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## Obituary

# Geoffrey Ford, 1942–2011

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University of Bristol*

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*Director of Library Services,  
University of the West of England (retired)*

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Geoffrey Ford, who died in August 2011, was a distinguished librarian with an international reputation. His career included both academic roles and the practical management of university libraries, and took him to the universities of Durham, Lancaster (where he met his wife Jill), Sheffield, Southampton and Bristol. He had a long association with Bristol University Library in the role of University Librarian, and later as Director of Information Services, between 1990 and 2002.

Geoffrey also served as a consultant on a wide range of bodies including the Office for Scientific and Technical Information, The British Library and the University Grants Committee. In 1973 he was awarded the Robinson medal by the Library Association. He was on the editorial board of three academic journals and held a range of positions with SCONUL, culminating as its Chair from 1998 to 2000. Geoffrey was also influential in the area of statistics and performance measurement and held an international role in setting standards for all libraries.

It was a real privilege to have Geoffrey as a boss and a friend, and we shall very much miss his company, his sense of humour and his enthusiasm for life.



*The 2002 Leicester University team: Leicester University Press Release, March 2002*

Geoffrey was a member of the Leicester University team who won the first series of University challenge in 1962. The team reunited several times to take part in anniversary editions of the programme. Interviewed in 2002, Geoffrey said that what he valued most from this experience was 'having the confidence to perform under pressure and in front of an audience'.

### A PERSONAL REMEMBRANCE

*Mike Heery*

I first met Geoffrey 21 years ago. We were both newly appointed as head librarians, he to the University of Bristol and I to the University of the West of England. I invited him to visit me and I remember the day very well, as it was red nose day and the library staff were all dressed as either vicars or tarts. Geoffrey was, typically, too polite to say what he thought of us all. But despite this inauspicious start he and I went on to become close friends.

I'd just like to say something about Geoffrey's name. I always called him Geoffrey, but others called him Geoff. However, there is a mystery here, in that his full name is M. Geoffrey Ford. I never knew what the 'M' stood for and Geoffrey seemed to keep quiet about it. His answer to those who asked was simple: 'His mother was happy with a Ford but his father always wanted an MG!' Another fanciful tale was that the vicar who christened him momentarily forgot his name until he finally blurted out, 'I name this child... ummm... Geoffrey.'

Geoffrey was a distinguished librarian with an international reputation and his career was very important to him. He was rightly proud of his achievements. He was deputy librarian at Southampton, where his boss Bernard Naylor described Geoffrey as '... a constant stimulus, a source of fresh ideas, always presented vigorously and so often in an entertaining way'. Geoffrey had a very long association with Bristol University Library, where he introduced many changes, including a programme of modernisation, and he was close to many staff including Peter King, Jennifer Schurr, Cathryn Gallacher and Derek Pretty.

In 1995 Geoffrey was instrumental in setting up the MSc in Library and Information Management at the University of Bristol and he taught on the course for many years. This was the first such course in the south-west of England and there were some present at his

memorial service who owed their careers to the MSc.

Geoffrey was also famed for his handwriting which, despite my many attempts, I never managed to decipher. Once I offered to take over a course he was teaching and I was delighted when he gave me all his notes, only to discover to my horror that they were all hand-written. Geoffrey also maintained the most untidy office I have ever seen. As university librarian he had a very large office, every inch of which was piled high with papers and books, reflecting his wide interests and the capacity of his mind, but which made a visit to see him rather tricky. I remember that his secretary insisted on keeping clear a couple of square feet of floor space on which to place the coffee cups of visitors.

Geoffrey retired in 2002 after being diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. I was very impressed by the way in which he dealt with his illness. He was always optimistic and cheerful and once told me that he greatly admired his own father's attitude to living with the effects of polio and that he was keen to follow his example. Even in the week before he died Geoffrey continued to show remarkable courage, organising his affairs right up until the end. Geoffrey's positive message was such that, for the benefit of other people with Parkinson's, the NHS published his account of how he approached his illness. The following are two extracts from that account:

As someone who took great pride in doing the best they could for their career, I made the decision that the best option was for me to take early retirement at 60 before I felt I wasn't able to do my job properly any more.

I then enrolled on a creative writing course not only to give my week structure but to help me combat the loss of confidence that comes with this debilitating disease. I had never done anything like this before but actually thoroughly enjoyed learning something new. I found it very therapeutic and after gaining a diploma, I now meet a group of my poetry colleagues in the pub where we can share our latest work.

Geoffrey concluded his NHS article with the following words: 'Parkinson's affects everyone differently, but I've always been determined to cope the best way I can. Even setting out to walk at least a mile a day has been beneficial and together with the support of my wife I'm keen to do everything I can to aid my own self care.' And

I can of course confirm that Geoffrey was always very appreciative of the marvellous support he got from Jill. In one of his poems he wrote 'I have been lucky in love and marriage.'

Geoffrey was also very close to his sister Vivien, his nieces Rachel, Georgina and Diana and to his wider family, who will all miss him greatly. And it would be remiss of me not to mention the pleasure Geoffrey got from his dog, Monty.

In addition to honouring Geoffrey's distinguished career and his tremendous spirit in the face of illness, I would also like to pay tribute to him as a very good friend. He and I often met for lunch or coffee. In fact we attempted to drink coffee in every café on the Gloucester Road, which is quite a challenge as new ones keep opening all the time. I really enjoyed those times. Geoffrey could make interesting conversation about almost anything. We would discuss politics, in a way that left us still friends. We shared interests in the theatre, books, concerts and jazz. Like Philip Larkin, another librarian turned poet, Geoffrey loved the music of Louis Armstrong, Bix Beiderbecke and Humphrey Lyttleton. His collection of books meant that he had a large library at home as well as at work. Jill tells me that he had 80 feet of shelving solely on the works of Rudyard Kipling. And Geoffrey had yet more interests, of which I knew little, such as railways and stamps, and he was recently the President of Bristol Philatelic Society.

Geoffrey often talked about travel and holidays. He and Jill made frequent trips in both the UK and abroad. In fact this year they had holidays in Scotland and Yorkshire, as well as in the Lake District, which was a special favourite. Indeed, Geoffrey was planning another trip there for September.

It has been a real privilege for me to have Geoffrey as a friend. I will badly miss his company, his sense of humour and his enthusiasm for eating out. You will have your own memories and stories to tell. We are all lucky to have known Geoffrey and he will live on in our hearts.