

David Symes, Reader Emeritus, B.Litt, M.A. (Oxon)

David Symes, Reader Emeritus, was one of Europe's most renowned social scientists working in the field of fisheries management, rural development and policy. During his academic career, which spanned seven decades, he generated a prolific volume of research and had a major impact on fisheries policy and the formation of a European fisheries social science community.



Born in Bradford at school he excelled academically. He was partially self-taught in Geography and secured a King Charles 1 Scholarship at Jesus College Oxford where he was awarded the Herbertson Memorial Prize. Graduating in 1956 with First Class Honours in Geography and following a period of postgraduate research on rural change in western Norway while based at the Norwegian School of Economics in Bergen, he was appointed to a teaching post at the University of Hull in 1958, where he would work in the Geography department for over 40 years up to 'retirement' in 2000.

For the first 25 years his research focused on the social structures and dynamics of family farming systems in Britain, Ireland and Europe. Working alongside sociologists from western and eastern Europe on UNESCO funded projects on rural communities and families in industrial societies under the leadership of the renowned French sociologist Henri Mendras, and later involvement with the European Society for Rural Sociology as Scientific Secretary, Vice President and co-editor of *Sociologia Ruralis* confirmed his identity as an interdisciplinary social scientist and Europeanist. He became a leading light in rural development and with a strong research interest at that time in Eastern Europe, before the cold war ended, was one of the few scholars to collaborate with Eastern European colleagues.



Throughout this period he developed his fascination with and understanding of North Atlantic fisheries, sparked initially by short intensive periods of postgraduate fieldwork in Norway, and sustained by an interest in and concern for the fate of the fisheries sector in the Humber ports of Hull and Grimsby.

His research intentions in western Norway were initially to explore the processes of modernisation in two contrasting but equally challenging environments: the coastal fringe and the inner fjords. Although his focus was primarily on rural, largely agricultural communities, he found it impossible to ignore the role played by small scale, highly seasonal coastal fisheries that provided an important supplementary income for many in the island communities.

At the time of his first appointment as an assistant lecturer in geography at the University of Hull, the city was the major distant water fishing port in Europe. Again, it was impossible to avoid the huge influence that fishing exerted on the city and the shock of losing its access to those distant waters in the 1970s. Over the next two decades his interest in, and understanding of, fisheries was broadened by fieldwork in other parts of

the Atlantic fringe including Ireland, the F eroes, Iceland and Newfoundland and deepened by work commissioned by Seafish relating to the seafood supply chain.

From the mid-1980s onwards, David took the decision to quit the rather overcrowded field of rural studies to focus his research exclusively on fisheries and their management, stimulated by issues relating to supply and distribution within the UK and emerging problems confronting the nascent Common Fisheries Policy, which continued well beyond retirement.

There followed what David described as the most active and rewarding period of his career, triggered by a series of EU research grants relating to the social dimension of fisheries management and involving partners in Norway, Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Spain and Greece, and by work undertaken for statutory nature bodies in England, Scotland and Wales. During the 1990s he coordinated two major EU funded projects, the first on Devolved and Regional Management in Fisheries (1993-5), which would provide formative evidence for successive reforms and efforts to regionalise the Common Fisheries Policy.



The second, a Concerted Action, established a European Social Science Fisheries Network (1996-2000). ESSFiN helped to change the course of fisheries social science and the approach to fisheries management, bringing new insights into institutional change, the role of applied social science and multi-disciplinarity, *inter alia*. Under David's leadership ESSFiN successfully initiated and developed an active network of social scientists - very broadly defined - with the aim of deepening the role of socio-economic issues in fisheries governance. ESSFiN was, and still remains, a unique experiment in applying a multi-disciplinary approach to fisheries management. It demonstrated the relevance of the social sciences to an understanding of current issues in the organisation, development and governance of marine fisheries in Europe. As David explained himself: "Fisheries management at the time lacked a coherent body of evidence describing how the regulatory regime was not only undermining the social structures and value systems but also turning fishers into the objects rather than the subjects of fisheries policy engendering low commitment and weak compliance on the part of the fishing industry". It would become a standard bearer for an applied social approach to fisheries governance and management.

David would develop valued and longstanding relations within the University of Hull, notably with colleagues in the Hull International Fisheries Institute, the Institute of Estuarine and Coastal Studies and the European Studies department (where he would regularly attend their coffee mornings). He garnered huge respect nationally and internationally across the worlds of academia (in both the social and natural sciences), policy and the fishing industry. In 2021 he was awarded an Honorary Fellowship at the Centre for Rural Economy, Newcastle University.

David carried out many research contracts from the Sea Fish Industry Authority, Joint Nature Conservation Committee and English Nature. Following retirement in 2000 (a year in which he was appointed as the prestigious Buckland Professor) he served on panels of inquiry into the future of the fishing industry, established by the Cabinet Office Strategy Unit, the Royal Society of Edinburgh and the Scottish Government, and on the editorial board of *Fisheries Research* (2000-2010). In 2007, together with Mike Sissenwine, he was invited by the European Commission to critically reflect on

and make recommendations for reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, thus kick starting the decennial review process and helping shape proposals for the 2012 reform.

David would again re-emerge from retirement in 2017, dismayed by the outcome of the 2016 referendum and provoked by the realities of leaving the EU for the fishing industry and the seafood supply chain. As he had done throughout his career he took his pen to paper to embark on a major reflective book on the last 50 years of fisheries policy in Europe starting with the eviction of distant water fishing vessels from their favoured grounds in the North Atlantic and the negotiation of the EU's Common Fisheries policy (CFP) and ending with consequences of the UK's decision to quit the EU. At the time of his death, his handwritten manuscript was tantalisingly close to completion, with discussions with publishers under way, to bring to fruition what will be his parting gift.

David was one of a kind – progressive, always ahead of the curve, a true scholar and a critical thinker. Agile, articulate and sharp witted in both written and spoken word. Not afraid to speak his mind. Dedicated to his craft and for many a reference of academic excellence. A masterly and meticulous editor, supervisor and author. Never esoteric. Always engaging. Often mischievous. Inspired generations of students who look back to his lectures and field trips with affection. A mentor who supported many academic careers at all levels.

Our thoughts are with David's family, wife Annick, children Nigel and Janet, and grandchild Xavier.

David Symes, Reader Emeritus, Born 30 July 1934, Died 13 January 2022