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Russell Coope, Honorary Professor of Quaternary Science, dies aged 82

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Russell Coope, Honorary Professor of Quaternary Science, and Birmingham staff member (1955-1993), internationally famous for his work on reconstructing climate from fossil beetles, died on 28th November, aged 82.

Russell began his career at Birmingham as a research fellow intent on working on corals in the geological record, when he made a chance discovery of fossil beetle remains in an organic layer recovered from the Chelford sand quarry in Cheshire. His senior colleague was Professor Fred Shotton FRS, who reportedly said "don't be silly, Russell, they are modern ones that have just crawled in there to die!". His first paper was on these finds in the Proceedings of the Royal Society in 1959, followed by famous discoveries at Upton Warren in Worcestershire. The faunas in deposits of different ages amazingly contained beetles from both warm periods (with modern southern European species) and cold periods (found today only in Siberia!). And so, assisted for some years by Museum curator Peter Osborne, and in the context of the department's radiocarbon dating laboratory, he set about his life's work with great vigour, famously demonstrating extraodinarily rapid rises in temperature in the late glacial period, a conclusion reinvented much later by the famous Greenland ice core records.

Russell continued to publish extremely actively after he had retired, forming an additional link with Royal Holloway where he assisted in teaching on the Quaternary Science MSc, and establishing a sample processing laboratory in his home near Pitlochry in Scotland. As recently as 2010 he was co-author of the Nature paper reporting the discovery of the oldest human artefacts in Britain, over three-quarters of a million years old.

Russell was a larger-than-life character with an enormous fund of stories (see photos) and with a penchant for adventures with the animal kingdom (he bred Scottish wild cats in his back garden in Belbroughton and persuaded ospreys to nest on his land in Scotland). In this way and many others, Russell received much-needed support from his GP wife Beryl. He was an extraordinary lecturer, a party-piece being the cause of the demise of the Irish elk, complete with horned demonstration. One year, first-year students in palaeontology found their classes being transferred to the field to investigate the newly discovered Shropshire mammoth. He also enthusiastically promulgated evolutionary theory to those same first years, along with the well-known biologist Jack Cohen. Ironically Quaternary fossil beetles show no sign of evolution at all, a feature Russell attributed to their flexibility in the face of environmental change as they migrated across Europe as the ice sheets waxed and waned.

Russell really was extraordinary - he was revered by generations of staff and students in Birmingham, and also by the eclectic group of geographers, geologists, archaeologists, zoologists and others that make up the Quaternary Research Association, of which he was a founding member.

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