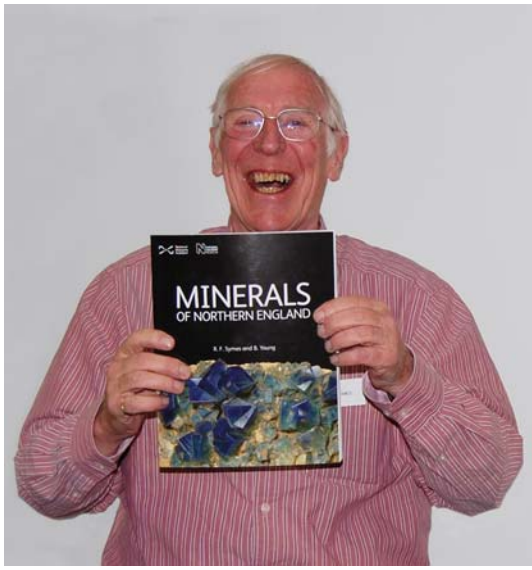
Obituary

ROBERT FREDERICK SYMES (1939–2016)



Robert Frederick Symes, known universally as Bob, has been a prominent figure in British mineralogy and geology for around 50 years. I first met Bob in 1982 when he came to stay with us at our home in Dudley as a guest speaker to the West Midlands Mineral and Gemstone Society, of which I was then Secretary. I had contacted the late Peter Embrey at the Natural History Museum (NHM) to invite him to come and talk to us about his involvement in the production of a facsimile reprint of Greg and Lettsom's classic 1858 work on the mineralogy of Great Britain and Ireland. Peter had declined the invitation owing to pressure of work on "*the book in which I am currently engaged on the minerals of Cornwall and Devon*", but kindly delegated the task to Bob. In later years, Bob told me that the overdue publication of the book led to the Museum authorities chasing Peter for a commitment to a completion date, whereupon Peter, not always known for his tact and diplomacy, apparently said "*get Symes to write it and I'll turn it into English!"* Bob contributed the geology chapter and some other sections of the book, and provided a stimulus for Peter. Whatever the process, we are all grateful to the pair of them for seeing it through to eventual publication.

Bob was born on 10th February 1939 in Harrow, London, and grew up in Eastcote, Pinner. His father was a self-employed builder in Chelsea, and his parents were both born in Chelsea. In 1948, Bob's father had arranged to take Bob to the summer Olympics at Wembley Stadium, and whilst waiting for the train, one of the athletes came and sat down next to Bob. He was just thrilled, and especially so when it turned out that the star was none other than the Dutch sprinter Fanny Blankers-Koen, who became known as 'The Flying Housewife', winning four gold medals in athletics.

After finishing his school studies, Bob joined the staff of the British Museum (Natural History) in South Kensington on 1st October 1957, as Assistant Scientific Officer. He attended evening classes and worked his way up, via part-time studies at Birkbeck College of the University of London, and gaining his BSc in geology. Bob completed his National Service in the RAF from 1959–1961,

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during which time a serendipitous posting to Weston Super Mare enabled him to explore the geology and minerals of the Mendip Hills, an area which became of intense interest to him.

One of his early career tasks, which no doubted sparked his detailed interest in Sir Arthur Russell, was to be despatched to Swallowfield Park near Reading in 1964, with his colleague the late John Fuller, to pack up Sir Arthur's fine collection of minerals and bring it to the Museum.

During his years at the NHM, Bob was an early adopter of new technology, and was largely responsible for bringing the first electron microprobes to the Museum. He was awarded a PhD in 1981 for his research on the orbicular rocks of the Channel Islands, supervised by Clive Bishop of the NHM under the auspices of Queen Mary College (Symes, 1981).

This programme of work, and the seemingly endless analysis of two unknown phases (popularly known as 'Red X and Yellow Y') from Merehead Quarry, took up much of his time. Eventually, with the assistance of collaborators these phases were characterized as the new minerals parkinsonite and mereheadite.

Over the years, Bob developed a global network of contacts in the mineral world and became a popular and well-respected scientist and curator. His work in the Mendips, and at Merehead Quarry in particular, was honoured by the naming of a pink oxychloride from the Torr Works (formerly Merehead Quarry) as symesite in 2000 (Welch *et al*., 2000).

In addition to his research and curatorial activities, Bob was instrumental in bringing a travelling display of minerals called the 'Rock Festival', arranged by Hubert Bari, to the NHM from July 1989 to January 1990, and he also guided through the new exhibitions in the Earth Galleries (formerly the Geological Museum).

The NHM played host to the inaugural *Mineralogy and Museums Conference*, held in July 1988, and Bob was at the forefront of organizing the event and chaperoning the many delegates from around the World. The event was a great success and continues to run every four years.

He had a genuine love of minerals and would extol, at length, the virtues of "our wonderful calcites and fluorites" to anyone who would listen. He was Keeper of Mineralogy from 1995 until his retirement in 1996 – a prestigious role in the museum world, and following in the footsteps of famous names such as Prior, Spencer, Herbert Smith and Claringbull. It was announced in the New Year Honours list, on 30th December 1995, that Bob was to be awarded the OBE (The Most Excellent Order of the British Empire is the "order of chivalry of British constitutional monarchy", rewarding contributions to the arts, sciences and charities) for services to the Museum and the science of mineralogy.

Bob was elected President of the Geologists' Association (1996–1998) and set about raising standards, and succeeded in increasing membership numbers to around 2400. His management style was gentle and persuasive, but gradually he initiated a complete overhaul of the society. In 1997 he asked his great friend Dick Moody to stand as President and together they started the 'Way Forward' programme, a root and branch review of a growing organization. Bob fully supported the organization of the 'Earth Alert 1' conference in Brighton to mark the new Millennium, and 'Earth Alert 2' in Scarborough in 2002. In 2009 Bob was invited to join the committee of the History of Geology Group and he became a Vice Chairman in 2012, serving until 2014 when he stood down due to his poor health.

Bob met his future wife Carol in 1961 and they were married in 1965. Some years ago he inherited an Orchard at Broadclyst in Devon (which has been in the family since 1750). Bob hoped one day to retire there, and he and Carol moved to the pleasant seaside town of Sidmouth in Devon in 1999. Here, Bob found a new career at the Sidmouth Museum, serving as Honorary Curator from 2001–2015. Sidmouth's 'Red Rocks Day' at the Museum was started when the Museum charged for admission and was launched as a free entry day to celebrate local geology. The museum is now free but the popular event continues to be held each year to promote interest in geology.

In September last year, a ceremony at the Museum saw the former 'Land and Man Room', which contains geology and archaeology items, formally re-named 'The Dr Bob Symes OBE Room' in recognition of Bob's tireless efforts to support and develop the museum over his tenure as curator.

He also established an informal mineralogical group, affectionately known as SMAGS (Sidmouth Mineral Appreciation Group), which met periodically at members' houses. Members included local mineral dealer Keith Corrie, former long-time member of the Harrow and Hillingdon club Michael Gough, and Roger Le Voir who Bob had met through the Geologists' Association and the Open University.

Outside of his professional life Bob was an energetic and popular participant in the world of the amateur geologist and mineralogist. His passion for his subject was infectious and he was in constant

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demand as a speaker at local clubs and societies. Three of his most popular talks – delivered many, many, times, in slightly different formats to audiences across the nation, were on the minerals of the Mendips, Cornwall and Devon, and Sir Arthur Russell.

Perhaps closest to his heart was the Harrow and Hillingdon Geological Society which he helped to establish in 1973. Bob had been an extramural lecturer for London University for about 10 years and was asked to do two evening classes in Harrow and Uxbridge. Some of his students decided that it would be a good idea to form a society, and Bob had a major hand in bringing this about. It was originally called the Harrow and Ruislip Geological Society but later changed its name to Harrow and Hillingdon. The group celebrated its 35th anniversary in 2008 with a memorable field excursion to the Massif Central in France to explore meteor crash sites and the volcanic rocks of the region.

Bob was made an honorary member of the Sussex Mineral and Lapidary Society on the occasion of its 25th anniversary in 1997, and it is typical of Bob's support for the amateur community that he was again in attendance as guest speaker at the Society's 40th Anniversary Dinner in October 2012 in spite of only recently having completed a course of treatment for a serious health condition.

He served as President of the Russell Society from 1989–1993, and was constantly encouraging and keen to drive up membership numbers, something which he did to dramatic effect during his presidency. He became firm friends with many members and also acted as auctioneer at the Society's annual benefit auction at the AGM.

Bob was involved in numerous local organizations, and also served as a member of the Council of Exeter University for 5 years, as a Trustee of Camborne School of Mines for many years, and as chairman, and subsequently president of Sidmouth National Trust.

A one day conference *Nature's Treasures: Minerals and Gems*, aimed at the general public and sponsored by the Mineralogical Society, Gem-A and the Russell Society was held at the Natural History Museum, London in September 2008. Bob was an enthusiastic supporter of this initiative, and gave a talk entitled – 'Devon: Minerals in the field: where to find them and how to collect responsibly.'

At a conference on *The Value and Valuation of Natural Science Collections* in 1995, Bob made the point that he was often asked to give a lecture called 'New uses for old minerals', underlining the latent research potential that lies in drawers in museums around the World. He gave as examples: leaching of metals from gangue mineral spoil heaps and their impact on groundwater; and the application of clay mineralogy to the sealing of landfill sites and protection of aquifers. Bob's point was really that we should look at our collections again, and by applying the science we have now, we would make discoveries of benefit to man in the future.

Bob was a prolific author, and a selected bibliography is provided at the end of this tribute. I suspect that the work of which he was most proud is *Minerals of Cornwall and Devon*, authored jointly with Peter Embrey (Embrey and Symes, 1987), which set the standard for an occasional series of topographical mineralogy works in the same style, progressively covering different regions of Great Britain.

In addition to his passion for mineralogy and geology, Bob was a keen collector of stamps which depict minerals and mining, and also had a strong interest in railways. He loved all sport and was an enthusiastic follower of football (and former keen footballer himself). Whilst living in London he supported his local team, Wealdstone Athletic, and at a national level he also followed Watford and Exeter City.

A great family man, Bob was immensely proud of his two daughters Catherine and Victoria, his devoted wife Carol, grandchildren Maisie, Olivia, Martha and Gabriel and sons-in-law Stas and Matthew. Our condolences go to all of them.

A true gentleman, and a great ambassador for mineralogy, Bob always had time for everyone, and was interested to know all the latest news and finds. I last visited him at the Royal Devon and Exeter Hospital on 30th April. Although quite poorly, he was really pleased to see me and enjoyed the visit. We chatted on things mineralogical for half-an-hour or so before saying goodbye. Bob passed away on 23 May, with his wife Carol and daughters Victoria and Catherine at his side. He will be sadly missed by all who knew him, but his memory will live on in the organizations he supported, his legacy of published work and in the local museum he did so much to inspire and develop. Rest in peace Bob.

I am grateful to Dick Moody, Roger Le Voir, Chris Stanley, Carol Symes and Peter Tandy for their assistance in compiling this obituary.

ROY STARKEY

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