

Obituary

John William Hersee – April 1930 to May 2005

Throughout its history, the Mathematical Association has benefited from the enormous contributions made by a select number of individuals. Few, if any, however can have occupied so many of its offices, and in so relatively short a time span, as John Hersee.

John, who was born in April 1930, was educated at Lewes County Grammar School and from there proceeded, after two years National Service in the RAF, to Keble College, Oxford where he obtained a First Class degree in mathematics. After graduating John took up a post at King Edward VII School, Sheffield, from where he moved in 1959 to Clifton College. Although John joined the Association in 1955, it was not until 1970 when he became a member of Council that his influence on the Association began to be felt. By 1971 he had been appointed to Teaching Committee and two years later he became its Chairman, a position he occupied until 1979. From 1972 until 1980 he was also an assistant editor of the *Gazette*, and between 1984 and 1992 he served as Honorary Treasurer. He stood down as Treasurer only immediately to become our President (1992-93: his Presidential Address can be found in the *Gazette* for July 1995, **79**, pp 305-320).

Alongside John's Association duties he also carried out many national and international tasks. He was appointed to the Schools Council Mathematics Committee in 1973 and became its Chair from 1977. When the Cockcroft Committee was established in 1978, John was one of its members. In 1975, however, John left Clifton, where he was by then Head of Department, to begin a ten-year stint as Executive Director of SMP. By the late 1970s he had also become involved in the International Mathematical Olympiads acting as Deputy Leader of the British team. He was the key person in the planning of the 1979 IMO, which brought that competition to the UK (Westfield College, London) for the first time. Later John was to serve as the Secretary of the IMO Site Committee that determined where IMOs should be held. This activity took John to, and brought him into contact with many educators from, the countries of Eastern Europe: a contact that was to prove valuable when, in 1985, John left SMP and became a Special Lecturer in the Department of Education at Bristol University.

John's greatest impact on the Association was, I believe, through his work as Chairman of Teaching Committee. This Committee had previously decided upon suitable subjects for "reports" and had appointed committees to produce them. These reports were uniformly noteworthy and authoritative, but they often had excessively long gestation periods. Clearly at a time when so many changes were taking place within education and so rapidly, some other *modus operandi* was required. John, then, restructured the committee into its current form as a network of working groups covering

issues of contemporary interest. His term of office coincided with many national issues to which the Association had to frame responses, including the “Great Debate” on education launched by the then Prime Minister, Jim Callaghan, the N and F proposals, and the core syllabus for A-level. All this while the country was restructuring its school system in order to move to comprehensive schools. There was much work to be done.

John's time at SMP was also one of great change. The project was engaged in the publication of two major textbook series: the enormously influential 11-16 books and the ‘new numbered books’, i.e., a revised and updated version of the original SMP 1960s numbered books written with grammar school pupils in mind. John oversaw, and contributed to the writing of, the latter. This, of course, reflected the area in which John had gained his teaching experience, but it was also a sign of his worry (which continued to grow over the years) that high attainers were being given insufficient of a challenge to grab their interest in mathematics. These books were used in public and some remaining grammar schools until the National Curriculum appeared to make much of their contents no longer ‘appropriate’. He was also greatly concerned in exploring how the by then commonplace calculators and the newly available microcomputers could enhance the teaching of mathematics.

By now, readers of this obituary might have come to the conclusion that John, given also his work on the IMOs (and, should they know of it, his involvement with the Mathematics in Education and Industry Project while at Clifton, and, later, with the British Mathematical Olympiad and the establishment of Royal Institution Masterclasses in Bristol, Bath and Swindon), was only concerned with the needs of the high attainer. This was far from the case. Indeed, his most influential work for SMP was in gaining support for and helping to launch the graduated assessment programme for low attainers aged 14-16: one of the most important and successful of all the SMP initiatives. The production of the ‘Foundation list’ to be found in the Cockcroft Report must also, I am sure, have owed much to John's influence.

John's work with the IMO served not only to develop the mathematical interest of many of the UK's most talented young mathematicians, but displayed other of his talents. One now outstanding university mathematician told me how at the 1981 IMO, ‘John was marvellous fun: relaxed and full of humour. I also remember him getting heavily involved in the disco dancing on the last evening with several of the young team guides!’ More significantly, work with IMO made John appreciate the high ability of many of the students from Eastern Europe, and also the way in which the strict bureaucratic regimes in those countries allowed so little autonomy to teachers – for he always held the same concern for teachers, the opportunities they were given and the demands placed upon them, as he did for students. He was concerned then to demonstrate what could be done in a system that allowed a degree of autonomy, encouraged curriculum development and tried to incorporate flair and interest into textbooks. These

issues were a prominent feature of two USSR/UK meetings arranged in the early 1980s at Oxford and Moscow in which John was one of the participants. Later, again with the help of the British Council, John established links with the University of Budapest that led to several Hungarian students following the Bristol PGCE course over a period of 3 or 4 years, and eventually an annual exchange between Bristol and Budapest mathematics education students. From whence can we expect missionaries to help deliver *us* from the rigid bureaucratic system *we* now have?

One other aspect of John's interests in mathematics education deserves especial mention. He had a very fine collection of antiquarian mathematics books, but what was probably unique was his collection of pupils' and teachers' workbooks from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. These have been generously donated to the Association Library. It is to be hoped that there someone will undertake the cataloguing and analysis of these books and complete the task that John was only able to start and Gwen, his wife, regrettably unable to finish. They form an untapped resource for any historian of mathematics education.

It is at this point that one should emphasise that to all who knew John well, he was viewed as one member of a duo. In addition to obtaining a degree from Oxford he also found his future wife there, Gwen, a fellow student of mathematics and, later, a teacher of the subject. Gwen not only supported John in his work, but made important contributions of her own. For many years she was Secretary of the Bristol Branch of the Association and when that Branch arranged the 1978 Annual Conference in Bath (complete with an 'Association swim' in the Roman baths), she and John were responsible for much of the organisation. In addition to her mathematical gifts, she brought a northern humour and directness to the partnership.

John and Gwen, however, had a life outside mathematics. Both were greatly interested and involved in the theatre and music. After retiring as a teacher, Gwen, a very competent musician, took both a first and a Masters degree in music at Bristol University. John had begun his work on the stage before joining Clifton. But there he contributed much, both as an actor in a variety of parts including Macbeth and as a producer. John also had talents as a carpenter and designer, and in this capacity contributed greatly to the building of the Clifton theatre. Again, the octagonal plinth he made for the school chapel is now used as an altar for Eucharists 'in the round' and for display purposes in the ante-chapel.

All this work did not pass unnoticed. In 1999, by which time John was already beginning to suffer severely from Parkinson's disease, the University of Bath awarded him an Honorary MSc in recognition of the work that he had done both locally and nationally. Later, at our Annual Conference in 2002, he was made an Honorary Member of our Association. Sadly, by then he had had to move into a nursing home and it was in such a home that he died on 10 May 2005. Also and deeply to be regretted, Gwen's health had deteriorated and she was unable to be present to receive the commemorative

glassware on John's behalf. Gwen pre-deceased John in early 2004. It was very sad to visit John and to see him with such serious physical problems and others brought on by the drugs he had to take, but he never failed to take an interest in what was happening within mathematics education – even if he felt that this was also too often a cause for sadness.

As the obituary written for the Clifton College magazine ends: 'a man of great energy, strong religious faith and firm views, as a colleague he made his presence felt. John's and Gwen's concluding years were sad and undeserved, but their achievements and character are already part of ... history.' And to quote another correspondent, 'He really was supportive of a remarkable array of activities and types of people.'

Acknowledgements

Many people have supplied me with information about, and reminiscences of, John not all of which I have been able to include in this obituary. I am most grateful to all of them for their assistance.

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Notices

The Association has been saddened to learn of the deaths of three long-standing members: Peter Coaker; Andrew Marris and Leslie Yoxall.

Peter Coaker, who died in June, was MA President for the year 1984 – 1985. He was not directly involved in education but worked for BP. He was particularly interested in links between schools and industry. A full *Gazette* obituary will be published in due course.

Andrew Marris, a Life Member who joined the Association in 1947, died on September 7th at the age of 81. He was a student at the University of London but spent much, if not all, of his working life in North America.

Leslie Yoxall, a member since 1938, died on September 30th at the age of 91. He was an eminent mathematician with, in his later years, having a particular interest in providing tuition. He was one of the code-breaking group of mathematicians which worked at Bletchley Park during the Second World War.