

## OBITUARIES

DESMOND THOMAS DONOVAN  
21 June 1921 – 23 December 2019



With Desmond's death, the Society has lost its last link with the pre-war years. He was almost certainly a Society member for longer than anyone else.

Desmond became interested in geology in his early teens. His first fossil was a very battered *Echinocorys* (sea urchin) found in his parents' garden in Cheam, Surrey. He assembled a collection of miscellaneous natural history objects, though gradually rocks, minerals and fossils came to predominate. Regular visits to the Natural History Museum, complemented by biology at school (Epsom College) encouraged his interests. A further passion for caving started on visiting the Beatushöhlen, on the Thunersee in Switzerland, run by friends of the family. Desmond's mother was German and his parents had lived in Switzerland before the First World War.

In 1938 Desmond joined 100 or so other students for the Intermediate BSc. at Imperial College in London, studying maths, chemistry and physics. After war was declared in 1939, no provision was made for first-year students at Imperial College. Through his father, Desmond eventually found a place via W. F. Whittard, professor of Geology at the University of Bristol. Despite being combined with the evacuated King's College, London, Bristol students in geology numbered perhaps six or eight in total. Many lectures were combined, and for his Honours year he was alone. On many topics, he was simply given the lecture notes and told to get on with it.

He joined the Spelaeological Society soon after his arrival, a matter simply of seeking out the Secretary, then Francis Goddard, and asking. He was involved in the early exploration of G.B. Cavern, discovered in 1939 and his paper on the cave's geology, written with Frederick Wallis and published in 1944 indicated a move in the Society towards the study of the caves themselves rather than purely their contents.

During his final year (1941-42) a field week in Torquay started Desmond on the road of systematic palaeontology. He graduated with an Upper Second Class Honours degree in

1942, and entered the army for training as a radio (i.e. radar) officer in November 1942. He served most of his time in Palestine.

In 1946, Desmond arrived back in Bristol to start research with Prof Whittard, to work on Middle Jurassic rocks, but became diverted into the Lower Lias ammonites. In this he was mentored by local geologist Tom Fry. Between 1947 and 1957 Desmond was the geologist on Lauge Koch's Danish expeditions to East Greenland every summer. In 1947 Desmond became assistant lecturer in geology at Bristol, being appointed to lecturer in 1950. In parallel with his research he also developed an interest in Pleistocene and Palaeolithic palaeontology and archaeology writing papers on a number of local sites and producing his first bibliography of the Palaeolithic and Pleistocene sites of the Mendip, Bath and Bristol Area in 1954, subsequently updated in 1964 and, with Ray Mansfield, in 1989. While at Bristol he met his wife Lou, with whom he had two sons and a daughter. In 1962 he was appointed Professor of Geology at Hull and then in 1966 he took up position as Head of Geology at University College London. He retired from UCL in 1982 and spent three years as Honorary Curator at the Wells and Mendip Museum in Somerset, after which he moved back to London.

Desmond saw retirement as an opportunity to go back to his beloved research, helped by having access to UCL facilities, and later also those in Bristol. He was active in geology and palaeontology up until the end, carrying on fieldwork and publishing on many topics including on the Quaternary stratigraphy of both Aveline's Hole and Gough's Cave. He remained an active member of the Society throughout. He was a long-standing vice-president and member of the editorial committee for these *Proceedings*. He was one of the original trustees of the Oliver Lloyd Memorial Fund. In all these roles his sound judgement and sage advice were often sought and gratefully received.

In 2007 after Lou's death, Desmond moved back to Wells permanently, to the heart of his beloved Somerset and the Blue Lias. In the last years of his life Desmond could also indulge his passions for church and cathedral architecture and archaeology, and music, particularly opera. He was very interested in the restoration of the West Front of Wells Cathedral, and later wrote a critical paper on it. In recent years he investigated the gravel beds under Westminster cathedral (Thorney Island), ledger stones in Somerset churches and other diverse topics. His last paper for the Society was a thoughtful and critical review of the Society's archaeological work during its first twenty years published in 2017.

Desmond was a stalwart and long-standing member of many natural history societies, including the Mendip Society, Bristol Naturalists Society, Bath Natural History Society, the Churches Conservation Trust and the Somerset Churches Trust as well as being a founding member of several. In later years he was very pleased to be able to support the English Touring Opera in its productions and Friends of Music at the Wells Cathedral School.

He was an old-style polymath, interested in and knowledgeable about many things, and never lost his curiosity. His great intellectual ability was disguised with a very modest and unassuming manner, and a gentle sense of humour. He was always very generous with his time and knowledge and would help anyone who came to him with questions.

Desmond died peacefully after a short illness. He will be greatly missed. He is survived by children Tom, Tessa and Dan, and four grandchildren.

TD-B & GJM