



Oxford's History of Mathematics Forum: The First Two Decades

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Oxford's informal History of Mathematics Forum was inaugurated in 2001 and has already met nearly two hundred times. Regularly attended by a group of interested mathematicians and historians from Oxford and elsewhere, its sessions have ranged from informal opportunities for members to share work in progress with informed and supportive colleagues to more structured presentations by visiting experts. Usually held at The Queen's College, Oxford University (Figure 1), the topics covered are wide-ranging, from ancient Egyptian mathematics to aspects of computing, and from current research work to using history in the mathematics classroom. There are nine meetings per year, with breaks at Christmas and over the summer.

The group is a legacy of the life and work of the influential and much loved historian of mathematics John Fauvel (see Figure 3), whose untimely death in May 2001 left a significant gap in the British history of mathematics community (see [1]). John demonstrated, both personally and practically, the vital place of the social element in academic work in general, and in mathematics in particular. It was with this in view that regular meetings on the history of mathematics were proposed by Steve Russ, of the University of Warwick, an editor of the extensive writings of the Bohemian mathematician Bernard Bolzano; and Jackie Stedall (see Figure 2), a specialist in British mathematics of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries who had recently arrived in Oxford after completing an Open University PhD degree with John Fauvel on John Wallis's 1685 *Treatise of Algebra*.

At The Queen's College, Jackie had found a friend and mentor in the algebraist Peter M. Neumann (see Figure 2), who lectured on the history of algebra and would go on to produce a widely admired edition of the works of Évariste Galois. Peter offered the use of his college rooms for what was initially termed a "history of mathematics working group" and also provided the refreshments that helped to promote and sustain the social aspect of the meetings. It was through his detailed seminar notebooks, now in The Queen's College Archives, that we have been able to reconstruct a detailed picture of the early presentations and attendance of what came to be known as the History of Mathematics Forum.

Besides the names already mentioned, other speakers during the Forum's early years included David Fowler (from Warwick) on his controversial views concerning ancient Greek mathematics, Eleanor Robson and Annette Imhausen (both then in Cambridge) on the mathematics of ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt, Raymond Flood (from Oxford; see Figure 2) on nineteenth-century mathematical physicists from Ireland, Adrian Rice (from London, and later the United States) on his current research projects, and three speakers from the Open University: Jeremy Gray (trying out his forthcoming inaugural lecture; see Figure 3), June Barrow-Green (on the mathematicians of World War I; see

This column is a forum for discussion of mathematical communities throughout the world, and through all time. Our definition of "mathematical community" is the broadest: "schools" of mathematics, circles of correspondence, mathematical societies, student organizations, extracurricular educational activities (math camps, math museums, math clubs), and more. What we say about the communities is just as unrestricted. We welcome contributions from mathematicians of all kinds and in all places, and also from scientists, historians, anthropologists, and others.

Submissions should be uploaded to <https://submission.nature.com/new-submission/283/3> or sent directly to Marjorie Senechal, MathCommunities@gmail.com.



Figure 1. The Queen's College, Oxford University.



Figure 2. Raymond Flood, Robin Wilson, Jackie Stedall, and Peter Neumann.

Figure 3), and Robin Wilson (on the four-color theorem; see Figure 2). In this connection, it is notable that Steve Russ had received his PhD degree from the Open University, and that John Fauvel had studied at Warwick University.

In the succeeding years, the Forum has often provided its members with an opportunity to try out new ideas and to practice upcoming lectures ahead of presentations in more formal settings. As such, it has provided a useful service, both to established academics and to those at earlier stages in their careers. Particularly notable in this latter category has been Benjamin Wardhaugh, formerly a

doctoral student of Jackie Stedall, whose talks have ranged from Euclid's *Elements* to mathematics and music in the seventeenth century, and who holds the record (14) for the number of Forum presentations (Figure 4).

Being a small-scale meeting, the Forum has never needed anything as formal as an organizing committee. Responsibility for putting together an annual program originated with Peter Neumann and Jackie Stedall and has since passed through various hands; it is currently in those of the authors of the present note. Fortunately, the arrangement of talks is not an onerous task, for most of the slots



Figure 3. John Fauvel, June Barrow-Green, and Jeremy Gray.

are easily filled by volunteers from within the group who are keen to talk about their latest work and by visitors to Oxford. It then falls to the organizers to find people to fill the gaps, often based on suggestions from other members.

Although the activities of the Forum have usually centered around a close-knit group of regular participants whose membership has gradually changed over time, it has endeavored never to be too parochial. In particular, it has always welcomed visiting speakers from abroad. In its first year, it hosted talks on the history of Dutch mathematics by Jan van Maanen and Danny Beckers from the Netherlands following a meeting of the British Society for the History of Mathematics (BSHM) that had taken place during the preceding weekend in the historic surroundings of Greenwich. Visitors from North America have included Karen Parshall, Victor Katz, Donald Knuth, Judy Gabiner, and Rob Bradley, while other parts of the world have been represented by Leo Corry (Israel), Bjarne Toft (Denmark), Sabine Rommevaux (France), and Tomoko Kitagawa (then at Oxford but now at

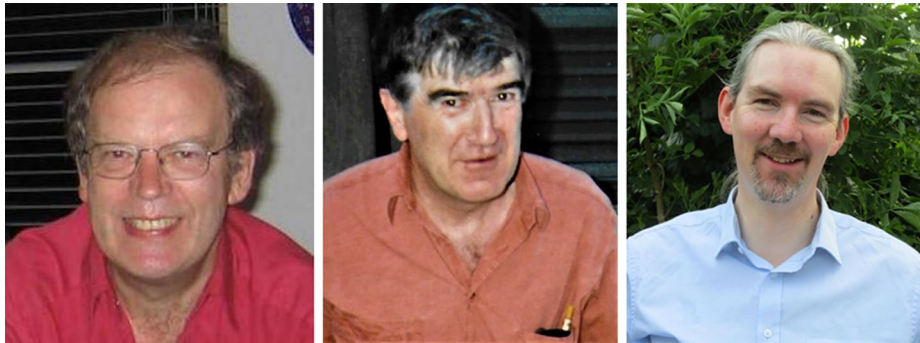


Figure 4. Steve Russ, David Fowler, and Benjamin Wardhaugh.



Figure 5. The Andrew Wiles Building, Oxford University's Mathematical Institute.



Figure 6. Relaxing after a Forum meeting.

the Japanese Aerospace Exploration Agency). The Forum has also enjoyed an important domestic connection: although it has never formally been a BSHM event, there has always been significant overlap between those regularly attending the Forum and those running the society, including several BSHM presidents and secretaries (see [2]).

As already noted, for many years, the Forum's meetings were held in the comfortable surroundings of Peter Neumann's rooms at The Queen's College. Later, in 2008–2009, during Peter's sabbatical leave in Paris to work on Galois's manuscripts, the meetings moved to a historic fifteenth-century wood-paneled room at All Souls College, courtesy of Benjamin Wardhaugh, before returning to Queen's. More recently, in order to accommodate larger audiences for more formal lectures by visiting speakers and to communicate the history of mathematics more widely, the Forum has also held a few of its meetings at Oxford University's Mathematical Institute (Figure 5).

Like all such gatherings, the Forum recently had to adapt to the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. A meeting scheduled for the end of March 2020 was necessarily canceled at short notice, but within two months, the Forum was reinvented as an online seminar (thanks mainly to Tomoko Kitagawa and Chris Hollings), and it continued in this mode until the summer of 2021. During this period, the new format attracted larger attendances from the UK and abroad, and members were able to enjoy talks from speakers that they would not otherwise have had the opportunity to hear.

At the start of the 2021–2022 academic year, the meetings shifted to a hybrid format, but that often entailed the worst of both worlds and quickly led to discussions on

how the meetings should continue. Although excited by the number of people who had attended online, the members were conscious of how the hybrid format had dramatically reduced the informal character of the meetings. After much discussion, the decision was made to return to an exclusively in-person format for the 2022–2023 academic year, recognizing that online seminars were becoming more regularly available from other providers. The group also sought to reestablish and reinforce the social element (see Figure 6) that has played such a vital role in the Forum's founding ethos. Attendance at the restored in-person meetings has been encouraging, and its members are quietly confident that the Forum will continue to function for many years as a local focus for a community that might otherwise have become somewhat rarefied.

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