

ROBERT W HOWE DSc: *Born - 1934 ; Died - 2013.*

Robert William Howe was born in Kent and gained a scholarship in 1934 to study Biology at Imperial College, London. After graduation he started work at the College's field station in Slough. Robert was one of the founding members of the internationally famous Pest Infestation Laboratory (PIL) set up in 1940, under the jurisdiction of the Department of Scientific & Industrial Research. PIL was transferred in 1959 to the control of the Agricultural Research Council and in 1970, was 'gifted' to the Ministry of Agriculture Fisheries and Food, when it was renamed the Pest Infestation Control Laboratory (PICL), affectionately referred to by its staff as 'Pickle'.

The Laboratory was originally set up to investigate attack by insect, mite and fungal pests on harvested crops and other food products at all stages of storage and processing, a function which broadly remained the same over the years.

The remit of the Biology Department of PICL was to undertake basic research on the ecology, physiology and habits of a wide range of beetles, moths, mites and fungal pests, and so produce information critical to the development of effective control methods. Robert led the section dealing with overseas problems. He spent 1948-50 in Nigeria and later made visits to the USA and Australia.

Dr Don Griffiths observes that when he joined the Biology Department, Robert (known as Bob) was a senior member holding a rarely awarded merit promotion at the rank of Senior Principal Scientific Officer, for Bob was an outstanding researcher with a special bent towards statistics and mathematics, a gift not within the capacity of too many biologists. His forte was to have the ability to develop methodologies and then carry out painstaking experiments on these small insects. The raw data so produced he used to construct life history profiles, from which, with his special abilities, he would produce mathematical models which were capable of assessing and predicting their life-styles.

By nature Bob seemed to prefer to be a 'loner', not interested in heading a large team. His group invariably consisted of a few technical support staff undertaking, with live insects, the experiments initiated by Bob's ideas, together with a continuous chain of young researchers whom he selected and then encouraged to register, with his support, for a PhD degree at one of the nearby London University Colleges.

A recommendation from Bob ensured their acceptance, for he automatically became their chief advisor and guide up to the point of the completion and submission of their thesis. Imperial College, London, was always a willing co-operator. There were at least eight doctorates successfully completed at Slough under his patient and understanding direction. He was not only a gifted



Doctor of Science, but also a kind considerate and approachable person. Anyone could knock at his door for advice, be welcomed, and go away uplifted. For most of his career IT technology had yet to take off. Complex multifactorial calculations had to be undertaken on mechanical, and later electrical calculating machines. Graphs and diagrams had to be drawn by hand, likewise manuscripts were hand written; then exposed to the trials and tribulations of the typing pool! But, despite these time consuming activities, Bob's ideas always seemed to reach the fruition of publication, as his record shows.

What more could he have achieved with today's magic machines?

When the Head of Department, Dr Maurice Solomon, retired in the early 70's, Bob was appointed as his successor. Under his leadership departmental meetings concentrated on science, acting as much as it was possible, as forum for the discussion of the Department's research programme. However, with the style of Civil Service management becoming more bureaucratic Bob was less comfortable. In 1979 Margaret Thatcher reduced the retirement age for Civil Servants, including scientists, from 65 down to 60; Bob was then 63 and opted for retirement but he continued his enthusiasm for science for many years.

Bob had an extraordinary range of abilities and at the start of his career had been tempted to become a professional cricketer. He later regularly played for the Slough Town Football Club. He was certainly happy with his decision to choose science, where he excelled in the application of mathematical solutions to biological problems and made a unique contribution.

Unfortunately Bob's wife Theda died three years ago; he is survived by a brother, sister, two daughters and four grandchildren.

*-Dr Don Griffiths, colleague
& Dr Janet Shapiro, sister*