
BILL BROOKES 1924–2005

Bill died on 23 November. It seems, to many of us, to be the passing of an age. Since retiring from Southampton University in 1990, Bill lived in North Devon, walking the dogs on the headland and only occasionally appearing in the explosive print that he used in earlier times.

He was part of the original generation of ATM members who will be increasingly unknown today, but there are still many of us around who came under his influence in one way or another, and remember being instructed, challenged and chastened, always with passion but also with good humour. (“That’s the first time you’ve ever shouted at me, Bill.” “Huh, it’s the first time you’ve ever noticed!”)

Even in the week before he died, Bill’s ability to listen and challenge were not dimmed. Being aware that Bill was listening made me listen to what I was saying with quite different attention. For this alone many of his former students and colleagues would drive the long miles to Hartland.

It is hard, now, to realise how unacceptable the work and ideas of ATAM were to the establishment in the 1950s. Bill, then a classroom teacher, was a member in the fifties and on committee from 1959. He describes some of this in this issue on page 15.

Within ten years, in *MT31* (1965), he wrote:
For some years there have been cries for large scale financing and organising of courses for teachers in ‘new methods’ and ‘new mathematics’. But these are ineffective unless the system which they feed has a structure which allows individuals to effect positive changes. The system is not built to change and yet change is inevitable. The weight of responsibility is too heavy for individual teachers in isolated classrooms to bear. “I teach with the strength of you all behind me,” said a teacher in an ATM group.

There was money to start some teachers’ centres, but Bill asked if this was going to help. “The system is not built to change,” he asserted. What politician wants to be told that the problem is tougher than he thought? ATM needed Bill. He was one of the people who made you stop and think; he asked the hard questions.

Bill was continually concerned with the effectiveness of ATM, its organisation and activities. An early long memo (1966) to the rest of the General Committee put forward a very detailed proposal. It began: “*There are numerous activities to stimulate people’s interests. To make these productive it is important to know the different ways in which people meet.*”

He went on to list examples of each. This thoroughness of analysis was for him a typical prerequisite for any plan of action.

In 1977 Bill had just come back onto the committee. Much was stirring on the national scene but ATM was not looking outwards. Committee weekends were cosy affairs. We assembled on a Friday night and David Lingard, as secretary, put up a blackboard and invited people to say what we should work on by Sunday. This was not to last. Callaghan’s Ruskin speech opened ‘the Great Debate’. To survive, ATM needed to change. Bill drove the committee to take notice about what was happening – out there.

In his early fifties, Bill was the older guiding statesman over the next two years of change. It is much to his credit that he managed to push and stand back, making space for the thirty-somethings to do the work, design a structure that ensured change in committee membership, move the office, appoint new staff and, most importantly, take notice of what was going on in the world outside.

Bill saw that there was a real need to have an umbrella mathematics education forum that would allow the various professional associations to meet and talk before, hopefully, presenting a united professional voice. He devoted energies to setting up SCAMES (Standing Committee for Mathematics Education in Schools) and was the first ATM representative and early chair.

Bill drove ATM to give real evidence to Cockcroft. Part of it included the assertion that a primary head could never have absolute control over what happened in individual classrooms. This became the cornerstone for some hard debate between the employer members and the teaching members of the Cockcroft Committee. Later Cockcroft visited Wyndham School to observe ‘investigations’ in mixed ability classes. This was one of the moments when ATM moved from being a group of ‘off-the-wall weirdos’ to being part of mainstream mathematics teaching.

As Jack Wrigley used to say: the trouble about Bill is that he is always right!

Bill we will miss you.

[Kev Delaney, Geoff Faux, David Fielker](#)

You can read tributes to Bill Brookes and add your own, on the ATM website. Go to:
www.atm.org.uk/people/bill-brookes.html

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