

Hywell Murrell

One of the Founders of Ergonomics and what we now call Human Factors

K F H (Hywel) Murrell was born in 1908 and, like many of the early psychologists, initially studied another discipline altogether – he graduated in chemistry and only later turned to psychology. During the Second World War, he worked in the Army Operational Research Group (effectively, taking a ‘Time & Motion’ approach to analysing behaviour in a work environment). He later transferred to the Admiralty, working on, amongst other things, the design of motor torpedo boats and similar craft to facilitate the performance of those sailing in them. In 1948 he became head of the Naval Motion Study Unit and in 1949 invited a small group of like-minded people who had experienced (what we would now recognise as) human factors research, and had met American scientists with similar experiences, to a meeting to discuss the establishment of a more formal group to promote the discipline. From this meeting the Ergonomics Research Society was later formed, Hywel Murrell himself coining the term “ergonomics” at the time. His leadership in the field influenced many other notable researchers such as Tom Singleton and Brian Shackel.

In the early 1950s, he formed the ergonomics department of Tube Investments Ltd, the first such department in industry, and in 1954 moved to Bristol University to lead a research group on skill and ageing. In 1963 he moved again, to the then Welsh College of Advanced Technology (later to become UWIST, the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology) where he became Professor of Psychology and headed the Department of Occupational (later Applied) Psychology until his retirement in 1975.

Hywel was mainly interested in the application of psychology and ergonomics to practical matters, and in particular, in skill development and in the effects of ageing and fatigue on performance. He wrote the first textbook on ergonomics in the UK (published in the mid-1960s) and worked with standards bodies, trades unions and managements in the dissemination of ergonomics. However, while the department he founded in Cardiff always had a strongly applied orientation (unlike its neighbour in what was then University College Cardiff), it was not narrowly focused just on human factors perspectives. Its degree programme was comprehensive and included a ‘sandwich’ year out (between the second and third years of the degree) which was unusual and quite novel at the time – and leading to enhanced accreditation at postgraduate level.

On a more personal level, Hywel was a forthright individual who did not suffer fools gladly! I had the good fortune to receive some lectures from him in my final year and can attest to his

lively and engaging teaching style. Indeed, those words describe his approach generally – as I learned when I was a visiting lecturer in his department for a couple of years. Not content with founding both an entire discipline and a psychology department, Hywel also found time to run a sheep farm in Wales! It was very much part of his grounded nature; he was not someone who stood on ceremony. He died in 1974: His legacy is, to this day, embodied in the MSc Occupational Psychology syllabus, and in the establishment of such bodies as the Chartered Institute of Ergonomics and Human Factors.

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