

Recollections of Professor Tim Atkinson

Alistair has been a part of my professional landscape for so long that it is hard to believe that he is no longer. I read his monograph on Poole's Cavern while I was a PhD student at Bristol. It had a big influence on me and on my work. For a while there were several of us at Bristol all doing much the same things as Alistair had, because he had shown the way. I have managed to keep up an interest in the chemistry of karst waters ever since, despite multiple distractions, and I recognise the durability of some of the concepts that Alistair introduced in my own recent work, published only a few years ago. It was also while I was doing my PhD that I first met him in person, when he helped to lead a field meeting based in Hull. I think I was rather a bumptious student at the time, but that didn't seem to put him off as he was as enthusiastic with me as he was with my more modest fellow-students. He did say something about "Bristol Bounce" though, perhaps the gentlest of admonishments.

It was not until his move to Norwich and his work on the Nirex projects with Keith Clayton that I got to know Alistair a little better. By then he had published his geomorphology book and his knowledge was encyclopaedic. For much of the time he worked alone and there was an amusing story about him being inspected by a Quality Assurance person from the nuclear industry - all Nirex projects had to have independent Quality Assurance. The method was to follow the worker around while they worked, asking questions about what they were doing and why they were doing it. As most of Alistair's work was library based, he arranged to meet The Inspector in the UEA Library. When the questions started, Alistair was assembling materials for that morning's perusal of published sources and compilation of relevant information about long-term landform changes - not exactly the day-to-day stuff of quality work in the nuclear industry but highly relevant to the hundred-thousand year timescale of nuclear waste disposal.

Inspector "What are you doing?" was the first question.
Alistair "I'm taking a geomorphology journal down off the shelves,"
Inspector "Why are you doing that?"
Alistair "Because I need to read it."
Inspector "Why is it relevant?"
Alistair "I won't know until I have read it"
Inspector "But surely if it isn't relevant you won't need to read it and could do something else"
Alistair "I told you, I won't know until I have read it."

Pause

Inspector "When will you have decided whether it is relevant or not?"
Alistair "Once I have read it all. It's quite long."

Another pause

Inspector "When will that be?"
Alistair "When you have gone away and left me to read it in peace."

I don't think the QA man had met anyone quite like Alistair before, and he certainly hadn't encountered the methodology of exhaustive study of the literature. The reports Alistair produced based on all that reading were exemplary summaries and I still have a full set of them on my shelves. (*Ironically, we seem no nearer to a long-term nuclear waste repository being built than we were almost thirty years ago when the encounter with the QA man took place*). I believe he recognised the inappropriateness of his task and gave Alistair a good report in the end.

Alistair was a great enthusiast for geomorphology and its applications and I believe he brought the same enthusiasm to everything he did. He opened my eyes to several things once the Nirex years were over, especially in his account of his work with archaeologists in trying to imagine how ancient peoples would have seen the landscapes in which their remains and artefacts now lie. He was a life force and even for someone like me who did not know him well, the force was palpable - a force for good.

With best wishes and condolences at Alistair's passing,
Professor Tim Atkinson