

Obituary

PROFESSOR ROBERT ANDREW HOWIE, 1923–2012



Bob Howie was born on 4th June 1923 in Olney, north Buckinghamshire in England and grew up on a nearby farm. His parents were Scottish and his father had moved south from Ayrshire after the First World War. He was educated at Bedford school and in 1941, at the age of 18, Bob cycled over to the nearby Cardington air base to volunteer. He joined up and was sent to Edinburgh and specialized in meteorology. His years in the RAF were eventful, and dangerous; he sailed across the Atlantic with U-boats lurking, flew aerobatics in a Tiger Moth aircraft in Saskatchewan and narrowly escaped death when a Halifax bomber that was attempting to take off brushed the top of the hut he was in and crashed into the sea. He was posted to Gibraltar where he contracted polio. He was bed ridden for a year and was left permanently disabled.

Bob was invalided out of the air force and went to Trinity College, Cambridge where he read Natural Sciences: Chemistry, Geology and

Mineralogy. He graduated in 1950 and then completed his doctorate at Cambridge with S.R. Nockolds on Indian charnockites. Despite limited analytical facilities, Bob demonstrated remarkable tenacity and perseverance in his research, completing large numbers of rock and laboriously separated mineral analyses. The origin of charnockites was, at the time, a source of geological controversy (were they igneous or metamorphic?) and Bob was able to demonstrate their igneous origin.

In 1953 Bob was appointed to a lectureship in Manchester. It was here that he started his collaboration with W.A. Deer (then Head of Department in Manchester) and Jack Zussman. This collaboration (and friendship) lasted the remainder of his life and resulted in the publication of the five volume 'Rock-forming Minerals' series. This monumental work is the bedrock of modern mineralogy and established the national and international reputation and

acclaim for the authors. *DHZ* is a work of outstanding scholarship and has remained the most widely used mineralogical reference book; it has sold more than 125,000 copies worldwide. Bob made a massive contribution to the work which is still being revised and updated, together with the student version which is about to enter its third edition.

In 1962 Bob was appointed Reader and later, Professor, at King's College, London and he remained there until the merger of the King's, Bedford and Chelsea Departments into the Department at Royal Holloway in 1986. Bob was appointed Lyell Professor of Geology at King's College and he brought this post to Royal Holloway with the departmental merger.

When appointed to King's he had been warned by the then Head of Department (the distinguished sedimentologist J.H. Taylor) about the 'traditionalist' attitudes of the College hierarchy. On appointment he was asked if, in view of his disability, was there anything specific he needed. Bob asked only for permission to park his car in the very limited King's car park as commuting would be difficult. The College agreed but the College Secretary (who ran everything) asked 'How many days a week did he need to park?' Bob said 'everyday' to which the College Secretary exclaimed in horror 'You cannot come in every day – why can't you work at home like everybody else'. Bob told him he could not do chemical analysis at home – it ruined the dining-room carpet.

At King's, the extent and scope of Bob's contribution was recognized. He continued to publish his research output on mineralogical assemblages and also revised the 'Rock-forming Minerals' with his co-authors (it became an eleven volume work).

It was in 1963 that S.O. Agrell and colleagues found three new minerals in the metamorphic rocks of the Franciscan in California. Appropriately they were named deerite, howieite and zussmanite.

He was awarded a D.Sc. by Cambridge University in 1974, the Murchison medal by the Geological Society in 1976, the Distinguished Public Service Award of the Mineralogical Society of America in 1999 and a D.Sc. by the University of Derby in 2009. He was an Honorary Fellow and President (1996–2000) of the Gemmological Association, and Vice-President (1973–1975) and member of council of the Geological Society. In addition, he was very

active in University of London politics from the 1970s until near his retirement, acting as Dean of Science from 1979 to 1983 and as chairman of Academic Council from 1983 to 1986. He was a member of the University of London Senate 1974–78 and 1980–90 and member of the University Court 1984–89. His contribution was much respected – his steadfast integrity and 'what you see and hear is what you get' approach in his dealings with academics was a welcome change in the murky waters of academic politics. Many senior academics (and others) will also have abiding memories of his offers of 'a lift up to Senate House'. A lift in Bob's car was a never-to-be-forgotten 'Alton Towers'-type experience; Bob had learned to fly before he drove a car, and it showed.

Bob also made a substantive contribution towards the establishment of the new department at Royal Holloway. The merger of the three small Geology Departments from King's, Bedford and Chelsea into the department at Royal Holloway was fraught with difficulty and faced considerable opposition. This was especially so at King's where the College was reluctant to give up anything but unwilling to provide real support to a new enlarged Geology Department. Although Bob had spent so much of his time at King's and was a loyal supporter of the College, he recognized that the merger was the best option. King's College had a great reputation but for Geology it was out of touch and out of money. At King's and within the University, Bob guided the merger through many difficult times and his contribution was appreciated. He also succeeded in maintaining great respect from the senior management at King's and was appointed a fellow of King's College. To his colleagues, Bob was a loyal and much respected academic. He brought to the Royal Holloway Department a national and international reputation.

Despite his scientific eminence Bob could also establish a great rapport with undergraduate and post-graduate students. His field trips to Skye were memorable experiences for generations of students. Not deterred by his disability, and complete with raincoat tied up with string, Bob would use his detailed knowledge of well chosen outcrops to generate real enthusiasm for mineralogy in the field. His lecture on gemstones was a firm favourite of student societies. This lecture traditionally ended with Bob asking the students if they had heard that evening's news – and then producing a very convincing gem-encrusted royal crown.

Bob was the most independent of men but benefitted greatly, especially in his later years, from the support of his sons, Robin and Timothy and their families.

The contribution that Bob Howie made to the Mineralogical Society was immense and possibly the achievement of which he was most proud. He joined the Society in 1950, served on council 1958–61 and 1963 onwards. He was General Secretary in 1965, was Vice president on three occasions and President in 1978–80. He served as Book Reviews editor for *Mineralogical Magazine* from 1980 and was a Managing Trustee from 1977 to 1987. At each meeting of Council, Bob ‘stamped’ the attendance sheet with the rubber support at the bottom of his walking stick. Even though in later years, he had a four-hour drive to get to London-based Council meetings, Bob was always first to arrive, complete with his plastic-bag briefcase containing a book or two in need of

review (many fellow Council members were persuaded to swap one of his books for a review), the latest batch of *MinAbs* proofs to fill any spare time and a packed lunch. Bob edited *Mineralogical Abstracts* from 1966 onwards and continued to contribute some 1600 abstracts every year, a simply phenomenal volume of work. Although he officially retired aged 67, his contribution to *MinAbs* and the society continued undiminished. Though he began in the time of paper and red ink, Bob embraced new technology, and oversaw the transition of his beloved *Mineralogical Abstracts* from paper, first to CD (*MinSource*) and later to an online version (*MinAbs Online*). Throughout his academic life he remained a great servant of the Society and this was recognized in 1994 with the unique honour of his election as an Honorary Life Fellow of the Society.

NICK WALSH