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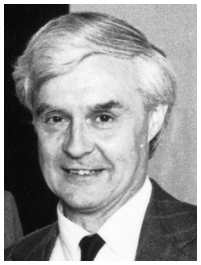
Obituary

David Barnard Thompson (1932–2013)



A new memorial headstone in the graveyard of St Margaret's church in Betley very poignantly reads: – 'Teacher and Geologist, Dear Husband and Father'. These thoughtfully chosen words concisely describe the essence of David Thompson, for he was both a very distinguished teacher and a geologist making major advances in his science, as well being at the core of his close knit family. In concert with Chris King, who has concentrated on David's teaching contributions (King, in press); here we attempt a complementary account, focussing primarily on David as a geologist although obviously the two activities merge one with the other. Fortunately David has facilitated an obituarist's task by having written a short but insightful autobiography (Thompson, 2000a,b,c). This latter account forms a chapter within a multi-author history of the early development (1950–1958) of the Geology Department in the University College of North Staffordshire (Keele), a collaborative project which, significantly, arose from his initiative (Thompson and Exley, 2006).

I first met David on the steps of the Victoria University refectory in Oxford Road, Manchester fifty one years ago, when just starting as a postgraduate student. It was during the annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (30th August 1962 to be precise) and Bill Williams, then the historical geographer at the University College of North Staffordshire (Keele), introduced us as potential friends. Unsurprisingly, we found that we had a lot in common since we both had read the Geology–Geography double honours degree at Keele. For the following three years we had regular contact since we were both working on stratigraphical topics as higher degree students in the same University, although during this period David was working full time as a teacher undertaking research in his spare time. He soon became my mentor and encouraged me to adopt a sedimentological approach to my research; indeed we collaborated on the topic of ventifacts and derived molluscan faunas (Thompson and Worsley, 1966, 1967). Without his wise counsel and example I doubt if I would have succeeded in making a career in the university world.

David was a Mancunian. His early school years were in south west Manchester and after the eleven plus examinations he was admitted to the prestigious Central High School for Boys in Whitworth Street. Although he was advised to follow a package in the sixth form of Art (architecture option), Geography and Latin, he was taught by Norman Horrocks and Malcolm Sinclair who had separate degrees in Geography and Geology and from them he drew the inspiration in the physical aspects of the earth sciences which would carve out his career. He excelled in Geography and gained a distinction which led to the award of a City Scholarship, influenced, he admitted, by leadership and prowess at soccer and cricket! Even at that early stage David's intention was to become a teacher, a course from which he never wavered. In the pre-UCCA era, university applications were uncoordinated and many institutions were loath to make firm offers without the availability of results. However, in North Staffordshire a revolutionary higher education experiment was being launched by the former Oxford Vice-Chancellor, Lord Lindsay of Birker. Essentially this was an undergraduate degree, extended over four years that emphasised a broad education which bridged the arts and sciences. Lindsay was very much a hands-on college Principal and he alone interviewed David. The outcome was a firm offer of a place amongst the first student intake which David accepted despite many counter offers that came once the examination results were known. Thus David became one of the pioneer entrants to the University College of North Staffordshire. Six decades later he is remembered by his student contemporaries as being kind, unassuming and modest (qualities which endured throughout his life) but also an outstanding athlete excelling at cricket and football. In 1954 David graduated with first class honours in Geography and Geology along with an Undergraduate Diploma in Education (equivalent to a PGCE). The magnitude of this achievement needs putting into perspective. The Keele lecturers were from single honours degree courses and knew no other and hence the two subject degrees were effectively the equivalent of two single honours courses. Taking the education course option as well, involved an exceptionally demanding schedule, and in David's case, this involved double the usual field work demands of a single subject degree. In addition there was teaching practice and a programme of practical field work all of which had to be packed into vacations.

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David received offers of research studentships from several Cambridge colleges but he decided to first fulfil his National Service obligation. Thus, during 1955–1957 he was stationed at RAF Manby in the east Lincolnshire Marsh where he worked as a weather forecaster, as well as playing a lot of team sport. Subsequently he was hooked on meteorology and was always keen to give an explanation of the current synoptic situation. Upon demobilisation the urge to teach became his number one objective, taking precedence over higher degree studies. His school teaching career extended from 1957 to 1972, initially at the North Manchester Grammar School for Boys in Moston and after 1966 at its successor comprehensive school. David was a brilliant enthusiastic teacher. He fully appreciated the benefits of sixth formers being exposed to a variety of outside speakers; for example David invited John Dewey, then a new junior lecturer at Manchester, to talk in scheduled teaching time to the 'Advanced Level' geology students at his school (the writer amongst others participated). It was Geology rather than Geography that became his calling and in 1967 he became a founding member of the Association of Teachers of Geology (this became the Earth Science Teachers Association in 1988).

He married Doreen in 1959, after a surprisingly long courtship that extended over nine years. They immediately established a close and very productive partnership which endured until his death. Doreen literally was the bedrock upon which his science flourished and without her total commitment to supporting his academic research, his prodigious productivity would not have been possible. During 1962–1966 he became a part-time student studying for an M.Sc. degree by thesis in the Geology Department in the University of Manchester, which at that time was headed by Professor David Vincent who gave him every encouragement. He undertook 1:2500 scale mapping of the Permo-Triassic in the Alderley Edge area along with detailed sedimentological analysis, a task which he was dissuaded from undertaking as an undergraduate. He submitted his thesis on schedule in 1966 and the quality of his research so astonished his external examiner that he recommended the award of a doctorate. Alas, the registration/fee rules would not permit this, an indictment of irrational university dogma at the expense of recognising scholarship. From 1965 to 1989 he served as a part-time tutor in geology for the Extramural Department of Manchester University and continued to run classes for the Wilmslow Guild well into the 1990s, commuting each week from Betley.

David's forte was the sedimentology and stratigraphy of the Permo-Triassic of the Cheshire Basin and he developed an unrivalled expertise in these rocks over his career. Consequently he was sought as a consultant by oil exploration companies and also those concerned with water supply. An examination of his publication listing (see later), amply demonstrates the extent of his fundamental contributions to understanding sedimentary processes. A particular fascination of his was the discrimination between aeolian and fluvial facies and as late as 2002 he was involved in further elucidating the interplay between the two. He co-authored what is undoubtedly the best sedimentary structures textbook and between 1982 and 2006 three editions were published. Its unauthorised translation into Chinese testifies to its international pedigree. However, as befits a Keele pioneer graduate, he did not have tunnel vision and was fully appreciative of the wider societal implications of Permo-Triassic geology. This may be illustrated by his introduction to the Grinshill area field guide written for the layperson (Thompson, 1995). 'Anyone who has sat upon the Cliff or High Scaur ... and marvelled at the harmony and beauty of the north Shropshire landscape all round will have spared a thought for the contribution of the treescapes of the escarpment and dip slope nearby'. He then went on to pose a number of questions designed to get the visitor to start thinking on the significance of a landscape elements resulting from a millennia of sandstone quarrying. His account is a supreme example of integrated history, industrial archaeology and geology and portrays David in his element.

David was much in demand by local, national and international organisations furthering education and geology. Over his active career he averaged some six invited lectures or field excursions a year for various geological organisations. He was very professional in his field demonstrations and spent countless hours meticulously preparing hand-outs. As well as marriage, 1959 was a landmark year as he was elected a member of the Geologists' Association and a Fellow of the Geological Society. Perhaps his most influential role in both the Geologists' Association and the Geological Society was his membership and later chairmanship of the management committee/editorial board of 'Geology Today' for many years. Locally, he served as President of the Manchester Geological Association (1966–1968); and his presidential address was published as Thompson (1970b). He was a stalwart member of the North Staffordshire Group of the Geologists' Association (NSGGA) following his move to the area and for a time served as chairman and later became an honorary member of the committee. The latter group are assembling an archive of his many contributions to the area, publications and unpublished field excursion notes. These will be made available on the NSGGA web pages and also in the NSGGA archive at the Potteries Museum in Hanley, Stoke on Trent.

In 1972 he was appointed to a lectureship in the Department of Education at the University of Keele with specific responsibilities for science education and in 1977 he was promoted to a Senior Lectureship. The Thompsons moved their home from suburban Sale to become residents of Betley village in rural Staffordshire on the border of the Cheshire Plain. During the next two decades, under his leadership, Keele University became the global centre of excellence in Science Education and in Earth Science Education in particular. The award of the R.H. Worth Prize by the Geological Society in 2002 is testimony to this. From 1993 to 1997, he was a half-time employee before taking full retirement after which he was awarded a 'Fellowship of the University', a position held until 2006. Unfortunately by that time the encroachment of Parkinson's Disease meant that he had to cease active geological research. However, in retirement David found time to investigate the local history of his adopted home and, from 2000 until his death, he was chairman of the Betley Local History Society. He wrote seven occasional publications between 2001 and 2006 on a diverse range of topics but including two with a strong geological component (Thompson, 2001c, 2002a). The Society elected him to the new position of Honorary President in 2012, a gesture which gave him immense pleasure.

Charles Darwin's career as a geologist was a particular interest of David's, generated in part by his geological and educational research into the Permo-Triassic of the Maer Hills in north Staffordshire. Subsequently he investigated the Darwinian connections with the area and campaigned successfully for the protection of the Grade 1 pristine landscape of the area around Maer Hall where Charles Darwin's wife Emma Wedgwood was born (developers had plans for a golf course and a gravel pit). The joint Geological Society/Geologists' Association Darwin bicentenary field excursion to the West Midlands and North Wales in 2009 visited St Peter's Church Maer. Fortunately David was well enough to join the party and participate in the tea and cake refreshments in