

OBITUARY: *Mavis Hitchcock*



Mavis Hitchcock, 1927–2004

Mavis Hitchcock, an Honorary Trustee of the Applied Probability Trust (APT) and its former Executive Editor, died suddenly in her home in Sheffield, UK, on 21 January 2004. She had suffered a bad fall in her kitchen the week before, resulting in bruises and a head wound which had required stitches; she died peacefully in her sleep. Mavis was in regular contact with me by telephone; we last spoke together on 20 January, and with typical stoicism she reported only that she ‘did not feel too well’. Her sudden death was a great shock to all her friends and colleagues. A funeral service was held for her at Sheffield’s Hutcliffe Wood Crematorium on 9 February 2004.

1. Some personal details

Mavis was born in Sheffield on 6 June 1927; her family belonged to the Church of Christ Scientist, with which Mavis retained her association throughout her life. She worked diligently for the Church in many capacities over several decades as Assistant Clerk, Treasurer, Board Member, and most recently Second Reader. She greatly enjoyed the challenge of this last office.

After school, Mavis studied at the University of Sheffield, and was awarded a Bachelor’s degree in French and German in 1948. She maintained close links with the University and was a respected member of its alumnus association (the Sheffield University Association of Former Students), of which she had been the efficient Secretary for some time. She was coordinating the association’s contribution to the forthcoming Sheffield University centenary, and attended one of its meetings shortly before her death. On graduating, she went to work as a commercial and technical translator at Firth Brown, one of Sheffield’s best-known steelmaking firms, but eventually began to feel that her scope for progress in this job was limited, and in 1965 she joined the APT.

After the death of her father, Mavis became the main support of her family; she was greatly attached to her younger brother Alan, who suffered from physical and intellectual disabilities, and worked in a sheltered workshop. When the Sheffield pavements were covered in snow

during winter, posing an added risk to Alan's stability on his feet, Mavis would take it upon herself to drive him to and from work. He died of heart failure in his fifties some 15 years ago. Mavis's mother survived into her nineties and died in 1996, having been lovingly cared for by Mavis in her home. Mavis always placed filial and family duties above her personal wishes; to some, she appeared to exemplify the self-sacrificing virtues of unmarried daughters in the Victorian era.

Following her mother's death, Mavis felt more free to travel outside Britain on her annual holidays. She enjoyed motoring and had often driven herself in her impeccably kept Mazda sedan to various parts of Britain; she particularly enjoyed the annual trip to Oxford with Harry Burkill to attend the *Mathematical Spectrum* Editors' lunch and meeting at Exeter College. She had previously taken her brother and mother to seaside resorts, mostly in Britain; but in 1999 she visited Australia for the second time, and toured Queensland and New South Wales extensively. A trip to Newcastle was arranged to meet the family of my son Jonathan Gani, to whom she had kindly offered support during his student days at the Sheffield School of Medicine between 1974 and 1980. The highlights of her visit were well recorded: Mavis was an inveterate photographer, who catalogued her photos methodically after each holiday.

In 2002, she holidayed in Switzerland, where she found her French and German language skills very useful in Geneva and Interlaken. Last year, she drove herself to Tunbridge Wells, and explored the town and its surrounding country thoroughly; she proudly showed me her photos of these on my last visit to Sheffield in September 2003. After offering me lunch at her home, she took the opportunity of guiding me around her garden, in which she took great delight; together, we admired her flower beds, her gooseberry bushes and fruit trees. She was a keen gardener, who enjoyed attending flower shows; I recall her enthusiastic description of a Chelsea Flower Show which she had attended a few years ago.

2. Mavis's career at the APT

Mavis was appointed as Editorial Assistant for the *Journal of Applied Probability* (JAP, first issued in 1964) in September 1965, soon after I had joined the University of Sheffield as head of the newly created Department of Probability and Statistics. Her salary was initially covered by the University, but the Applied Probability Trust soon took over financial responsibility for her, as well as her growing staff, as the publishing operation rapidly became self-supporting. In 1973, she became Executive Editor of three APT journals, *Journal of Applied Probability*, *Advances in Applied Probability* (AAP, 1968) and *Mathematical Spectrum* (MS, 1968). By the time she retired in 1992, the Trust had added a fourth journal, *The Mathematical Scientist* to its publications (TMS, an APT journal since 1988). By 1992, Mavis's staff consisted of four assistants in the APT office, respectively in charge of subscriptions, accounts, technical editing, and secretarial duties.

She has described her experience of journal production, and of running the APT office, in her paper 'The origin and growth of the Applied Probability Trust' (JAP Special Volume 25A (1988), pp. 47–64), to which interested readers are referred.

In September 1974, when I left Sheffield to join the CSIRO Division of Mathematics and Statistics in Canberra, the question arose as to whether the APT office should also be moved. After discussions among the APT Trustees and with Mavis, it was agreed that the interests of the APT would be best served if the office remained in Sheffield. It was decided that, by installing Telex machines in both Sheffield and Canberra, Mavis (as Executive Editor) and I (as Editor-in-Chief) could still remain in daily communication. The system worked well at the time, and a modified form of it, with today's more advanced methods of electronic communication,

continues to work equally well between Chris Heyde (now Editor-in-Chief) and Linda Nash (now Executive Editor). I never had the slightest cause to regret the decision to leave Mavis in full charge of the APT office: she adapted to the system very quickly, and continued to work most efficiently.

Mavis often admitted that her assumption of direct responsibility after 1974 for the running of the APT office, and for correspondence with authors and referees, was an enormous challenge. What had been a joint enterprise in management and editorial duties in Sheffield between 1965 and 1974 was now split into two distinct jobs: editorial on my part, and managerial on hers. But she enjoyed the additional responsibility and developed hitherto hidden talents. For example, she successfully supervised the introduction of the first electronic computers in the APT office in the late 1970s, after first learning as much as she could about computers.

Mavis's many contributions to the APT in her 27 years of service were fully recognized by the Trustees on her retirement in 1992, when they conferred the title of Honorary APT Trustee upon her. A brief appreciation 'On the retirement of Mavis Hitchcock' by Gani and Heyde commemorating the occasion may be found in JAP Volume 29 (1992), pp. 484–486.

By the turn of the century, Mavis had few blood relatives left: only a male cousin, George Mycock, survived among her immediate family in Sheffield, and even before he died in 2002 she had come to regard the APT staff as her family. She was a friendly person, but except for her involvement in Church and alumnus association affairs, she tended to be rather solitary, and 'kept her own counsel', according to the old Yorkshire saying. She loved her work, and after her retirement continued to serve the APT as a Trustee and to proofread articles for *Mathematical Spectrum*. She was always honest and forthright in her dealings with colleagues and friends. It was possible to disagree vigorously with her on matters of APT policy, but after a heated argument, one readily fell back into one's usual friendly personal relations with her, knowing full well that she had only wished to champion what she believed to be the APT's best interests

3. A tribute

The APT owes a great debt to Mavis Hitchcock for her dedication, her integrity, her administrative ability, and her meticulous attention to detail. For many years, she supervised the APT office, proofread journal issues, advised on the layout of papers, and corresponded with authors, referees and the journals' Editor-in-Chief. She established a sound foundation on which the later development of the Trust's work could be based. She would often attend professional conferences, where authors would introduce themselves to her; they identified her closely with the APT and would sometimes seek general advice from her.

She was a systematic organizer, cautious in her approach to new ventures, and insistent on mastering every detail of a problem before reaching a final decision on how to solve it. She distributed office duties fairly, and was always helpful to her assistants, while closely supervising their activities; she enjoyed the direct contact with them in the large office of the APT, which they shared on the top floor of the University's Hicks Building. When asked if she would not prefer a separate room to herself, she would maintain that the shared office enabled her to keep her fingers on the staff's pulse, and make her readily available to them for advice and counselling.

Mavis Hitchcock's death marks the passing of the APT's formative era; she will be remembered with warmth and affection by all who knew her personally. Her willingness to accept responsibility, her balanced judgment and thoughtful advice on APT matters, as well as her dry humour, will be missed by her fellow Trustees. Over the past 38 years, she became more than a colleague; she was a true and valued friend.

Acknowledgements

I should like to thank the colleagues, friends and family who have helped me in the writing of this obituary.

Australian National University, Canberra
February 2004

JOE GANI