

Leslie F. Thomas
(1920 – 2002)



(ca. 1975, Birmingham University)

Leslie Ford Thomas was born in July 1920 in Pembrokeshire, Wales. He was educated at Milford Haven County School, Pembrokeshire, from where he won a County Scholarship for undergraduate study: he chose to read Chemistry at the University of Birmingham.

On graduating in 1941, he was awarded the Richard Fenwick postgraduate scholarship in the Faculty of Science at the University. However, in 1942 he interrupted his studies to join the Royal Naval Volunteer Reserve (RNVR), seeing action from the North Atlantic convoys to the China Seas throughout the remainder the of the Second World War. Holding the rank of Lieutenant, he specialised in the relatively new field of radar. This gave him hands-on electronics experience which was to stand him in good stead during his subsequent research activities. Following demobilisation in 1946 he returned to Birmingham University, where he was appointed to an Assistant Lectureship by Sir Norman Haworth, and where he happily remained for the whole of his career. He completed his PhD in Chemistry, on the photobromination of tetrafluoroethylene, in 1951, under the guidance of Professor (later Sir) Harry Melville and John Sheridan. After this, his research interests centred on the application of microwave spectroscopy to determine accurate molecular structures in collaboration with John Sheridan who later moved to Bangor University. During this period, the application of microwave

spectroscopy for molecular structural studies flourished and he had three papers published in Nature within the space of two years (1953-1954).

In the late 1950s his research interests turned to NMR spectroscopy. His first PhD student, starting in October 1959, was John Homer (later Professor at Aston University, Birmingham). His experimental NMR work was carried out on a Mullard Mk 1 SL 44 spectrometer, initially located in a very small room under the stairs in the Hills Chemistry building, but later moved to the Haworth Building when that opened in 1963. Later Les Thomas acquired a Varian HR-100 spectrometer which was subsequently upgraded to the HA-100 model in 1967. His research group remained quite small, taking on a new PhD student each year. Following John Homer, came Felix Ayanbadejo, John Wyer, Alan Peake, Richard Fletton, John Lindon and Roy Lapper.

One of Les Thomas's main research areas was ^{19}F NMR spectroscopy and because of the close proximity of the world famous group at Birmingham that synthesised polyfluoro-organic compounds, there was a plentiful supply of new and unusual compounds for study. Some important ^{19}F NMR publications came out from this group in the 1960s although it is to be regretted that many of the results languished away in filing cabinets. Nevertheless, he was an excellent research supervisor and teacher, even if one's student laboratory notebooks often bore the hallmarks of spilt shreds of pipe tobacco pressed between the pages!

Leslie Thomas retired from the University of Birmingham in 1980 and died on 13 July 2002, his wife Margaret predeceasing him by a few months. He is survived by a daughter, Carol, a son, David and four grandchildren. We thank Carol and David for providing much information about their father.