.

**I**t was a little less than four months after my father died that Simon himself was diagnosed with the childhood variant of the same disease that killed his grandfather.

As soon as he knew he asked me the obvious question: "Daddy, will I die like my grandad?" What were we sup-

posed to say?

Our first suspicions that something was seriously wrong occurred several weeks before the final diagnosis was made. Simon's neck glands had swollen to an enormous size and he had become lethargic and disinterested in life generally, sleeping very poorly at night and waking in a state of distress and terrible confusion.

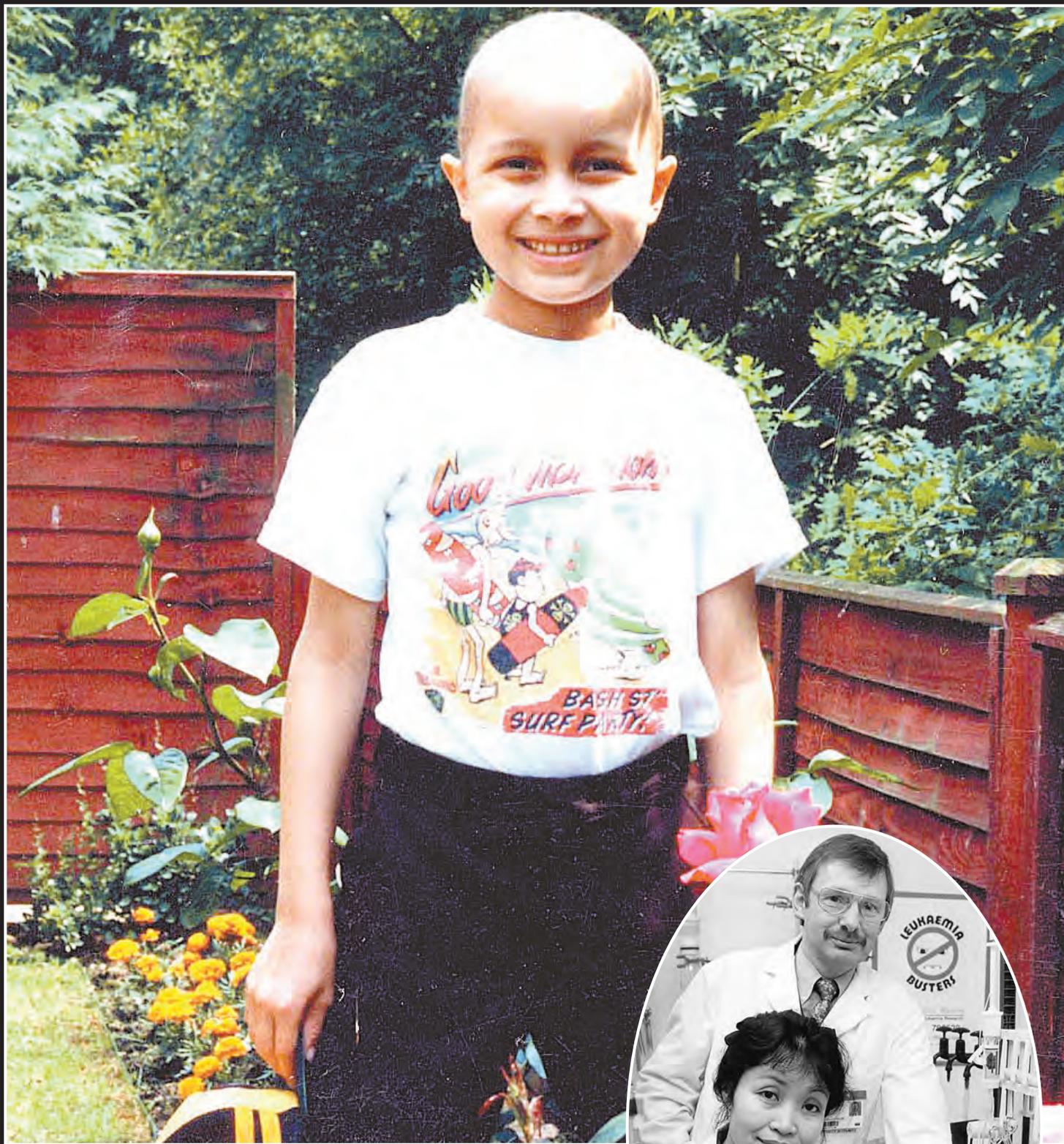
As with any concerned parent, our first port of call was the GP, who initially diagnosed an unknown viral infection, as often is the case.

I took his blood sample into the general hospital myself where the analysis was undertaken in the haematology department just three floors below my own laboratory.

A few hours later, as I worked away in my lab trying in vain to forget our situation, a telephone call came through from senior haematologist

Flavell lost his fight for life . . . but it was only the beginning for his devoted parents David and Bee

# greatest loss



Simon pictured in his garden and (right) David and Bee producing new antibodies for diagnosing leukaemia and lymphoma

Morag Chisholm to say that she'd seen some cells in his blood that might possibly be leukaemia cells. More tests would be necessary.

I sat there, ice running through my veins, stunned by the news. All my hopes that this whole episode was some sort of false alarm were dashed at that instant.

Quietly, I went back to peering down my microscope at the leukaemia cells I was currently experimenting on and knew that the summer that lay ahead was going to be the longest and most difficult haul of our lives.

There was to be a further two agonising weeks of watching and waiting, of is it or isn't it, to live with.

A bone marrow biopsy was finally taken.

**I**t was a boiling July day as Simon went off bravely into theatre for the definitive test that would finally give us the answer.

The bad news, when it eventually came, was given to us by two colleagues. I knew what was coming even before they'd opened their mouths to speak.

With hindsight I realise how difficult this must have been for them.

Irony was poured on irony as we were given the news that Simon had developed a variety of acute lymphoblastic leukaemia involving a type of white blood cell called a T-cell.

Doubly ironic because just a few months earlier, before he developed the disease himself, we had produced an antibody that identified this particular type of leukaemia and had become excited at the prospect of turning this into a drug for targeting these leukaemia cells in patients.

Worse still was the fact that the variety of leukaemia that Simon had contracted was relatively uncommon and carried a poorer prognosis than the more common variety,



therefore his chance of a cure was further reduced.

For me, the news turned into an episode of reality dysfunction and the world suddenly became disjointed as I plunged into a dreamlike state, submerged in a sea of shock, wondering when I was ever going to break surface again.

When I finally did, the summer sun was no longer shining and storm clouds had gathered ominously from horizon to horizon.

Leukaemia had once again come home to roost in my closest family and the future seemed so fragile and so uncertain. One thing was certain, however, and it was this – life was never going to be the same again.



**FLASHBACK:** The *Daily Echo* got involved in the story of Simon Flavell way back in 1990.

THE success of Southampton-based children's research charity Leukaemia Busters over the past 13 years owes a great deal to the generosity and support of *Daily Echo* readers.

During this time, it has blossomed from very humble beginnings to what it is today, supporting national clinical trials for the treatment of children with incurable forms of leukaemia using new antibody-based drugs developed with funding from the cause.

The story of the charity's rise to what it is today and the personal heartbreak that lies behind it is told here for the first time by the charity's honorary scientific director Dr David Flavell who, along with his wife Dr Bee Flavell, has been directly involved with its formation and work.

Along with their co-founders and, later, a board of committed trustees, they launched a very personal campaign against the leukaemia that in 1990 claimed the life of their only son, Simon.

Two years after Simon's death and following a year-long campaign by the *Daily Echo* to raise funds for Leukaemia Busters, the Simon Flavell Leukaemia Research Laboratory finally opened at Southampton General Hospital and the Flavells' quest began in earnest.

*The Flavells continue their series of articles in tomorrow's Daily Echo*