

A Conversation with David J. Finney

Ian MacNeill

Abstract. David John Finney was born in 1917 in Cheshire, England. He received his secondary schooling at the Lymm Grammar School and the Manchester Grammar School. At school he developed an interest in and showed an aptitude for mathematics. From 1934 to 1938, he pursued this interest by reading mathematics and statistics at Cambridge University.

He then accepted a post-graduate scholarship to work with R. A. Fisher at the Galton Laboratory in the University of London. In 1939 he took a position as assistant to Dr. Frank Yates at Rothamsted Experimental Station, where he became involved in many problems concerning the design of field experiments and the interpretation of their results. In 1945, he began his university teaching career at Oxford University as first holder of the post of lecturer in the design and analysis of scientific experiments. In 1954, he left Oxford to establish a Department of Statistics in the University of Aberdeen and also to set up a unit of statistics funded by the British Agricultural Research Council that could provide a service for Scotland patterned along the lines of the Rothamsted statistics department's work in England. In 1966, David was invited to move this unit to Edinburgh, where he was to continue as its director and also to become the first Professor of Statistics in the University of Edinburgh, thereby inaugurating his third statistics department. He retired from his position at Edinburgh in 1984, but he has remained active, especially in the study of problems relating to the safety of drugs.

David Finney is author or joint author of nine books, including those on probit analysis and on biological assay for which he is widely known among the international statistical community. He has over 250 other publications to his credit. In 1955 he was elected to fellowship of the Royal Society and of the Royal Society of Edinburgh. In 1978 he was honoured by appointment as a Commander of the Order of the British Empire. Other honours include Oxford University's Weldon Memorial Prize and honorary doctorates from the University of Waterloo, the National Faculty of Agriculture, Gembloux, Belgium, City University, London and Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh. The main strands running through his career are experimental design, bioassay and (later) radioimmunoassay and other biometric techniques, statistical computing and drug safety. Pursuit of these interests has led to extensive travel and to many interesting assignments. He has spent substantial periods in India, in the Philippines and in the USA. He has been Chairman of the British Computer Board for the Universities (1970-1974), President of the Biometric Society (1964) and President of the Royal Statistical Society (1973). During 1987-1988, he was Director of the research centre operated by the International Statistical Institute.

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The following conversation took place in Toronto during the Statistical Society of Canada's 1991 meeting, which immediately followed the symposium held in Hamilton, Ontario, in honour of Charles Dunnett