Obituary

Bob Burn: 1934-2024

'It is a sign of the man who knows, that he can teach' (Aristotle Metaphysics, Book 1).

Professor Bob Burn, mathematician, educator, and priest – died in Exeter after a short illness on 23rd February 2024. Bob published 22 articles in the *Mathematical Gazette* between 1972 and 2017 and contributed about 15 book reviews. The Mathematical Association provided him key support early in his career, when he met obstacles to his approach to mathematics teaching at his first college post in India.

Bob was born on August 15th, 1934, son of Joshua and Katharine Burn, and was given his mother's maiden name, Pemberton, as his second name. He grew up in Oxford, where his father, Joshua Harold Burn FRS, was Professor of Pharmacology.

At the start of WWII, Bob was evacuated to New England, where he began his schooling, but he returned to Oxford in 1943 and attended the Dragon School, whence he moved to Shrewsbury School in 1948. Five years later he had won an open scholarship in mathematics at Peterhouse, where he shared rooms with Chris Calladine – beginning a friendship that lasted over 70 years*. After Cambridge, he taught at Mill Hill School, London, from 1957 to 1960.

Bob developed a strong Christian faith in his teenage years, and at Cambridge met Isabel Bennett when they served together on the University Committee of the Student Christian Movement. They married in August 1958, and in 1961, with children Christopher and Katherine, moved to South India, as Bob had been asked by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to work in the mathematics department at St John's College, Palayamkottai. Nicholas and Sarah were born in India.

Bob was, initially, critical of the teaching of mathematics in the college, which was almost entirely by rote. The sympathetic Principal encouraged Bob to reform it, so he did exactly that. I quote from Christopher's words at Bob's funeral:

'He thought long and hard about what would be distinctive in a Christian approach to mathematics teaching and came to five principles, all of which we will recognise permeated his work and his connections with us: first, that mathematics (or Christianity) is not something we learn, but something we do; second, that his job was not so much to stimulate the memories of those he taught, but their understanding; third, to treat the syllabus less as a prison than a home base; fourth, to lecture less and let the class work more; and fifth, to be less like a father and more like a brother to his students'.

As these principles became apparent at St John's, the Principal urged Bob to go back to England for graduate study. Bob registered in 1965 at Westfield College (now Queen Mary College), London. His PhD thesis – Involuntary Perspectivities in Projective Planes and their Relation to Quasi-fields, Pappus' Theorem and Harmonic Conjugates - was completed in 1967.

Bob established a new MSc course at St John's that year, incorporating his approach to teaching. By 1971, the family was ready to return to England, and

* Chris Calladine died on 3rd August 2025

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Bob to a position at Homerton College, Cambridge, where he succeeded Hilary Shuard as head of mathematics. The first four of Bob's five 'principles' were apparent in his teaching at Homerton, although any connection with his faith was never made explicit. His determination to enable students – active engagement in – and contribution to – their own learning rubbed off onto his departmental colleagues, so that when students came to their undergraduate mathematics classes, they knew that they would be expected to do more than note-taking.

As for Bob's 'other job' having served as a deacon in the Church of South India 1963-71, 10 years after returning to England he was ordained a priest in the Church of England, and, with Isabel's support, he served from 1981-88 as non-stipendiary priest-in-charge in Foxton, just south of Cambridge.

In 1988 Bob moved to a lectureship at Exeter, and upon his retirement, nine years later, he took up a professorship at Agder College, Kristiansand, Norway, before returning to Exeter in 2000. Bob was not yet ready for a quiet life in his fireside chair: Isabel and he translated Latin correspondence between early 17th century Italian mathematicians, to see what could be learned from it about the construction of mathematical thinking.

In addition to many publications both in 'straight' mathematics, the history of mathematics, and in mathematics education, no fewer than 14 books bear Bob's name as author. In university mathematics departments around the world, Bob will probably be best known for three of them published by Cambridge University Press: A pathway into number theory (1982), Groups: a path to geometry (1985), and Numbers and Functions: steps into analysis (1992). Through the medium of these books, Bob enacted his radical beliefs about teaching advanced mathematics in the classroom. While at Homerton, and to promote his convictions about mathematics pedagogy, Bob established a London Mathematical Society Committee entitled, appropriately, 'The Teaching and Learning of Mathematics'. Bob's Cambridge mathematics colleague Alan Beardon chaired this committee for the first three years, to be succeeded by Bob himself, who chaired the Committee for many years.

When Bob left Homerton in 1988, the highly regarded principal Alison Shrubsole had retired, but she wrote to him "First and foremost, I appreciated your rock-like integrity. After that came my admiration for your scholarly qualities, teaching ability, concern for the students, capacity for organizing others, working harder than anyone I know. But there was usually a twinkle in your eye as well, and a refreshingly original approach to the problems which beset us."

Bob's funeral took place in Exeter in March 2024, and on 26th May a good assembly of villagers, family and former Homerton colleagues gathered for the interment of Bob's ashes in the graveyard at 'his' church in Foxton.

The Reverend Professor Robert Pemberton Burn: Requiescat in Pace.

TIM ROWLAND, in collaboration with Chris Calladine and Christopher Burn

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MA Honorary Members

The Last Honorary Members of The Mathematical Association

On 13 September 2025, at the final meeting of The Mathematical Association Council the Directors took the opportunity to appoint two new Honorary Members, Dr Chris Pritchard and Bill Richardson, MBE.

Chris Pritchard's early service to The Mathematical Association revolved around Teaching Committee and its Scottish Interests Subcommittee, the latter of which he led through the 1990s. In 2002, during his eight-year spell on Teaching Committee, it celebrated its centenary, and for this he persuaded numerous leading mathematicians and educationalists to write for the book *The Changing Shape of Geometry*, published jointly by MA, MAA and CUP. This was the first of nine books he has produced for the Association. Chris returned to Teaching Committee in 2009, largely rebuilding the team and its structures as Chair, recreating links with the Department for Education and helping to influence policy. When he stepped down, he took on the role of the Association's Secretary before being elected President for 2021-22. Chris has been a regular presenter at Annual Conferences. And since 2005, not only has he co-edited over a hundred issues of Mathematics in School with John Berry, but he has contributed a large number of articles to that and other journals.

Bill Richardson's service to The Mathematical Association is without parallel and in fact there is no way it could ever be exceeded, for in an unbroken 33-year stint on Council he held all three offices – Chair, Secretary and Treasurer – as well as the Presidency in 1996-97. His time on Council coincided with his joining the Association's Teaching Committee and its Scottish Interests Subcommittee. In addition to the posts mentioned already, at one time or another he was Editor-in-Chief of the Association's journals and Company Secretary, taking on other roles on a temporary basis as needs arose. Bill has been ever-present at Annual Conferences, forty-one of them on the run to this point. And if this were not enough, since 1995, he has typeset *The Mathematical Gazette*, with its complex mathematics and intricate diagrams, producing almost 18,000 pages in the process. In the words of a past Chair of Council, Adam McBride, "Bill has devoted a large part of his life to the MA and if anyone were to be called Mr MA, it would be Bill."

In addition to the service Chris and Bill have given to The Mathematical Association, both have made outstanding contributions to the community of mathematics teachers in Scotland, Bill as national organiser of the Scottish Mathematical Council's Mathematical Challenge competition over 25 years, Chris as Chair of the Council and, for nearly two decades, the editor of its journal. Bill was appointed MBE for his service to mathematics education in 1998; Chris received the SMC's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2024. Each was Head of Mathematics at secondary schools in Scotland for the majority of their teaching careers.

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