

RECOLLECTIONS OF THE STATISTICAL LABORATORY, 1966-69

(written for Peter Whittle in 1993, for his history of the Stats Lab,
A Realised Path)

For any mathematician with a British connection and an interest in probability and/or statistics, the Cambridge Statistical Laboratory is not only an institution, but an important institution dear to his heart. As with any institution, one's recollections are primarily of the people, but also – perhaps more importantly – of the collective ethos, the atmosphere, the spirit of the place.

On a daily basis, I found the Stats Lab a wonderfully congenial mathematical home – friendly, stimulating, fun. Where I felt it showed its personality as an institution most clearly was in the Friday seminars. I found the sheer quality of the talks I attended over a three-year period, and the tremendous range of subjects covered, a revelation. One heard many splendid talks, and some great ones. Rényi, for instance, was a great man, and it showed in every talk of his I attended. David Williams' first talk I found absolutely unforgettable (I confess for linguistic as well as mathematical reasons – I had never been exposed to the full glory of a Gower accent before). On a much humbler level, I made my own professional debut as a speaker in the Stats Lab.

But perhaps even more vividly than the talks, I remember the teas afterwards. There was no stuffy inhibition about asking questions: the conversation flowed, starting with the talk, and going off enthusiastically in any or every direction. One was left with an overwhelming sense that everything was interesting – and so, that one should be interested in everything. No one quite lives up to this, of course, but as a general guiding principle in professional life it has served me as well as anything has. I owe it to the Stats Lab tea-room, where I drank it in as the mathematical equivalent of my mother's milk.

As for the people, a few vignettes will suffice:
DGK, the fountainhead of mathematical wisdom for me in my formative years, endlessly patient with my ignorance (I arrived from the Other Place) and first fumbling flounderings, unfailingly encouraging as I began to find myself with something to say, and wise enough to be happy to let me take off in my own direction when the time came. There is no memorial to Wren in

St Paul's, rather the inscription *Si monumentum requiris, circumspice*; so it is with David Kendall and British probability and statistics (as I remember thinking in last Friday's COPS meeting in Liverpool).

Rollo Davidson was one year my senior, and I had the great good fortune to share an office with him when I arrived. We talked about everything under the sun – history and politics a lot, but mathematics too. I think I absorbed as much mathematics by osmosis from Rollo as I did from any other source. I won't speak here about his loss: we all feel it still.

Life in the Stats Lab became even more interesting with David Williams' arrival. One realised then – as one does now – that one is in the presence of a force of nature: matchless technical prowess, combined with such infectious enthusiasm for the subject and so much else besides. What a man!

Peter Whittle arrived during my time in Cambridge. Apart from his endearing personal qualities, I remember being struck by the contrast between his boyish looks and his status as an established professional heavyweight. This contrast persisted until quite suddenly Peter went grey. But this has happened to me too since, so let me turn aside from that painful subject ...

Then there were those, like Harry Reuter or John Kingman, who were so close to the Stats Lab personally and professionally that they felt like part of the family.

I was very lucky to be in the Stats Lab during one of its great periods. I owe it a tremendous amount.

N. H. Bingham, 22.2.1993.

Postscript, 2009.

Rollo Davidson (1944-70), killed tragically climbing in the Alps, is commemorated in the memorial volumes *Stochastic Analysis* and *Stochastic Geometry*, edited by David Kendall and Ted Harding, and the Rollo Davidson Trust, of which I have been a trustee since 1988.

Obituaries of David Kendall (1918-2007) appeared in the national press (including one by me in *The Independent* on 1.11.2007, also on this website). A full obituary by John Kingman will appear in the *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the Royal Society*, Volume 55, 2009.

Obituaries of Harry Reuter (1921-1992) are in *J. Applied Probability* 29 (1992), 754-757 and *Bull. London Math. Soc.* 27 (1995), 177-188.