

Peter woodward obituary

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OBITUARY



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Peter Woodward, a key figure in UK religious education, especially through his involvement in the Shap Working Party, died recently, aged 86. This obituary is written by Professor Brian Gates.

Throughout the 50 years since April 1969, the Shap Working Party strove to broaden the range and depth of education by reference to the world's religious traditions (Jackson 2019). It did so by tuning into the processes of teacher education, in both its initial and continuing forms, and providing help to overcome the related knowledge deficit. Peter Woodward, the last survivor of those present at that very first conference gathering (at Shap Wells Hotel in Cumbria), has died at the age of 86. Without hint of self-promotion, he had served as Treasurer (1969–71), Secretary (1972–73 and 2016–19), Chair (1978–80), Mailing and Journal Editor (1969–77), and Calendar Editor (1969–75, 1995–99 and 2009–19).

In common with others unremunerated for working with Shap, it was affordable because it complemented the focus of their full-time professional employment. For Peter, this was initially at Borough Road College in Isleworth (subsequently becoming West London Institute of Higher Education, later still Brunel University) where for 5 years (1968–73), he was a lecturer in the Divinity Department (later Religious Studies). Howard Marratt, his departmental head, gave him the task in 1968 of setting up a 'clearing house' for information on the study and teaching of world religions. The subsequent outcome became staple features of the Shap annual mailing: bibliographies on individual religions and on related primary and secondary school resources, plus a calendar of festivals. Peter edited this from its outset, including a fully extended, 140-page, version in 1972: *Education for a Multi-Cultural Society. World Religions: Aids for Teachers*. It was published for Shap by the government's Community Relations Commission – testimony to the combination nationally of academic subject interests and those of increasing social diversity.

Another sphere in which Shap's vision had potential for complementary expression was that of schools inspector/adviser. In 1973 Peter was appointed to Birmingham Local Education Authority (LEA) as general inspector of schools with responsibility for Religious Education. There was an arena within which to make a direct impact on the ground: need and opportunity combined in the 1975 publication of the first local Agreed Syllabus for RE in England and Wales which was inclusive in its attention to the diverse religious starting points that children brought into school – and went on to stretch their own and teachers' horizons. Peter was a central contributor. He helped with the final stages of the production and publication of the syllabus and supporting materials. Thereafter, it was his responsibility to facilitate its implementation in over 500 primary and secondary schools, most of which were without specialist expertise. When a survey was carried out some three years later, the degree to which the new approach was being adopted both surprised and delighted the Birmingham Standing Advisory Council for RE.

During its first 20 years, in addition to its annual mailing, Shap was best known for some of its members' publications and its national 'in-service training' conferences – Southern Shap, North West Shap, South Coast Shap and York Shap. There were also local conferences, and Peter organised many of these for the benefit of Birmingham schools. He drew on his national contacts for input and no less on local talent: he was very keen to involve teachers on these courses in sharing their own good practice. He also organised two Shap-shaped overseas courses for his teachers, one to Israel and the other to Egypt.

Cecil Knight, a senior LEA colleague, remembers him thus: 'In addition to initiating training, Peter had tirelessly visited schools, supporting and persuading headteachers and identifying imaginative and

enterprising colleagues in all sectors to become leaders and influencers, opening up practical visions of what could and should be achieved within the context of RE. Woven into every element of the handbook was the desire not merely to explore the expressions of religions and other stances for living but to encourage pupils at all levels and stages to reflect on what this or that way of living might mean for them personally – approaches taken for granted now but certainly not then. Peter's success in Birmingham was rooted both in his expertise and his personal qualities. He was a good strategic thinker and a tireless and meticulous planner, whilst being blessed with gifts and graces which engaged colleagues to support and work with him. He was a good pastor: he readily recognised and gave credit for effort and quality work, and he brought humour and kindness to all his relationships and endeavours'.

In 1986, now in his early fifties, after 13 years in his Birmingham role and faced with LEA reorganisation, Peter resigned and for the next 10 years redeployed his RE energies differently, but yet shapfully. He continued his examination work as Chief Examiner for the Associated Exam Board's Ordinary and Advanced Level Multi-Faith Syllabus, as also his advisory work for West Midlands-based Central Television with two of their schools' visually rich series *Believe It or Not* and *What's It Like to Be ... ?* with location work beyond the UK as well as the Birmingham area. He then took on an ethnographic researcher role with the ESRC-funded Religious Education and Community Project at Warwick University, recording interviews and gathering material on Jewish and Muslim children. Alongside this, he contributed to a church schools RE project within Coventry Diocese. Finally, he took up positions in Cambridge. Initially, this was as a Senior Lecturer at Homerton College teaching World Religions on the four-year BEd degree, which provided concurrent education and training in Religious Studies and School Experience and then became the one-year PGCE RE Secondary Tutor there. Feedback from students at the time was highly appreciative of both the substance and enthusiasm of his teaching and the individual help he gave them.

Formal retirement in 1997 brought major changes, especially a relocation with his wife Pat – herself a renowned Birmingham primary school head teacher – to Menorca. There his love of sailing became a ready expression of their continuing enjoyment of an active sporting, dog-loving, social life. Shap engagement remained constant, however. It remained so throughout their time there and for the further 5 years after their return to England, most especially with the Calendar. At a celebratory Jubilee Conference in April 2019, back at the Shap Wells Hotel, our starting point, in Peter's presence, the Working Party agreed to disband. One enabling feature of its operation will continue – that of the Calendar, replete with monthly photographs as well as wall chart. For Peter that was Shap's working priority until just weeks before his death. It is now for equally self-effacing others to draw attention to the special times in the year when faith communities within the UK and across the world feast and fast their deepest identities.

Selected writings

For full flavour of Peter's overall approach:

'World religions: practical considerations – an allegory' in Ninian Smart & Donald Horder (eds) *New Movements in Religious Education* (Temple Smith, 1975) pp. 204–18. (Both Ninian and Donald were former Chairs of Shap) and 'Multi-faith teaching in creative classrooms in Robert Jackson (ed) *Approaching World Religions* (John Murray, 1982) pp. 36–52.

For his Warwick-based research activities:

'The Jewishness of Jews: What the Textbooks Don't Tell You', in *Resource*, 14:1 1991, pp. 5–7.

(with Robert Jackson) 'RE and Community Project: An Outline of an Ethnographic Study of the Religious Nurture of Jewish Children in an English City', *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies*, 7:1 (1993) pp.153–160.

For articles in Annual Shap Mailing and Journal (these along with all his other ones are slowly but freely downloadable from Shap's website <http://www.shapcalendar.org.uk>):

RE How Far Can I Teach Your Religion? A Conference Report (1979).

Various Sacred Writings? Scriptures? Holy Books? (1984).

RE – Syllabuses Teacher Education and the SCAA model syllabuses (1995).


Christian Millennial Meditations (1999).

For illustration of some of the complexities of Shap Calendar production, see Peter's editorial text for the 40th edition in 2010, see:

http://www.shapcalendar.org.uk/downloads/calendar_editorials_1972-2018.pdf pp 81–7.

Reference

Jackson, R. 2019. "50 Years On: The Shap Working Party on World Religions in Education and Its Publications." *Journal of Beliefs and Values* 40 (1): pp 45–54.

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