OBITUARY

MICHAEL ROBERT HOUSE (1930–2002)

Michael House's unexpected death in Weymouth on 6th August 2002 at the age of 71 came as a great shock to his family and his many friends. Born in Blandford Forum in 1930 and going to school in Weymouth in a geologically rich county he became fascinated by ammonites. As a schoolboy he amassed a superb collection from the Jurassic rocks. This laid the foundations of the palaeontologist we knew together with a burning passion for geology coupled with a deep love of Dorset which remained with him throughout his life.

Following National Service, he went up to Cambridge to read geology under Professor W. B. R. King in a department which also contained W. J. Arkell, the eminent Jurassic stratigrapher and ammonite specialist. Clearly set for first class honours, even before graduation he was appointed to a lectureship in the University of Durham. It was always assumed that he would do his research on the Jurassic System but King and Arkell perceptively steered him on to the Devonian Ammonoidea, at that time a rich and relatively unworked field. It proved a pivotal point in his life. He spent 1958–1959 in the United States as a Commonwealth Fund Fellow working in the University of Michigan and Cornell during which time he doubled the number of genera that had hitherto been recognized in the US. On his return he continued at Durham until 1963 when he was appointed Lecturer in Palaeontology at Oxford.

In 1967 he moved to the Chair of Geology in Hull where his quiet authority and willingness to listen, together with his sense of humour, quickly gained him friends among both students and colleagues alike. His administrative ability was also noted by the University who called on him to chair numerous committees, to be Dean of Science (1976–1978) and Pro-Vice Chancellor (1980–1983). A gifted geological cartographer he always led the first year field excursions and mapping courses and got to know all the students intimately. At the time of his appointment the Department had been engaged in North Sea research but realizing the impossibility of competing with the growing millions being poured into North Sea exploration by oil companies he redirected the main thrust of Departmental Research. A Professor of Industrial Mineralogy was appointed and very successful MSc courses were set up in Industrial Mineralogy and Micropalaeontology. With other appointments the Department flourished until it was forced to close by the notorious Oxbridge ‘reforms’ of the 1980s. The last students left in 1991 when the staff either retired or were dispersed and Michael took up an appointment at Southampton until he finally retired to Weymouth where he was able to return to his study of the Dorset Mesozoic.

His early work concentrated on the highly deformed Devonian rocks of SW England where he used Ammonoidea, together with conodonts, to elucidate the structure and stratigraphy of the System. This interest in the succession and correlation of the Devonian led him to widen his field, firstly to the United States and then later to Southern France, Morocco, Australia and SE Asia. With this wide breadth and depth of knowledge it was a logical progression that he should be called upon to serve first as secretary and then as president of the sub-commission on Devonian stratigraphy, a role he fulfilled for many years.

With his deep understanding of Devonian stratigraphy his interests turned more to environmental matters as seen in his two Presidential Addresses to our Society – ‘Facies and time in Devonian tropical areas’ and ‘Faunas and time in the marine Devonian’ (both 1975), wide ranging, detailed, closely reasoned papers and models of their kind showing a complete mastery of the evidence and reinforcing his standing as an authority on the Devonian System. Becoming interested in the variations in the Earth’s orbit round the sun detailed by the astronomer Milankovitch, he was able to show that the resultant variations in the insolation of the earth could be recognized in the rock succession and established the presence of ‘Milankovitch Cycles’ in the Devonian as well as in the Jurassic.

His continuing studies of the Dorset Mesozoic, produced a widely used Guide to the Dorset Coast and a highly regarded re-interpretation of some of the controversial structures in the Weymouth area. Altogether he had produced more than 200 publications and was still working on papers the day before he died.

Outside the University he was widely called upon to fulfill various roles. A popular lecturer, he was in great demand by various Societies and Institutions. He was a member of our Society for over forty years and a very successful President (1972–1974), the quality of his work and his contribution to the Society being recognized by the award of our Sorby Medal in 1985. Other bodies also recognized his worth. In 1970 he was awarded the William Bolitho Gold Medal of the Royal Geological Society of Cornwall, in 1984 the Neville George Medal of the Geological Society of Glasgow and in 1991 the Murchison Medal of the Geological Society. A very supportive member of the Hull Geological Society, he was also a founder member in 1962 of the Ussher Society dealing with Geology in SW England where he was the first editor (1962–1967), Chairman (1976, 1977), Vice-Chairman (1978, 1979) and a committee member from 1999 until his death. One of his last engagements was to give an Address at the 40th Annual Dinner in January 2002. His other appointments were legion – President of the Palaeontological Society (1972–1974), of the Section C of the British Association for the Advancement of Science (1977), of the Systematics Society (1978–1981) and service on various national and international committees.

His retirement enabled him to spend much more time on the Mesozoic formations which first inspired his love of Geology. He will be sadly missed by former colleagues and students as well as by his many friends. Our deepest sympathy goes out to Felicity and family in their loss.

© Yorkshire Geological Society, 2002

John W. Neale