

Mathematicians at Auckland 125 Years On



Twenty-eight mathematicians made an unusual pilgrimage to the Grafton Cemetery recently in memory of the University's first Professor of Mathematics, George Francis Walker, who was appointed to the Chair when the College was established 100 years ago. He drowned in the Waitemata Harbour before his first lecture and was buried here. His name appears on the Wall of Remembrance behind the group. (Photo taken 1983).

In 1883 the third College of the University of New Zealand (and the first in the North Island) was opened in Auckland. This didn't mark the beginning of University level education in Auckland, that being traced back to 1872 when the Auckland College and Grammar School was affiliated to the University of New Zealand. Indeed, the first woman to graduate with a BA degree in the British Empire, Kate Edger, received her tertiary education through this facility in the 1870s.

The initial appointments to the academic staff were four professors, in English & Classics, Mathematics & Mathematical Physics, Chemistry & Physics, and Natural Science. Unfortunately the first professor of Mathematics, George Francis Walker, died tragically in a boating accident in the Waitemata Harbour soon after his arrival in Auckland so he never gave a lecture. His boating companion, the newly arrived professor of Classics and English, barely survived. So the first Mathematics lecture at the newly opened University College was given by the professor of Natural Science, APW Thomas.

Actually Walker's successor, William Steadman Aldis, had an untimely end to his appointment too: he was dismissed because he complained about having his parking place usurped. Well, that was the trigger but even the official reason for his dismissal was about as spurious. If you are interested in a discussion of the circumstances surrounding Aldis's dismissal then you would do well to read the chapter devoted to it in Keith Sinclair's *A History of the University of Auckland*, published in 1983. For more on the early professors of Mathematics, as well as a brief summary of the circumstances surrounding Aldis's dismissal, read Don Nield's *Centrefold* article *Professors of Mathematics at Auckland University College: the Missionary, the Businessman, the Story-teller and the Salesman*, also published in 1983 and available at <http://ifs.massey.ac.nz/outreach/mathnews/centrefolds/27/Apr1983.shtml>. Don also wrote a longer article about the history of Mathematics at Auckland in his *University Mathematics at Auckland: a historical essay*, *Mathematical Chronicle*, 12(1983), 1-33. In the latter Don briefly outlines the subject content of the courses taken by a Mathematics major, with elementary differential and integral calculus making an appearance in honours classes following the bachelors degree. The next professor had a longer tenure: Hugh William Segar was professor of Mathematics at Auckland and remained in the post until he retired in 1934.

Back to Walker. Following his death, Professor Walker was buried in the Auckland Cemetery in Grafton Gully. There his body lay in peace for over 80 years until, in the early days of the ongoing

motorway expansion in Auckland, it was deemed that Grafton Gully was needed as the route for one branch. Many graves had to be disturbed and those whose graves were had their names inscribed on a Wall of Remembrance on the edge of the cemetery near the western end of Grafton Bridge. Professor Walker's name appears on the wall.

It seemed fitting for as many members, and former members, of the then Department of Mathematics and Statistics to assemble in front of the Wall for a photograph on the 100th anniversary of Professor Walker's death. The first accompanying photograph was taken on that occasion. It did not include all living members or former members of the Department as many were unavailable for a range of reasons.

In 2008, now the 125th anniversary of the death of Professor Walker (and, of course, of the founding of the University), as many members and former members of what was once again the Department of Mathematics returned for more photographs. The second photograph shows 18 of the 28 in the original photograph, including two (Gordon Hookings and Marin Segedin) in their late 80s. Of the original group one, Professor Cecil Segedin, had died while most of the other nine who were absent had retired or resigned and either moved out of Auckland or ill health prevented their attendance. In addition all other available members of the Department also attended and appear in the third photograph. How many of us will make it in 2033?

David Gauld



(a)



(b)

(a) From 1983 to 2008. Back row: Dr Paul Hafner, Emeritus Professor George Seber, Dr David Smith, Mr Roy Swenson, Dr Ganesh Dixit, Dr Garry Tee, retired Associate-Professor Donald Nield, Professor David Gauld, Mr Marin Segedin, Emeritus Professor Alastair Scott. Front row: Emeritus Professor Jeffrey Hunter, retired Associate-Professor Mervyn Rosser, Emeritus Professor John Butcher (front), Dr Joel Schiff, Mr Christopher King (front), Professor David Ryan, Associate-Professor Bruce Calvert, retired Associate-Professor Gordon Hookings. Photo: Godfrey Boehnke.

(b) Some current and former members of the Mathematics (and Statistics) Department, 2008. Back row: Dr Alastair McNaughton, Mr Roy Swenson, Dr Robert Chan, Emeritus Professor John Butcher, retired Associate-Professor Mervyn Rosser, Emeritus Professor George Seber, Emeritus Professor Jeffrey Hunter, Dr David Smith, Professor David Gauld, Dr Paul Hafner, Dr Ganesh Dixit, Dr Philip Sharp, Dr Allison Heard, Dr Joel Schiff, Dr Garry Tee, Professor David Ryan, retired Associate-Professor Donald Nield, Mr Marin Segedin, Associate-Professor Bruce Calvert, retired Associate-Professor Gordon Hookings, Dr Tom ter Elst, Ms Sheena Parnell, Dr Stephen Taylor, Ms Moira Statham, Professor Roderick Gover, Dr Judith Paterson, Mr John Walls, Dr Maxine Pfannkuch, Professor Eamonn O'Brien, Emeritus Professor Alastair Scott. Front row: Dr Sina Greenwood, Ms Wendy Stratton, Associate-Professor Michael Thomas, Dr Shixiao Wang, Dr Michael Meylan, Mr Gregory Oates, Dr Shayne Waldron, Ms Helen McKenzie, Associate-Professor Jianbei An, Mr Christopher King. Photo: Godfrey Boehnke