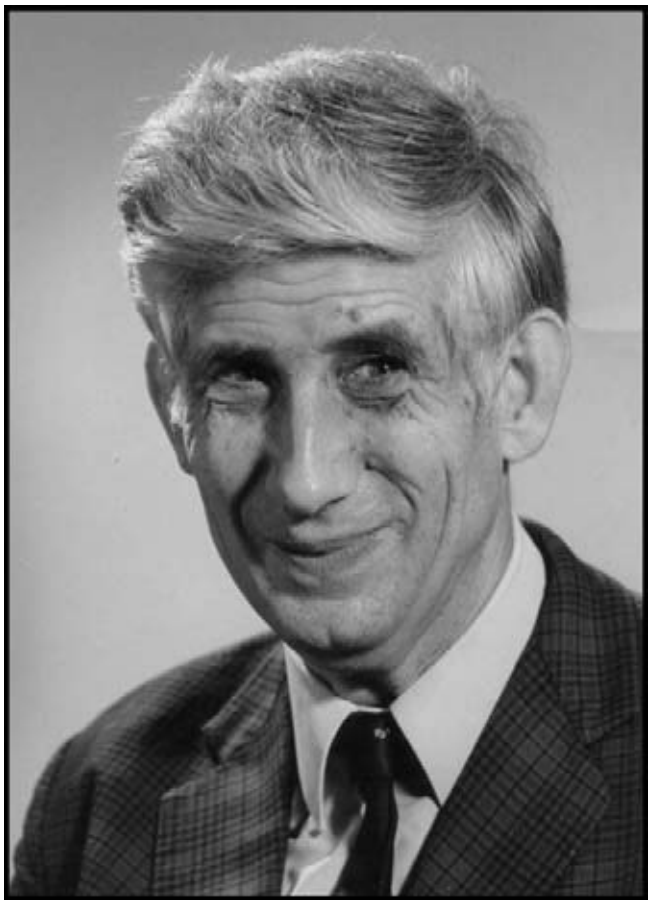
VALE

Ron Firman 1929-2005



Born in Norfolk as an only child, Ronald John Firman overcame the severe handicap of cerebral palsy, to lead a very full and fruitful life. His early years in rural Norfolk had a great influence, and he was never more at home than when he was in the field, for either his first love of geology or other aspects of natural history.

Between 1940 and 1947, he attended the City of Norwich School, which had a strong tradition in the teaching of geology. By the time Ron entered the sixth form he had already had a taste of the subject, which he then pursued with great and lasting enthusiasm. The degree to which Ron ignored his physical problems was reflected in him being made captain of the school hockey team, a status he later equalled at his college in Durham. At university in Durham, Ron continued his study of geology under the direction of such notables as Professor Lawrence Wager and Professor Sir Kingsley Dunham. It was Wager who expressed his doubt about Ron's ability to carry out geological fieldwork by leaving him out of a departmental field trip to the Lake District. Eric Robinson, one of Ron's contemporaries at Durham, reflects how Wager tended to favour the type of student who was a potential candidate for the 1953 Everest expedition or who could roll kayaks under the cliffs of the Skaergaard intrusion. Following an animated discussion, Ron was allowed to join the Lake District trip, and the obvious success of it was that he participated in all subsequent departmental trips. Eric and his contemporaries had great admiration for Ron who even in his student days had severe physical problems. During his time as a student he also made private trips to Skye, North Wales and the Malverns.

Kingsley Dunham was a major influence in Ron's developing interests. Following graduation, Ron embarked on a PhD research study on the "Metamorphism and metasomatism around the Shap and Eskdale granites". At this time he was particularly interested in the origin of granites, a topic that provoked considerable interest and controversy. Under the supervision of Frederick Stewart he completed his thesis in just over two years. Before his thesis was completed Ron led a number of field trips, including one for the Yorkshire Geological Society to the Lake District; this was attended by Prof W D Evans, who later appointed him to a lectureship at Nottingham.

Following award of his PhD in 1953, Ron became a research assistant to Professor Deer at Manchester University. Although his stay in Manchester was short, it was significant, as it was there that he met Pat, who he married in 1955 after he was appointed to a lectureship at Nottingham University. They had three children, Rosemary, Hugh and Alison. Ron and Pat had many interests in common, and in particular a love of the Lake District where Ron continued his research activities. It was in the Duddon Valley that Ian Sutton assisted in the mapping of joint patterns in the glorious summer of 1958 - with wonderful memories of Pat in harness, dragging the baby Hugh in a box with wheels over the rough fells, Rosemary with her face covered in bilberry stains - and Ron ceaselessly mapping joints.

Although Ron was very much a field geologist he excelled in academic work. He gave a course on metamorphism and metamorphic petrology to the final-year students in Nottingham. It reflected so much of Ron's attitude to the subject, and also the great care that he took in everything he did. The lectures were superbly prepared, very much up-to-date with many of the references to current publications. The students did not fail to recognise the high quality of Ron's presentations, and many owe a great deal to him. Ron genuinely cared for his students' needs, and Phil Doughty was just one of those for ever grateful because Ron took them on for research projects when few others showed much interest.

Ron also enjoyed his teaching to engineering students. For many years Ron paid a weekly visit to Sutton Bonnington, to deliver lectures on mineralogy and pedology. He caught the train at Beeston and took his bicycle with him; his students at Sutton Bonnington were in full admiration of Ron's cycle ride from Beeston - they were never disabused.

Ron's work was recognised nationally and internationally. He was a fellow of the Geological

Society and a member of the Institute of Mining and Metallurgy. His work in the Lake District earned him the award of the moiety of the Lyell Fund in 1964.

Ron also did extensive geological consultancy. He was in great demand in the location of hydrothermal mineral deposits in the Peak District, and became an authority on the gypsum deposits and alabaster of the East Midlands. Perhaps some of his most important consultancy work was for Manchester Corporation Waterworks in the Lake District, where he advised during the construction of the Wet Sleddale Dam near Shap; he was solely responsible for geological advice on renovation of tunnels leading from Thirlmere reservoir and on many other projects in the region.

Ron's well-merited promotion to senior lecturer at Nottingham was in 1968. By 1984, his worsening speech impediment had made lecturing into a less appropriate occupation, and he was awarded the post of Senior Research Fellow. On closure of the Geology Department in 1989, he retained that position in the Archaeology Department. Ron already had natural links with archaeology, particularly his interests in bricks and other building materials.

A most important aspect of Ron's interest in geology was his desire to bring the subject to the non-geological world. This he did by offering and teaching a number of adult education courses, and also by being a very strong supporter of the EMGS. He was a major contributor to the health of the Society, being a founder member, a member of Council and for a long period Editor of the Mercian Geologist. These were only some among many diverse activities within and outside the geological world.

Ron was fully involved with the Spastics Society (now Scope), and in 1962 he helped to found the '62 Club as a social club run entirely by people with cerebral palsy. He was successively the Chairman, Secretary and President of the Nottingham '62 Club, and from 1973 to 1979 was President of the National Association of '62 Clubs. He was also directly involved in the establishment of the Portland Club for the disabled, for which he was the first President and Chairman. Ron inaugurated the Nottingham University society for disabled adults.

In spite of all his physical problems Ron was very much a happy man – he enjoyed life and he had a very strong sense of humour. In a most delightful way the humour was that of a rascal, but he was also quite happy to be the butt of some of his humour. Some will recall his story of him going to a meeting straight from field work at Manchester Corporation offices to be told by the lift attendant that if he wanted the job he should dress more appropriately.

Ron was a man of great dignity, of compassion and was a colleague held in high esteem. Mercia has lost one of its specialist geologists and one who perhaps was not given enough credit during his life in geology.