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Obituary

Professor Richard Aldridge (1945–2014)

Richard Aldridge, Chairman of The Micropalaeontological Society from 1995 to 1998, passed away on 4 February 2014, aged 68. He joined the University of Leicester in 1989 from the University of Nottingham, where he was Reader in Palaeontology. He became a Professor at Leicester in 1996 and served as head of the Department of Geology from 1998 to 2004. He held the F. W. Bennett Professorship from 2002 until his retirement from the University of Leicester in 2011. His passing is a huge loss to the academic community as well as to his family and friends. He was a distinguished scientist, with an understated enthusiasm for all that he tackled.

A south Londoner by birth, Dick (as he was known to all) gained both his BSc in Geology and a PhD from the University of Southampton, for which he researched conodonts from the British Silurian under the supervision of Ronald Austin. The study of microfossils from early Palaeozoic rocks was to form the focus of his research career. He was a world authority on conodonts, and was at the forefront of many major developments and new applications in the field, including multi-element taxonomy, numerical taxonomy, biostratigraphy, phylogenetic analysis, geochemistry and their use as thermal maturation indices. Most notably, together with colleagues he used discoveries of conodont assemblages from the Carboniferous of Scotland with the first *bona fide* soft tissues to help elucidate one of the great unsolved questions in micropaleontology – the affinity of conodonts – thereby shedding light on the early evolution of vertebrates. It was ground-breaking research that revolutionized our understanding of vertebrate evolutionary origins, and was later to be highlighted in Simon Knell's book *The Great Fossil Enigma*. He developed interests in exceptional fossil preservation also through the investigation, in particular, of the Ordovician Soom Shale of South Africa and the Cambrian Chengjiang biota of China. Using a variety of microfossils, particularly conodonts and organic-walled groups, he was also involved in some of the earliest attempts to understand the palaeoceanography and paleoclimatology of the Silurian, work which has formed the springboard for much subsequent research.

Dick was a model research supervisor with a light but deft touch, always encouraging his students to approach a problem from every angle, and without any suggestion that the answer was known or obvious. He encouraged his research students to devour the literature omnivorously and, in particular, to understand the philosophical underpinnings and methodologies of science. He supervised almost 30 research students, and many of those he supervised now occupy senior positions in academia and other professional bodies.

It was perhaps inevitable that Dick would become a Head of Department. Equally characteristically, he did it with aplomb: calm, efficient, honest, always with an open door and willingness to help. He was especially adept at diffusing potentially difficult situations, often using his sense of humour to do so. He shielded his staff, especially from the daily incoming barrage of demands on staff time, and he was respected for his loyalty and integrity.

His leadership and wisdom was widely sought, and he served many learned societies and organizations with distinction. He was, *inter alia*, President of the International Palaeontological Association (2002–6), The Palaeontological Association (2008–10), The Micropalaeontological Society (1995–8), and of the international group of conodont specialists, the Pander Society (1998–2004). He served on a range of NERC and other professional committees and acted as external examiner for many UK university courses. His academic merit and contributions were widely recognized. He was the recipient of the Lapworth Medal of the Palaeontological Association, the Coke Medal of the Geological Society and, in 2013, was the Brady medallist of The Micropalaeontological Society.

Yet, it is perhaps Dick the man that many will hold in the memory, for working and socializing with Dick was never less than fun. Whether in the field or laboratory, wherever it was – in South Africa or in Wales with friends from the Ludlow Research Group – banter with Dick was always an eclectic mix of science, sport, music and, inevitably, jokes. For many years, UK conodont workers – his 'academic family' – held an annual field excursion (in December of all times) and memories of these are infused with long parlour games led by Dick in the minibus to break the tedium of the journey, and by even longer jokes. He greatly enjoyed his music and was a very keen ornithologist, a passion that grew from his childhood interest in natural history in general.

Dick enjoyed teaching and, typically, he excelled at it. In addition to his distinguished scientific research and publications his enduring legacy will undoubtedly be his enthusiasm for learning

and for the philosophy and curiosity-driven nature of science that was warmly appreciated by all the undergraduate students that he taught over the years. He was, put simply, a much-loved and generous colleague, always willing to help and offer advice. Work with Dick in the laboratory, classroom or field was always a delight, and his engaging wit and twinkle in the eye was evident through to his final days. Dick is greatly missed by all those whose lives he touched and influenced.

He is survived by Alison, his wife of more than 40 years, and by their sons James and David, daughter Rebecca and seven grandchildren.

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