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## **Doug French**

**20 October 1941 to 14 September 2009**

The Mathematical Association has suffered a great loss with the death of Doug French last September. In terms of active MA involvement Doug and I got to know each other around 1992 as members of Teaching Committee. Although not a lifetime, seventeen years is a considerable amount of time to have worked, and worked very well, with someone for whom I had enormous respect.

Doug was born in wartime London, the eldest of four boys although the other three were not born until after their father returned from wartime service. By a strange coincidence, Doug and his mother were evacuated to Driffield, the town in Yorkshire nearest to where Doug eventually moved to take up his job at Hull University. After the war, Doug was at school until 1960 when he went to Bristol University to read mathematics. At his funeral, his son Mark observed that Doug was not enthused by his mathematics degree but that his passion for the subject came into being when he took his PGCE and then began teaching. Mark recalled that Doug thoroughly enjoyed his time at Bristol but perhaps largely through his interest in the Scout Movement an interest which he retained throughout his life. This was an important strand and, as it was through this that he met Julia Adams, who he married in due course. After graduating from Bristol, he embarked on a year in Nigeria with the VSO and that was another interest which remained with him. Indeed, he and Julia returned to Africa for a holiday shortly after he retired. On his return in 1964, he went to Leicester for his teacher training year. Leicester was another place, like Driffield, which he would visit many times later. I suspect that his link with the MA may have begun around this time. His tutor was Ray Hemmings but also in Leicester was Wilf Flemming, a stalwart of the Leicester Branch for many years.

Having completed his training, Doug began his teaching career and he and Julia were married. After a very short time, Doug was appointed as Head of Mathematics at the Beacon School in Sussex. This must have been in 1968 as he left 19 years later to go to Hull where he worked for a further 19 years, and I remember him commenting on this. During his time as a Head of Department, he began to write and I have found an article in

*Mathematics in School* in September 1984 called ‘Prompted by a mistake’. This may have been his first MA contribution—it was the earliest I could locate. In it, he takes four common errors and attempts to explain just why they happen! Very shortly after appearing in *MiS*, a *Gazette* note appeared. In October 1984 he wrote ‘An application to archery’, which Mark made reference to, commenting that it was inspired by an interest of Linda, Doug’s daughter. It was some time later that his first *Gazette* article appeared. This was ‘Varying the approach to A level mathematics’ which appeared in March 1991. But, by 1991, he had changed jobs.

He joined the University of Hull in 1987, his appointment being shared between the Schools of Mathematics and of Education. The appointment was funded for three years, with Doug having the remit to establish a two-year PGCE Mathematics Conversion Course. Students joining this course would already be graduates in subjects other than mathematics and keen to qualify as mathematics teachers.

At the funeral, in September, Chris Collinson, a former Head of the Mathematics Department at Hull commented

‘ The early years of Doug’s appointment were very exciting for all, with the first change in the basic structure of the university, flourishing interaction with teachers through the local branch of the Mathematical Association, various joint INSET initiatives, sixth form and teacher conferences, etc. Doug was soon making an immense contribution in these areas and winning the confidence and respect of his academic colleagues and local teachers. How often I have heard a student or academic with a problem say, “Oh, we have Doug on Monday, we might as well wait to see him. He’s the best one to help us.” ’

Throughout this time, Doug was writing, and speaking at conferences, ever-willing to share his ideas with colleagues. He was one of the authors responsible for the complete re-write of the School Mathematics Project textbooks and has authored two major influential texts *Teaching and Learning Algebra* (published in 2002), followed by *Teaching and Learning Geometry* (published in 2004). Doug made significant contributions to many other publications. In 1994, in *Mathematics in School*, he began the long running series ‘Creative use of odd moments’ which provided an issue-by-issue set of inspirational ideas but which was re-published in book form by the MA and which continues to be a best-seller. He continued to publish and, in the *Gazette*, we had his Presidential Address and, in this issue, an article of which he is a co-author.

As I mentioned at the start, my first contact with Doug was on Teaching Committee. We joined it at roughly the same time in the early 1990s. For a while, I was its secretary and he was the treasurer. In the earliest days, the Chair of TC was Barbara Jaworski. She was followed by Sue Sanders and she in turn by Jan Jagger. However at the 1999 AGM, Doug took over as the Chair and threw himself into its work. My feeling is that he wasn’t

passionate about committees and meetings, but they were viewed as a necessary evil. As Chair of TC, he joined the Council of the MA and made many worthwhile contributions to discussions whilst continuing to write and to provide sessions at conferences and in-service events. As often happens in MA work, Doug was timed out of being Chair although he remained a member when Charlie Stripp took over in 2003 and also remained on Council as a member-without-office.

In 2005, Council made the long overdue decision to invite Doug to be President. This was an invitation which he accepted readily. After his year as President Designate, Doug became President at the 2006 AGM. The year 2006-2007 was a tumultuous year for Doug, for not only was he our President, he also resigned from his position at Hull. So he began his year whilst still a lecturer and ended it as a 'gentleman of leisure'. He left Council early in 2008 and I saw much less of him but we still talked a lot. As others will know, I do a lot of driving, to and from meetings, and tend to fill some of the hours by telephoning (hands-free!) and Doug was high on my list of callers. So we kept in touch. I was very sad when he became ill but he seemed to be responding to treatment. I had asked him to open a conference in Stirling in September 2009 but that plan had to be changed. I was greatly saddened when Julia rang with the news. It was very heartwarming to attend the service on 25th September held in a packed chapel with many, many friends who had gathered to pay their respects. I am sure we all miss him and will continue to do so but, at the same time, are very grateful to have known him and, perhaps even more so, for all he did for UK mathematics education.

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## **Tributes from others**

I have just heard the sad news of Doug French's death. I did my maths PGCE at Hull university in Doug's final year there as the main maths lecturer (2005/06), and without his help and support, I would almost certainly have not completed the course. He always kept us busy with his extremely creative ways of approaching the mathematics curriculum, and I can now testify that some of them actually work. But I'll always remember him with a great debt of gratitude for the support he gave me with my first teaching practise. I really struggled in my first school, and came to tell Doug that I was planning on quitting the course, and he managed to persuade me to stay on until the end of the week. Ironically the fact that I thought I was about to give up teaching meant that my stress levels were much lower, and I had the confidence to start teaching properly.

Later on, Doug was kind enough to provide me with a good reference that got me a job in a good school, where I finally began to feel comfortable as a teacher, and since then I haven't looked back, and certainly now see my future in teaching.

Although, Doug's enthusiasm for mathematics and creativity are what have made him well known amongst the Mathematical Association, I will also remember him as a kind and supportive man without whom I would probably not be a happy teacher now.

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It is with much sadness that I read today of Doug French's death. I was a student of Doug at Hull University in my final year of a Joint Honours (Maths and Sport Science) degree and then the following year when I undertook a Maths PGCE. Doug was a charming and brilliant man who entertained thoroughly; his passion for the subject was incomparable and helped affirm my intention to teach. He inspired me to begin new topics with students by offering a joke as the title to the subject, here are a couple for you:

- What sound does a mathematical cow when sliding down a hill? *Mu*
- What type of underwear does a mathematical mermaid wear? *An algae-bra*

My fondest memory of Doug was on the day of my PGCE interview. Another inspirational tutor had encouraged me to go into teaching and having not enrolled myself onto a PGCE course, he contacted Doug and asked to arrange an interview for me. Doug obliged and knowingly offered me 9:15am on March 22nd 2001. The only reason that the date sticks in my mind is because it was the day after my 21st birthday! You can imagine the delicate head I was nursing when going into that interview and Doug decided to start the interview off by asking me firstly what the answer to 3.6 divided by 0.9 was and then how I would go about explaining it to a group of low ability year 7 or 8's?

Doug thrived on someone not understanding something, but only because it provided him with the opportunity of giving them their light-bulb moment, never because he liked to see someone struggle. Doug also lectured a module that I took in my final year entitled Maths in the 6th Form. I had always been particularly fond of my 6th Form maths teacher as he was an enthusiastic and entertaining guy, but Doug was just on another level!

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That is so sad. I will remember Doug as a perfect gentleman, a modest man with great talents.

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How very, very sad. He gave so much to Maths, his students and the MA, he deserved some time to enjoy his retirement and his family - it seems too cruel that he had so little time. His passionate interest in Maths how it was taught and how all students could be helped was always evident. He will be greatly missed.

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One of the features I remember was that of Doug chairing an open meeting of Teaching Committee at one of the Annual Conferences. During this meeting he did his utmost to keep the discussion constructive and positive despite attempts from some of the audience to be confrontational.

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