

PROFILE

DR. NEIL AITKENHEAD

Carboniferous man who finally came in from the cold

Having known the President of the East Midlands Geological Society for some 30 years, it is with great pleasure that I present to you this profile — and with it my congratulations to him on his election. A family man with three grown-up daughters, Neil lives with his wife Marion in Keyworth, Nottinghamshire, and within easy walking distance of the headquarters site of the British Geological Survey — where he works as a Principal Scientific Officer in the division for Thematic Maps and Onshore Surveys.

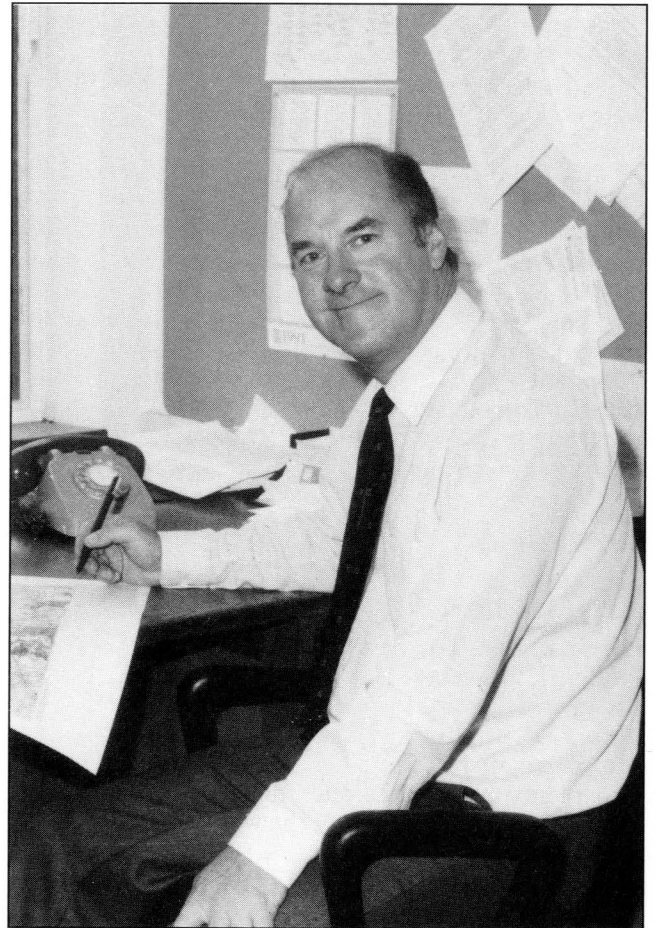
A spritely fifty something-or-another, Neil became interested in geology while still at school in his native Newcastle upon Tyne. An interest in exploration, particularly of the more remote circum-polar regions, began here too when he participated in a walking tour and an expedition to central Norway. Later, at Durham University, he took part in other expeditions, this time to Arctic Norway, and was fortunate enough to witness the sudden drainage of a glacier-dammed lake, the subject of his first professional paper.

After graduating with an honours degree in geology, Neil's previous experience of working in a cold climate enabled him to adapt easily to the role of a field geologist with the Falkland Islands Dependencies Survey, later renamed the British Antarctic Survey. Two winters (1960 and 1961) were spent at Hope Bay, the northernmost of the British bases on the Antarctic mainland and Neil travelled hundreds of miles by dog sledge while making a detailed investigation of the Trinity Peninsula Group, a thick sequence of strongly folded turbidites of Carboniferous age intruded by granitic plutons that occupies much of the northern part of the Antarctic Peninsula.

For his meticulous work in Antarctica, Neil was awarded (in 1964) a PhD from the University of Birmingham and was invested (in 1967) with the Polar Medal by Her Majesty the Queen for "services to Antarctic geology".

Having expended at least some of his wanderlust, Neil then left the British Antarctic Survey for the Leeds Office of the Institute of Geological Sciences (now known as the British Geological Survey) where he became a member of that organisation's Yorkshire and East Midlands Field Unit. Neil's ability to produce a definitive geological map for part of the coldest, driest, windiest and most inhospitable place on Earth enabled him to slot easily into the role of a Survey field geologist, a lone existence for the self-reliant individual but *not* necessarily the introvert. However, pure chance enabled Neil to work (with others) in areas of the UK that were not only geologically interesting and stimulating but also scenically attractive — like, for example, the Peak District. Here, his work involved him in walking every field and farm over an area of hundreds of square

kilometres, mainly in the Carboniferous country between Buxton and Ashbourne, an exercise that enabled him to acquire an intimate knowledge and affection for the area and its people. More recently, Neil has been mapping the hills, valleys and coasts of north Lancashire where the bedrock is again of Carboniferous age. He has also applied his considerable experience in explaining to boards of inquiry the geological backgrounds to two disastrous events, namely the collapse of the dam embankment at the Carsington Reservoir site and the landfill-gas explosion at Loscoe.



Hence, the EMGS President is an experienced geologist who has worked mainly in rocks of Carboniferous age but who would be equally at home in strata of any age — for he is keen to share with others not only the pleasures of the outdoors but also all the excitement that the science of geology can conjure up in anyone possessing a little curiosity and imagination.

A former Council member of the Yorkshire Geological Society, a fellow of the Geological Society of London and a member of the Quaternary Research Association, the Antarctic Club and the British Antarctic Survey Club, Neil Aitkenhead was also for many years an activist in the Institution of Professionals, Managers and Specialists (formerly the IPCS) and lists amongst his leisure pursuits ski-ing, badminton, tennis and singing in the Keyworth Choir, all of which ensure that he is physically fit (for a 50 something-or-another) and perennially in good voice.

Brian Taylor