

Obituary

Rex A. Walford OBE

1934–2011

It takes a very special person to fill a cathedral, but on 16 February 2011 well over a thousand people packed Ely Cathedral for a service of thanksgiving for the life of Rex Walford. Relatives, friends, professional colleagues, former students, associates from the worlds of geography, education and drama, and many others gathered to remember this wonderful man. The news of his tragic death in a boating accident on the River Thames, followed by an agonising month's wait until his body was recovered, triggered a wave of shock and disbelief among those who knew him. The service at Ely provided an eloquent confirmation of the way in which Rex had touched so many lives with his remarkable gifts. It also celebrated his zest for life, his energy and commitment, his intellect and scholarship, his infectious good humour, his optimism and his steadfast religious faith.

Rex was born in the north London suburb of Edgware when it was in the throes of inter-war expansion, stimulated by its role as the terminus of the Northern Line. The developing community proved a fertile environment for Rex's childhood and he never lost his fondness for his suburban roots. He would return to the growth of north west London and suburban society for his PhD research topic in retirement. His primary school years coincided with the Second World War and the backdrop of aerial conflict over London must have been exciting for a youngster. Much later, as a Cambridge resident, he relished his proximity to the Imperial War Museum Duxford, attending many air shows to experience again the thrill of Spitfires and Hurricanes in flight.

As the war ended, Rex gained a county scholarship to University College School in Hampstead. He travelled there each day by bus and tube, reinforcing a lifelong commitment to public transport. His house was adjacent to the local Anglican church – another product of the inter-war building boom – and this became the natural focus of his social life, incorporating as it did Bible Class, Scouts, Youth Club and Theatre Group. In 1952 he went up to the London School of Economics on a state scholarship to study for an Economics degree. At the same time he joined the Student Christian Movement (SCM) which he later described as 'the key factor in bringing me to a reasoned and living Christian faith'. Rex carried his faith lightly and was never judgemental, but it provided the central thread to his *raison d'être* and his practical motivation to help others whenever and however he could.

After successfully completing his first degree, Rex studied for his PGCE at Kings College, London, passing with a Distinction. He was then given the opportunity to take a Theology degree at Kings and was awarded his BD after just two years of work. During his student years Rex revealed his flair for multi-tasking. As well as his commitment to the SCM, of which he was the National Chairman 1956–57, he was also moonlighting as a journalist for the *Hendon and Finchley Times*, having begun as a cub reporter in the sixth form. At the age of 24, Rex embarked on his first teaching post at St Mary's secondary modern school in Hendon. The untimely death of the departmental head meant that Rex became Head of Geography on his first day, a challenge to which he rose with typical fortitude and skill. In the early 1960s the burgeoning higher education sector was seeking bright young subject specialists for teacher training. Rex was appointed to a lectureship in Geography and Mathematics at Maria Grey College in Twickenham in 1962, rising to Principal Lecturer in Geography and, later, Senior Tutor over the next 11 years.



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During this period Rex became one of the key players in the development of the 'new' geography, mixing with like-minded individuals who were seeking a modern alternative to the 'capes and bays' tradition. In the broader context of the subject's quantitative revolution, Rex used his personal enthusiasm for games to introduce teaching approaches rooted in role plays and simulations. After observing Rex's innovative work, John Morris, Chief Inspector for Geography, promptly instructed all subject HMIs to investigate it themselves. Rex was also heavily involved in the annual Madingley Seminars, arranged by Richard Chorley and Peter Haggett to disseminate their revolutionary ideas. In 1969 his *Games in Geography* was published, followed in 1972 by *Simulation in the Classroom* (with J.L. Taylor). In early 1970 Rex co-ordinated the first of the Charney Manor conferences – a gathering of young teachers and lecturers at a Quaker retreat in Berkshire which led to the seminal work *New Directions in Geography Teaching*, edited by Rex.

Rex had married Wendy in 1969, the beginning of a loving and supportive partnership that would sustain them both through lives of wide-ranging enterprise and fulfilment. In 1973 Rex moved to the Department of Education at the University of Cambridge to run the Geography PGCE group. Over the next 25 years he would launch the teaching careers of hundreds of young people, nurturing their first forays into the classroom with a potent mix of inspiration, encouragement, practical advice, humour and rigour. It did not take long for the label 'ex-Rex' to become a nationally-recognised quality mark when appointing a new geography teacher. A former HMI recalls a visit to Rex's PGCE group in Cambridge in the mid-1980s:

That day was a model of good practice ... however, what was unusual, and especially memorable, was the number of students who quietly went out of their way to tell me how much they appreciated Rex's enthusiasm, his understanding and skills, his high expectations of them and the personal support he gave them ... they recognised that they were privileged to be taught by him.

A great networker and committee man, Rex worked tirelessly to translate his and others' ideas into action. He had joined the Royal Geographical Society (RGS) when he began teaching and signed up for the Geographical Association (GA) in 1960.

As the emphasis in geographical education shifted from description and the memorisation of facts to enquiry learning, Rex was in the vanguard of those introducing these exciting new methods to schools. He was a vital bridge builder between the higher education sector and schools through his professional activities, his own writing and the editing of several influential textbook series. By the late 1970s Rex was a prominent figure in the GA, chairing the Education Standing Committee for three years before becoming President in 1984. In his presidential year he led a GA national working party on the contribution of geography to a multicultural society. His crusading zeal constantly energised the promotion of geography as a vital element in a young person's education. Nevertheless, he always remembered that learning should be fun and, combining this with a fervent belief in the need for strong factual knowledge in geography, he instigated the Worldwide Quiz in 1984. As secretary of its organising committee and indefatigable main question setter, Rex was the driving force behind the Quiz for the next ten years, during which time it is estimated that over 15,000 contestants took part in schools throughout the UK. Restless as ever, he immediately began to plan two ground-breaking new initiatives for the GA: Geography Action Week and Land Use UK. The latter epitomised Rex's love of maps and mapping, harking back to the pioneering land use surveys conducted by Dudley Stamp in the 1930s and Alice Coleman 30 years later. Both Rex's projects came to fruition in 1996, establishing a template for future annual Action Weeks and inspiring a second national survey by schools in the shape of Coastline 2000.

In 1988 Rex's persuasive advocacy of the educational benefits of geography led to his appointment to the National Working Group charged with writing the National Curriculum for Geography in Schools. This controversial task followed a difficult path, but Rex's positive outlook and diplomacy contributed significantly to its successful conclusion. At the same time, Rex had begun serving on the Council of the RGS-IBG, having been a member of its Education Committee since 1981. In 1990 he received the Back Award from the RGS-IBG 'for contributions to geographical education' and went on to be a Vice-President, 1993–96. He believed that all branches of the geography community should be brought together for the future health of the subject and was

instrumental in the formation of the Council of British Geography (COBRIG) in 1987, which he chaired for its first five years.

The 1990s was a decade of intense activity for Rex on numerous fronts. As well as his multitudinous outside commitments, he became Acting Head and later Head of the Department of Education at Cambridge University, helping to guide its transformation into the Faculty of Education. He had been made a Fellow of Wolfson College in 1988 and also acted as Director of Studies at Emanuel and King's Colleges. In 1999 he left the Department of Education, having been awarded a Pilkington Prize by the University for 'excellence in teaching' in 1998. In the same year he was granted Honorary Membership of the GA, after serving as a Trustee since 1992. He became an Emeritus Fellow of Wolfson College in 1999. The apex of his official recognition came in 2000 when he received the Order of the British Empire from HM The Queen 'for distinguished contributions to geographical scholarship'. Each honour was graciously accepted with the modesty that characterised Rex's attitude to his many achievements. He simply felt a responsibility to make the most of his talents.

Any concept of retirement was impatiently brushed aside. As the new millennium dawned Rex was putting the finishing touches to his scholarly opus *Geography in British Schools, 1850–2000* (published in 2001) and was well advanced on research for his PhD at Anglia-Ruskin University. His thesis was a journey back to his north west London origins, combining the geographical spread of the great metropolis with the role of the church in creating a focus for faith and community. Following the completion of his doctorate in 2003, Rex worked long and hard to adapt his thesis for publication – a project that was realised in 2007 with the release of his book *The Growth of 'New London' in Suburban Middlesex (1916–1945) and the Response of the Church of England*. Altogether Rex was responsible for more than 30 publications, spanning geography, education, theatre and religion, as well as contributing over 100 chapters and articles to books, journals, magazines and newspapers. He also produced 50 classroom games and simulations and authored a score of schools' radio and television programmes. His written legacy is rich and encompasses a startlingly broad range of topics, though one would expect no less of such a renaissance man.

There were so many facets to Rex that, no matter how well you knew him, he was always capable of springing a surprise. His exploits in the world of amateur drama – as director, producer, author and adjudicator – deserve a full tribute of their own. He was a gifted pianist, with a deep affection for musical theatre and the swing music of his youth. Rex performed as piano accompanist to soprano Gabrielle Bell in delightful, intimate presentations of classic songs. Rex and Gabrielle recorded two CDs as well as collaborating on some of the many weekend courses that Rex organised for the Cambridge Board of Continuing Education at Madingley Hall. Sport provided another of Rex's consuming interests, as a frequent player in his younger years and avid spectator throughout adulthood. Motorbike enthusiast and owner, Dinky toy collector, Mastermind semi-finalist, public speaker, traveller: there was no end to the ways in which he entertained himself and those around him. What everyone appreciates is the immense generosity with which he gave his time, energy, wisdom and kindness to thousands of others and how grateful we are for an exceptional life lived to the full. We remember him as a champion of geography and it is fitting to close with Rex's personal philosophy of the subject:

I remain convinced of geography's potency to teach both a stewardship of the physical world and an understanding of the need for harmony in the human world and of its great value in a properly humane education.

Mike Morrish

Tributes to Rex can be read on the GA website. Go to www.geography.org.uk/news/rexwalford