

Obituary: Benjamin Harding Browne (1946-2019)



Dr Ben Browne joined the Geological Society of Glasgow in Session 129 (1986-1987). Over a period of almost thirty-three years he provided an enormous contribution and became a highly respected and valued member. His knowledge and understanding of geology were immense and he continually enhanced these by attending the University of Glasgow's Open Studies classes on many aspects of geology and by his own personal investigations and extensive reading.

Ben was born in Hereford and grew up in Worcester where he received his first taste of geology. His mother had her own collection of minerals and Ben spent much of his youth walking and climbing among the varied and fascinating rocks of the Malvern Hills. He attended University College London where he gained a degree and doctorate in mathematics, and where he subsequently took up a post teaching maths. He would meet Sudi, later his wife, while teaching maths with the OU. He also started teaching judo, eventually forming a small close group of enthusiasts. Calling themselves the "Universal Artists", UA, they played judo in university clubs in England, competed in the Eindhoven international students' tournaments and attended the annual British open judo championships at Crystal Palace – to watch, not to participate! They labelled their judo UA meetings as "Conventions" and they have continued to the present – almost 50 years later.

After some years Ben decided to study medicine but for this he needed A Level Chemistry and Biology. He achieved this in one year – a remarkable feat! Ben moved to Sheffield where he gained his medical doctorate and specialised in ophthalmology. As a result his friends thereafter referred to him as "Big Ben the Double Doctor"! Ben had a gold-plated tea pot in which he infused Earl Grey – a novelty at that time in the 1980s. He also had his own local butcher, baker (and probably even candlestick-maker!!). He was active in the Sheffield University Judo Club, and in the 1990s a "UA Convention" was held in Stratford-upon-Avon to celebrate a 50th birthday. He is particularly remembered for "holding himself out horizontally" from a lamp-post outside the group's hotel, thus exhibiting his tremendous physical strength.

After Sheffield, the family lived in Summertown, Oxford while later, in 1986, they moved to Glasgow where Ben had acquired a position at the Royal Infirmary and where, in the course of time, he became a Consultant in Ophthalmology. Ben was renowned for his caring and conscientious manner: his great strength was that he always saw his patients as “people” first and “patients” second, and took a very personal interest in them. Part of his remit was the training of new doctors. In this he was his usual meticulous and patient self, such that his trainees became very well qualified and proficient. Ben was very astute and had a wry and entertaining sense of humour – considering the vagaries of the NHS he would say that “the NHS management is like the weather in Scotland. There is no point in complaining, you can’t change it. You just have to be prepared and make the most of the occasional sunny day”!

Ben joined the Oban Mountaineering Club in 1987. His numerous climbing ventures included all 282 Scottish Munros (individual mountains over 3,000 feet) – he was one of only nine members of the club, over a period of about 40 years, to do so. For this he received the “Golden Nut Award”. This does not refer to the character of the climber – a nut is a piece of climbing equipment used to secure ropes! At the same time he accumulated a detailed knowledge of Scotland and of its topography, and developed a deep love for the Scottish mountains. Ben had a very enquiring mind, constantly observing and asking questions about all the plants, trees and environment. He regularly climbed with a friend who had a background in ecology and forestry. This led to a number of stops along the way “Vaughan, this looks like a good one” comes a voice from down in the heather or from behind a boulder. “What’s happening with these trees here do you think?” This inquisitive nature attracted him to a wide variety of interests. No matter what was the new subject, Ben was soon deeply involved, always with extra input freely given, and all part of a very generous character. Lately he successfully combined two of these interests, water-colour painting and wild flowers, by attending classes in the latter at Edinburgh Botanic Gardens; his finished paintings are simply exquisite. Ben’s hand-writing was also exquisite, beautifully crafted and instantly recognisable.

Ben retained the judo skills of falling down and could convert a tripping stumble into an instant roll and a bounce back up – a neat trick indeed. Typically he would be walking over rough hilly ground chatting away, but also trimming his finger nails with clippers – the multi-tasking mountaineer. He became club treasurer and deservedly one of only two honorary members of Oban MC. He was truly a polymath, and the finest of companions.

On joining the Geological Society of Glasgow in 1986 Ben, as ever, quickly became totally involved. He regularly attended its monthly lectures given by experts in their field; not only was he able to converse in depth with these experts on a wide range of topics, he also gave his own talks and provided displays. These included the geology of Al Jabal al Akhdar (Green Mountains) of Oman in 2009 and a mid-Atlantic walk in Iceland in 2012. He became a regular contributor to the proceedings of the society, reporting not just on its finances, but also on the many field trips in which he took part. Among these were Ardnamurchan, Argyll, Islay, NW Highlands, Ben Lawers and Ben Lui, Stonehaven, Lochaber, Raasay and the Fife Coastal Walk. Ben also took part in field trips abroad, organised by the tutor of his Open Studies classes, to France, Italy, Spain, the Rocky Mountains of Canada and the Grand Canyon Arizona. His wife Sudi, also a member of GSG, accompanied him on many occasions. Ben led a field trip with another society member to Schiehallion and Strath Fionan. For this he studied the area intensively, visiting it three times on reconnaissance before the “day”. This enabled him to deliver a detailed introduction to a very complex geological area, explaining all its intricacies with great erudition *and* he was able to maintain this for the whole day. Ben took his geology very seriously and was always well organised with maps, compass, torch and, most usefully, his Swiss army knife, without which it would have been sometimes difficult to finish the day properly with a glass of wine. He was extremely observant and often noticed the significant features of an exposure long before anyone else. On more than one occasion he would continue his geological musings in strong winds and heavy rain when most of the others had found shelter.

Ben was treasurer of the society for six years in the 1990s, co-auditor from 1999 until 2007, a vice president from 2012 until 2014, and then treasurer again from 2013 until 2018. He was also recently elected an honorary member of the society in recognition of his contribution to its objectives and his distinction in service. Last but not least, he took charge of organising the tea and biscuits at the end of the monthly meetings! Ben was a very thoughtful and considerate person, with always a helping hand for others. He cared very much for the members of the society, having been involved in all its aspects for so many years. Ben passed away peacefully on 25th May 2019 after a short illness. He will be greatly missed by us all. Ben is survived by his wife Sudi, son Tristram, daughter Claire and grandchildren.

Maggie Donnelly, Residential Excursions Secretary, Geological Society of Glasgow

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