

Obituary

Howard David Flack (1943–2017)

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Dr. Howard D. Flack passed away after a short period of ill health on February 2nd. The crystallographic community has lost a brilliant and deep thinking scientist, an excellent educator, teacher and fair-minded colleague. Several among us also lost a good friend.

Virtually any researcher who solved and refined at least one crystal structure has come across a parameter called ‘Flack’, in particular if the structure turned out to be non-centrosymmetric. This single parameter results from a very clever solution of a very tricky problem. Interestingly, Howard Flack himself called this (his) parameter simply x . The procedure resulting in the Flack parameter is only a very small facet of Howard Flack’s research. His affection for crystallography and chemistry originated from his time

at university both in Nottingham and later in London where he was awarded a PhD for his thesis ‘Studies of Disorder in Anthrone and in Mixed Crystals of Anthrone-Anthraquinone’ under the supervision of Dame Kathleen Lonsdale, F.R.S. After 3 years as a research assistant on surface physics at the Cavendish Laboratory at the University of Cambridge, Howard returned to his crystallographic roots by moving to the University of Geneva to join the group of Professor Erwin Parthé. He remained for the rest of his life at the Laboratoire de Cristallographie – a world-renowned center for structural research. A characteristic of his scientific work was that formal categories were very alien to Howard, but he was always striving for a deeper and better understanding of the phenomena he observed. This was a pleasure for all his colleagues who had privilege to collaborate with him on various projects, contracts and discussions.

Science and research formed only the ‘visible’ facets of Howard’s life. Another side of him which was not obvious to everyone was that having spent his youth in a rather ‘flat’ countryside, he became an admirer of mountains, a very keen skier who enjoyed the slopes in the Swiss Alps whenever his many obligations permitted. In the summers he enjoyed horse riding. His technical and handcrafting skills together with a strong interest in technical history allowed him to create his own museum of Hornby model trains. Those, who had the privilege to enjoy some time with Howard among his family, will always remember his kind hospitality combined with his special British sense of humor.

We all miss but will not forget Howard and mourn together with his family.

Yuri Grin