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Obituary

KEITH SUTTON 1943–2018

By Ian Douglas, with advice and assistance from
Michael Bradford, Rob Hodgson and Wilfred Theakstone.

Keith Sutton lived as a child in Chorlton–cum–Hardy where he attended Chorlton Grammar School. His route by bicycle to school involved crossing the railway bridge and dashing down a narrow passage parallel to the railway tracks to reach Corkland Road. His great sporting activity was swimming, particularly at the baths on Manchester Road. He made lifelong friends at school, some of whom went with him to university in London. He joined the distinguished geography department at University College London (UCL), where he had a good reputation among his fellow students. One of them, Jack Hobbs, who became a geographer at the University of New England in northern New South Wales would always ask visitors from the UK about Keith and then reminisce a little about their days at UCL.

Keith was taught by some fine historical geographers at UCL, particularly the renowned Professors Clifford Darby and, perhaps, most especially, his postgraduate mentor Hugh Prince, who encouraged Keith and others to undertake research into the historical geography of 19th-century France. Keith Sutton investigated geographical change in the Sologne, an ill-drained area of 500,000 hectares of heaths and forests south of Orleans. His work on the reclamation of unused heath and uncultivated land in this former “paradise for hunters and fishermen” was the subject of his MA thesis. At that time he also began his life-long interest in both North Africa and in government policies for resettlement and planned agriculture, his first paper on Algeria being published in 1969.

He spent a short period on the geography staff at Bedford College, London (now part of Royal Holloway at Egham), working with influential third world geographers such as Alan Mountjoy. His work on Algeria continued while he also published more work on the Sologne. From 1969, Keith spent the remainder of his working life at Manchester University and was totally professional in all his teaching, administration and research. Students at all levels greatly



Keith Sutton engaged in fieldwork in 2018.

valued Keith’s generous help and encouragement on both academic and personal matters. He had a strong sense of commitment to all that he did. His equable temperament and meticulous attention to detail made him an excellent administrator, especially when undertaking tasks that could be very stressful, such as examinations secretary. His lecture courses (including third-year options on North Africa, and Rural Settlement Studies) were always popular: well-prepared, organised and full of interesting ideas backed by factual evidence.

Most of his academic colleagues in Manchester will remember Keith as the enthusiastic stalwart of many a field course, both in the UK (for example, North Wales, Ribblesdale, and a major second-year course to Torquay in the 1970s) and overseas (notably France and SE Spain from the 1980s). His evident *joie de vivre* on such occasions owed much to his ability to understand the interactions between the physical and cultural geography of the landscapes he visited and then be able to impart that knowledge to undergraduates. In this he showed his indebtedness to his training in historical geography at UCL. But every visit he made was also a chance to enjoy the company and leisure it afforded, and never more so than the annual pre-session field trip for the new first year students to Newlands valley near Keswick. His ability to ascend Cat Bells more quickly than the 18-year-olds was legendary.

After the cuts to University spending in 1981, the School of Geography decided to give all second-year students the opportunity to take an overseas field course. Keith helped to initiate one to the Ardeche Gorge in France, showing his two colleagues how to produce a detailed field course guidebook and willingly leading trips from the camp site to analyse the rural landscapes of south-eastern France. He subsequently joined the team running the SE Spain field course, becoming fully conversant with the evolution of the landscapes in that region. For several years, he both organised and led it. He was an excellent leader and, through the field courses, many departmental students were able to visit and to admire the Alhambra, a World Heritage site. Keith always seemed to get the group special admission, no matter how long the queues. His colleagues on the team, Brian Kear, David Tout, Julia McMorrow, David Shimwell and Wilfred Theakstone all acknowledged how they benefited from Keith's organisational skills in South East Spain.

These field trips are never without some interesting incidents. Manchester geographer, Rob Hodgson, describes adventures in County Durham in 1984 during the year-long miners' strike:

"The highways and especially byways of Durham were soon the scene of a serious game of cat and mouse between flying pickets keen to ensure that mines stayed closed, strike breakers, often surreptitiously brought in by car, van or minibus from other coalfields, and the local constabulary trying to keep the peace by monitoring the situation, often by stopping traffic or diverting it. Into this heady mix drove Keith with a minibus load of students, whose motives were not immediately apparent and were viewed with suspicion on all sides. There were several stoppages, a good deal of questioning (often in a language in need of interpretation) and

requests to go elsewhere. The saving grace was Keith's cool, calm, common sense approach to diffusing the situation, aided no doubt by his evident socialist leanings; and, of course, the fact that on close inspection the minibus was seen to contain several female students as well as a male from West Africa!"

Keith was active in the social life and sporting activities of the Geography Department becoming the captain of the departmental staff cricket team and their unbeaten 5-a-side soccer team. In the 1970s, he played football against the geography undergraduates and participated in several cricket matches against the geographers at Keele. More significantly perhaps he was a useful batsman for the university staff team in which he played alongside geography colleagues Rob Hodgson and John Hamshere.

Keith had several Ph.D. students from North Africa and Malaysia, all working on aspects of land use change and the impacts of government policies. He continued to encourage and support them as they developed their careers after completing their Ph.D. theses. His Ph.D. students had great respect for Keith and were enormously grateful for the way he guided them through the research and writing processes. One of them, Amriah Buang, became a Professor at the National University of Malaysia. Another Malaysian, Jennifer Lim, came from Sabah and worked with Keith on a research project about land transformation. She wrote *"I always remember him with fondness and as my Ph.D. supervisor he never failed to give his time whenever I needed his guidance. He was ever so patient and supportive throughout my studies"*.

Keith was one of the best-informed UK geographers working on North Africa, becoming one of the few British geographers to really understand the evolving land use and population changes in North Africa, especially Algeria. His publications ranged from analyses of demographic change, to the influence of the centrally planned economy, settlement, the oil industry, wine production, and environmental degradation. He was regularly called upon to review books on the region and on Third World geography generally. He supported regionally oriented journals, such as the Maghreb Review and the Journal of North African Studies, but his work also appeared in such renowned journals as the Geographical Review and the Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers.

The historic imprint of people from North Africa on South East Spain, where he led student fieldwork, fascinated him and he wrote two papers about the qanats, gently sloping underground channels built to transport water from an aquifer or water well to the surface for irrigation and drinking, that were constructed near Almeria during the centuries the Moors ruled southern Spain. The

Muslims inherited the qanat technology from the Persians and brought it westwards to North Africa and across the Mediterranean to Sicily and Spain.

Keith was a willing participant in major research programmes. One of these involved examining settlement changes in Malaysian Borneo, where he worked closely with both Manchester colleagues and members of the then Centre for South-East Asian studies at Hull. He was fascinated by the government land settlement schemes in Malaysia which operated under a somewhat different political regime from that which he had studied in Algeria. Here again he collaborated with former Ph.D. students, encouraging them to write and publish.

After much collaboration with Algerians Ahmed Aghrout and Zaimeche Salah, further fieldwork in the country became difficult and Keith began examining planning and urban population change in Cairo with his Egyptian colleague, Wael Salah Fahmi. They made highly significant contributions to the study of waste manage-

ment by the Zabaleen minority people in the city. His sharp perception of the important issues and his willingness to learn from local people make this set of papers particularly significant. After his retirement, Keith continued to collaborate with Wael Salah Fahmi from Cairo, writing joint papers on Cairo. His support of, and friendship with, North African scholars is his greatest contribution internationally.

In recent years, Keith has been a trustee of the Manchester Geographical Society, writing about Chorlton for the recent book *Manchester Geographies* and advising on the cataloguing of the Society's collections. It was a wonderful experience to walk around Chorlton with him and to learn about what it was like when he was at school there. He made a unique and enthusiastic contribution to geography. He was an excellent teacher, supervisor and colleague. He has left us too soon, but our memories of times in his company and the contributions he made to geography, the University of Manchester and the Manchester Geographical Society will live on.

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