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 ATM 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 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 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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