William Salisbury Wynne Willson 1932-2010

William was born in Clifton, Bristol on 30 November 1932. His father, John Percival Wynne Willson, had roots in the South West; his mother Ruth Squance hailed from Sunderland. He had one elder and (later) two younger sisters – not to mention the dog, a great dane called Hamlet! His grandfather had been a vicar (and named his son after Bishop John Percival, who he served as Prebendary, and who was the first Headmaster of Clifton College, President of Trinity College Oxford, Headmaster of Rugby, and later Bishop of Hereford). His uncle (St John Basil Wynne Willson) studied at St John's College, Cambridge, and was later Headmaster of Marlborough College (1911-16) and Bishop of Bath and Wells (1921-37). William followed this trajectory in part, and in reverse – to Marlborough and to St John's – but espoused a sceptical rationalism at a fairly early age.

When war broke out, William was six. His father joined the army. Rather than stay in Nailsea, the family decided to 'up sticks' and find lodgings wherever he was stationed – mainly in Lincolnshire. William first went to school in Stamford, where he made friends with the young Colin Dexter. Later he boarded at Berkhamsted School, before going to Marlborough College, where he came under the tutelage of Alan Robson (MA President in 1949-50). Robson was mentor to a remarkable number of pupils who made significant contributions to mathematics, including H.S.M. Coxeter (an Honorary Member of the MA until his recent death) and Geoffrey Matthews (another MA President 1977-78).

Alongside mathematics, William's other great love was music. He was an accomplished keyboard player, and became an active and influential champion of the music of Lennox Berkeley – being a founder member of the Lennox Berkeley Society, creating and (as long as he was able) maintaining its website. In his later years he also created a website to make his own collection of piano music freely available.

Back in the late 1940s Robson had a house in Grasmere, to which selected boys – including William – were invited, where they indulged in the twin delights of mathematics and mountains. In William's case this led ultimately to a scholarship to study Mathematics at St John's College, Cambridge.

But first came national service. Instead of being packed off to the Korean War, William spent his time as a second lieutenant in charge of wages in Towyn, where he fell in love with Wales (and more mountains), started learning Welsh – and of course rented a piano.

Arriving in Cambridge in 1951, William threw himself into undergraduate life: the Footlights, piano, mountaineering, jazz (playing in a band called *The Moonrakers*) – and of course mathematics. At some stage he joined a bunch of classics students on a trip to Greece – where he

climbed Mt Olympus, and met his future wife Jane. He took Part III, graduated in 1955, and accepted a teaching post in Wellington College. And he got married.

His teaching career got off to an inauspicious start. The signs are that he was both effective and popular; but he was sacked at the end of his probationary period for 'not attending chapel'. At that time, this made it unlikely that he would find subsequent employment in any leading private school. Fortunately Bristol Grammar School felt no such inhibitions; so in summer 1957, the family arrived back in the South West.

February 1961 saw the publication of his first article – *Lines associated with a triangle* [1] – marking a love affair with geometry which may well have had its roots in adolescence and which was never to fade. In 1962 William moved as Head of Department to Cheltenham Grammar School (which survives, having merged with, and taken the name of, Pate's Grammar School, which was the girls' equivalent). There he stayed for the next seven years, during which he published a sequence of ten or more articles in *Mathematics Teaching*. His departure from Cheltenham at the very end of 1969 was marked by a thank-you letter (including the summary: 'You have looked after the mathematics of the school with distinction and enviable success') written by the then Chair of Governors – Shaun Wylie (for many years Chief Mathematician at GCHQ, having joined Bletchley Park in 1941).

In early 1970 William arrived in the School of Education of the University of Birmingham, taking over from Owen Storer (who had just moved to the Mathematics Department in Aston). The family moved up from Cheltenham later in the year.

That same year Geoff Wain was to spend part of the summer working with teachers in Alexandria, Egypt, under the auspices of the British Council, and invited William to join him. William revelled in Alexandria as 'the cradle of geometry', where Euclid, Heron, Menelaus and Ptolemy had worked before! This marked the start of 15 or so years where the two of them worked together every summer – in Malaysia, and then in the scattered 'black homelands' of South Africa.

Throughout the 1970s and 80s William published a stream of articles in *Mathematics Teaching*, in *Mathematics in School* and in the *Gazette*. He also edited and contributed to a number of important books – including the ambitious survey of *Geometry* [2] which appeared in 1977. A two-volume collection of these papers led to the award of a doctorate in 1981.

In parallel with his official work, William joined a committee of the Nuffield Foundation concerned with the public image of mathematics, contributed to Richard Gregory's ground-breaking *Exploratory* (which closed in 1999, but helped give rise to the new *At-Bristol* science centre), and got involved in the Molecule Club at the Mermaid Theatre, which used drama to introduce children to science – a tradition continued by his son Peter. He also produced or contributed to a number of short films on suitable aspects of his beloved geometry.

In the early 1970s, the Birmingham work expanded, and William was joined by Tony Fitzgerald some time around 1974. They worked together as a contrasting, but highly effective, team until the late 1980s. William was an active contributor when the MA Conference was held in Birmingham in the turbulent year 1988, and was President for the year 1993-94.

William's retirement in 1989 gave him freedom to pursue fresh enthusiasms. He took up cycling in earnest – both locally and more widely (including a sponsored ride in India). He explored local canals and lakes, but never produced his planned book on *The Birmingham Lake District*. He immersed himself in the delights of computing – and applied its power to all his other interests, including geometry and music. He worked quietly, and more productively, on a book about Ptolemy – though it remained uncompleted. He expanded his musical activity – developing his scheme to make neglected piano music freely available. And he continued to find endless delight in the exploits of his four children (Ruth, Peter, Tom, and Emma) and his ten grandchildren.

William was an enthusiast, who never grew weary. He always saw the possibilities rather than the dangers; and in his hands the possibilities were immense and the dangers relatively few. His combination of insight, gentleness, open-mindedness and sheer humanity inspired and supported many hundreds of mathematics teachers in many lands.

References

1. W. S. Wynne Willson (with D.R. Dickinson), Lines associated with a triangle, *Math. Gaz.* (1961) pp. 351.
2. W. S. Wynne Willson (Ed.), *The mathematics curriculum: Geometry*, Blackie (1977).

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