

Obituary

Charles Winthrop Molesworth Swithinbank 1926–2014

On 27 May 2014 the polar community was saddened to learn that the eminent glaciologist Dr Charles Swithinbank had died after a brief illness, at Hilton Park Nursing Home in Bottisham, Cambridgeshire. He was 87.

Charles Swithinbank the son of Bernard Swithinbank of the Indian Civil Service was born on 17 November 1926 in Pegu, Burma. He was educated at Bryanston followed by Pembroke College, Oxford where he read Geography and also rowed in the university trial eights. He was a Sub-Lieutenant in the Royal Navy 1944–1946 serving on minesweepers and aircraft carriers.

In 1947 Charles joined an Oxford University expedition to Vatnajökull in Iceland, this was followed next year by field work in Gambia. In 1949 he began his long association with the Scott Polar Research Institute, Cambridge, then went on to enjoy a successful and extraordinary 60 year career undertaking research in the Arctic and Antarctic.

Newly graduated he was appointed Assistant Glaciologist to the 15 member Norwegian-British-Swedish Antarctic Expedition 1949–1952 led by Dr John Gjaever. The party wintered over in a large hut at Maudheim on an ice shelf in Dronning Maud Land. Using dog teams and tracked vehicles, research which included meteorology, focused on the polar ice sheet, with deep drilling and seismic measurement.

Charles who became fluent in Norwegian, returned to Oxford in 1952. He continued employment with the expedition until 1955 and wrote up his field work for the degree of DPhil awarded the same year. With funding from the Canadian Government, he studied the distribution of Arctic sea ice and the effects on shipping. He then returned to the Scott Polar Research Institute until 1959 followed by appointment as British Representative at the Soviet Union Novolazarevskaya Station, where he became fluent in Russian.

In 1960 Charles became a Research Associate and Lecturer based at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, a position held until 1963, at which time he was Head of the Glacial Geology and Polar Research Laboratory. During this period three summers were spent with American colleagues investigating the Ross Ice Shelf and the glaciers feeding it.

He returned to the Scott Polar Research Institute until 1974. Until 1986, he served with distinction at the British Antarctic Survey initially as Chief Glaciologist, then as Head of Earth Sciences. He became involved in very low-altitude radio echo-sounding flights from Twin Otter aircraft, on the Antarctic Peninsula. Many of these flights saw Charles who was a qualified pilot and navigator at the controls.

During his career in glaciology, he also served with colleagues from Britain, Chile and New Zealand, resulting in total the completion of three winters and more than 20 summer field seasons in both the Arctic and Antarctic.

In retirement Charles enjoyed his days at the Scott Polar Research Institute, where he was an Emeritus Associate and his interests included interpretation of satellite imagery of Antarctica, mapping and he pioneered use of blue-ice runways for wheeled aircraft which in association with pilot Giles Kershaw, after test flights in 1986, began the following summer.

As Vice Patron on the UK Antarctic Heritage Trust Charles showed great interest in the conservation of Antarctic historic sites. His long interest in Antarctic history was doubtless stimulated by contact with veterans of early exploration. They included physicist Richard Walter Richards GC of the Ross Sea party 1914–1916, who participated in placement of a supply depot in 1916 at The Gap beside Mt. Hope, for Sir Ernest Shackleton. In 1960 when Charles led a party which found no trace of the depot, he considered that even if placed on blue ice, the depot would have remained for 45 years at the most.

Charles Swithinbank's many publications included over 100 scientific papers along with four books: *Vodka on Ice. A year with the Russians in Antarctica* published 2002; *Foothold on Antarctica. The first international expedition (1949–1952)* – published 1999; *Forty years on ice. A lifetime of exploration and research in the polar regions* – published 1998 along with *An alien in Antarctica. Reflections upon forty years of exploration and research on the frozen continent* – published 1997.

His many awards included the Polar Medal with Clasp Antarctic 1950–1952 (*London Gazette* 24.1.1956); the Patron's Medal of the Royal Geographical Society and the Vega Medal of the Royal Swedish Geographical Society. He is also commemorated with place names of the Antarctic - Swithinbank Glacier; Swithinbank Range; Swithinbank Moraine and the Swithinbank Slope.

In 1960 Charles married Mary Fellows (née Stewart) with whom he had a son and a daughter.

With his characteristic quiet and unassuming manner, Charles Swithinbank was a gentleman who enjoyed being with, sharing his interests and helping his many colleagues. All in the polar community including those of the Scott Polar Research Institute and British Antarctic Survey will miss him dearly. We are however grateful and indeed privileged to have known this remarkable scientist and true friend.

David L. Harrowfield