

## Obituary

### PETER GRAHAM HILL 1942–2010



On 13 May 2010 our Production Editor Dr Peter Hill died suddenly from a pulmonary embolism. All who knew Pete were shocked and deeply saddened. In his multifaceted career he interacted with hundreds of people worldwide and touched the lives of many.

When Pete left school in 1960 he worked for the Department of Forensic Medicine at Edinburgh University, before deciding to enrol as a geology student at Edinburgh, where he would eventually become a member of staff of the Department of Geosciences (or ‘The Grant Institute of Geology’ as it was initially known). Mineral analysis became the focus of Pete’s career and enthusiasm; though forensic analysis in some shape or form remained an interest through most of his long career of almost 45 years.

When Pete started his PhD on the volcanic rocks of Aden under the supervision of the late Keith Cox, he was happy not to head off to Aden to collect samples but rather to stay put in Edinburgh and carry out a programme of analysis of Keith’s samples. For three years he was in his element, and by 1970 there was nothing left to

analyse. It was time to write up, but if there was one thing that – on his own admission – Pete found hard, it was writing. When his grant duly ran out, and with no evidence of a thesis emerging, Pete headed off to Newcastle University early in 1971 to earn his keep as a geochemist.

The arrival of Edinburgh’s first electron microprobe in 1973 came with a summons from Mike O’Hara to return to Edinburgh to be assistant to Barry Jeffries in establishing and running the new lab. It was the perfect job – a new toy to learn and analyses to be done, and in Edinburgh. Despite this distraction, Pete finally managed to deliver his PhD thesis in 1974.

Pete had a great love of most things British – the Highlands, Cambridge Instruments, skittles, beer and, of course, his “blaze” (orange to the rest of us) MG sports car – twice written off, twice rebuilt. However, when a group of Edinburgh geoscientists went to Paris to shop for an ion microprobe on a very hot week in June 1986, Pete finally acquired his first British passport so he could go along and consider the possibility of buying French. He shopped at Cameca for new

electron probes thereafter. The acquisition of a passport had the wider effect of tempting Pete to explore further-away places, most especially his annual holidays with his wife Irene to the Swiss Alps, and even a trip to North America.

Professionally, Pete was, above all, a celebrated practitioner of scientific technology – an extension of his wider love of things mechanical and electrical, including aeroplanes and his beloved MG. Countless people benefited from his great technical skill and imaginative insights into how to solve problems relating to sample preparation, characterization and the interpretation of chemical data. The landscape in which he moved was the Periodic Table, and he knew its contours and foibles intimately. At the same time a basic interest and enthusiasm for minerals and rocks was always present, and when Pete became involved in teaching undergraduates, this interest shone through.

Pete was refreshingly independently-minded, treating students and professors alike in an even-handed way – except, that is, for a tendency to reserve the day-shifts on the microprobes for academic staff and visitors, and the night-shifts for PhD students, for whom these lonely hours of data-gathering were a rite of passage. But Pete far from abandoned the night-shift workers. He would regularly call into the microprobe lab late in the evening, after an evening out with Irene or his skittles mates, to ask the student if things were going OK. These visits were not quick in-and-outs, and he might well sit for an hour discussing the data collected and tweaking the instrument to perfection. He had a great empathy with students, a knack of knowing exactly when to get out of the operator's chair and say to the student "Right, it's your turn, see how you get on". Of course Pete was well aware that if the student made a mistake, it was he who would have to pick up the pieces. In

many ways that was a risky strategy, but Pete knew it was the right way.

All those colleagues who worked in the lab owe Pete a huge debt of gratitude; yet he was quite content with a simple "thank you" for his efforts and with no expectation of becoming an author on the resulting manuscripts. Perhaps Pete's humility was not well suited to the more 'political' aspects of scientific research, and yet it was this which endeared him to so many. He was also extremely loyal to those who worked in the lab – he would always fight their corner to secure their next contract and protect them from the whims of departmental politics.

In Spring 2008, after retiring from the University, Pete was appointed Production Editor to *Mineralogical Magazine*. This was a job that he relished. As Irene well knows, he put in far more hours than were ever expected of him – to the enormous benefit of the journal. Pete was one of that very small fraction of the population who did not simply look, but actually took the trouble to see. His attention to detail was second to none. His identification of logical flaws and non-sequiturs in scientific reasoning was penetrating. On hearing of Pete's passing, an eminent Canadian colleague described him as "one of the best editors I have come across". Not bad going for two years into the job. For the Principal Editor it was just great to know that there was someone on the boundary with big hands. He missed very little, he was fantastic to work with and an invaluable touchstone. He was instrumental in improving the quality of the journal over recent years, and we gratefully acknowledge the many hours he gave to the journal, and the passion and perfectionism with which he undertook a very demanding role.

COLIN GRAHAM, BEN HARTE,  
STUART KEARNS, MARK WELCH