

ROBERTS, EVAN (1923 - 2007), research chemist and industrialist

Name: Evan Roberts
Date of birth: 1923
Date of death: 2007
Spouse: Winifred Mary Roberts (née Gambold)
Child: Gareth Roberts
Child: Aled Roberts
Child: Megan Roberts
Child: Eluned Roberts
Parent: William Henry Roberts
Parent: Mary Jones Roberts (née Smith)
Gender: Male
Occupation: research chemist and industrialist
Area of activity: Science and Mathematics; Business and Industry
Author: Mark Baird

Evan Roberts was born on 18 November 1923 in Penygroes, Caernarfonshire, the son of William Henry Roberts (1899-1974), a baker, and Mary Jones Roberts (née Smith, 1899-1980), a laundress.

He secured a scholarship to Penygroes County School in 1934, and in 1940 he won a State Bursary to study at the University College of North Wales in Bangor, where he graduated with a first class honours degree in Chemistry in 1944, winning the course prize for his year. The Department of Scientific and Industrial Research then provided a grant to do research on nitration and he began a PhD.

Evan had joined the Air Training Corps whilst at school and remained a member during his first year at university, then joining the Army Cadets. He was not called up for military service during the war because each year one third of students were selected to go into industry, one third to the armed forces and the remaining third stayed in college. He was always in the latter group.

In 1946, he gave up his PhD studies, and started work as an organic chemist at the Premier Yeast Company in Greenford, Middlesex. This eventually became Peboc Limited, a company dedicated to the manufacture of organic chemicals and in particular Vitamin D3, a vital food supplement.

He met his wife, Winifred Mary Gambold (1924-1987), a nurse from Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire at the London Welsh Club, and they married in February 1950, and went on to have four children, Gareth (b. 1952), Aled (b. 1953), Megan (b. 1955), and Eluned (b. 1960).

In 1958 he became Chief Chemist at Peboc, and, in 1965, Director and General Manager. He decided the company needed to expand and eventually settled on a green-field site in Llangefni, Anglesey. The new factory opened in 1971, employing almost 100 people, mostly recruited locally. He was instrumental in the development of the manufacture of Vitamin D3 - at one stage Peboc provided 70% of the world's requirements - and was a leading authority on it. He travelled extensively promoting the company, which won the Queen's Award for Export and Technology in 1980. He was proud to have brought a company to his home region, significantly contributing to its economy, but more proud of avoiding making any redundancies during the turbulent economic times of the late 1970s and 1980s. When Evan retired on the 18th November 1988, the company employed 160. He remained a non-executive director for many years.

In March 1972 Evan joined the Rotary Club and in about 1977 was elected president of his local branch. He was also treasurer for many years, and remained an active member for the rest of his life. The Rotary Foundation of Rotary International named him a 'Paul Harris Fellow' "in appreciation of tangible and significant assistance given for the furtherance of better understanding and friendly relations among peoples of the world".

Not long after moving to Llangefni, he renewed links with the Chemistry Department at UCNW (now Bangor University), and he was made an Honorary Fellow by the university in 1997. He endowed two prizes, the 'Peboc Medal and Prize' for the best final year student, and the 'Evan Roberts Prize' for the best second year student. After retiring, he returned to the Chemistry Department to undertake various research projects with two Professors of Organic Chemistry, making a valuable contribution which continued until a few months before his death, when his health deteriorated. For the last 10 years of his life he researched mycolic acids, components of mycobacterial cells, with Professor Mark Baird, and their last joint paper was published about a month before his death. He provided a wealth of experience and common sense and was very popular with colleagues and young research students from many nations.

Evan Roberts died of brain tumours on 26 March 2007. His funeral was held at Bangor Crematorium, and tributes were paid to him by colleagues both past and present from all over the world. Those tributes spoke of his modesty, his willingness to share his knowledge and help others, and the contributions that he had made to the scientific community.

Author

Mark Baird

Sources

Personal knowledge and family information

Additional Links

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