

FLOWERS, BRIAN HILTON, Lord Flowers (1924-2010), scientist and university administrator

Name: Brian Hilton Flowers

Date of birth: 1924

Date of death: 2010

Spouse: Mary Frances Buneman (née Behrens)

Parent: Marian Flowers (née Hilton)

Parent: Harold J. Flowers

Gender: Male

Occupation: scientist and university administrator

Area of activity: Education; Science and Mathematics

Author: Lyn Owen

Brian Hilton Flowers was born on 13 September 1924 in Blackburn, the eldest of three children of the Reverend Harold J. Flowers (1894-1971), a noted Welsh Baptist preacher, and his wife Marian (née Hilton, 1897-1985). The family moved back to his father's native Wales in 1932, and Brian was educated at Bishop Gore Grammar School in Swansea, where his interest in physics was encouraged by an enthusiastic teacher named Mr Foukes. He went on to study at Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, reading Physics and Electronics. He gained his degree in two years with such brilliance that before he was 20 the physicist John Cockcroft had recruited him for the Anglo-Canadian Atomic Energy Project in Canada, where he spent two years from September 1944.

He returned to Britain in 1946 to work at the Nuclear Physics Division of the Atomic Energy Research Establishment (AERE) at Harwell. In 1950 he transferred to the Theoretical Physics Division and witnessed events when the head of the group, Klaus Fuchs, was arrested as a Soviet spy. It was at Harwell that Flowers met Mary Frances Buneman (born 1921, née Behrens); they married in 1951 and he became father to two step-sons, Peter and Michael.

Flowers left Harwell in 1950 to carry out research on nuclear structure at Birmingham University under the inspiring teacher Rudolf Peierls (1907-1995), for which he was awarded a DSc. In 1952 he rejoined the AERE, where he became Head of Theoretical Physics and pioneered the use of computers to solve problems of atomic structure. He recruited a strong team including another Welsh nuclear scientist **Walter Marshall** (1932-1996), and continued his own research on the algebra of nuclear shells. In 1958 he was appointed professor of theoretical physics at the University of Manchester. In 1967 he took unpaid leave from that post to serve as chairman of the Science Research Council until 1973, when he became Rector of Imperial College, London. He remained at Imperial, living at the Rector's residence in Queen's Gate, until 1985 when he took on the vice-chancellorship of London University until his retirement in 1990. He served as Chancellor of Manchester University from 1995 to 2001.

Flowers applied his scientific expertise to influence public policy on numerous occasions. In 1965 he chaired a joint working group on Computers for Research which helped shape Britain's computer policy for both universities and industry. From 1973 he chaired the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution looking into the long-term problem of nuclear waste. The Flowers Report of 1976 effectively led to the closure of Britain's fast breeder reactor programme. A firm Europhile, he pressed for the establishment of the European Science Foundation, serving as its first President from 1974 to 1980, and he also ensured Britain's participation in the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN).

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1961 and knighted in 1969. In 1975 France awarded him the title of Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur, and in 1981 the higher award of Officier de la Légion d'Honneur. He was made a life peer in 1979 as Lord Flowers of Queen's Gate, and continued to promote science as chair of the Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology. In 1981 he became a prominent founding member of the Social Democratic Party, but returned to the cross-benches in 1989.

Brian Flowers died at his home in Barnet on 25 June 2010, and was cremated at Golders Green Crematorium on 1 July.

Author

Lyn Owen

Sources

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Oxford Dictionary of National Biography

Obituaries in *The Daily Telegraph* and *The Guardian*, 30 June 2010

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