

Tribute to John Lambert

John Lambert, who died in May 2001, had been associated with the Newcastle University College and the University of Newcastle for almost half a century. He was appointed to a Lectureship in Mathematics in the early days of the University College. An early interest in computing led him forward to his eventual appointment as the University's Foundation Director of Computing Services. His interests and his efforts ranged across the spectrum of university life and his contributions were many and varied.

Many of his contemporaries first knew John as a cheerful voice on radio. He was a member of John Dease's team of Quiz Kids, who engaged in a high-grade general knowledge program for Radio 2GB. We others, up and down the state, pitted our wits against theirs and usually had to give them best. John's quick wits, confidence, and wide range of knowledge were apparent then and were to remain his hallmark.

Others can say more of his contributions to the life of the young university. His connection with what was later to become the Centre for Literary and Linguistic Computing began in August 1979 when I sought his advice on the use of computer-assistance in my research on Jane Austen's language. John took an immediate and enthusiastic interest and was able, as always, to suggest the latest software for the task.

Over the next decade, as the work advanced from rudimentary trials to widespread international recognition, John was always available when help was needed and was never impatient with our many blunders. He was generous in his help for our research assistant and our keyboard operators. He pointed us in the right direction in the appointment of our first two part-time programmers and, after his retirement from the Computing Service, himself became the third of them.

Throughout the nineties, he refined and added to our growing suite of programs for the VMS-Vax and then, in his last two years or so, helped us to forestall the replacement of the Vax by PCs. His new suite of LILAC programs (LIterature, LAnguage, Computing) existed as a set of advanced prototypes at the time of his unexpected death. He always insisted that, as a computer programmer, he was no more than a tradesman. These fast, accurate, and user-friendly programs are a worthy memorial to a man of many gifts and great modesty.

On the technical side, he had an astonishing capacity for keeping up to date across the growing range of computational possibilities and a youthful willingness to attempt something entirely new. On the personal side, we will always be the poorer without his cheerful company and his quick grasp of a line of thought, whether it bore on our work or on the world at large.

John Burrows