

David John Finney, CBE, FRS, FSS
3 January 1917 – 12 November 2018

David John Finney, the eldest of three brothers, was born in Latchford Without (Cheshire), near Warrington, on 3 January 1917.

Until the age of four Finney gained much from being an only child. Taught the three Rs by his mother, by the time he was five he found reading a pleasure.

At primary school, thanks to his mother's early efforts, Finney was soon in classes with children two or three years older than him. Five years after going to Lymm Grammar School he became a pupil at Manchester Grammar School, where he remained for three years to complete his secondary education. (He always remembered gratefully the altruistic suggestion of W B S Hawkins, the Headmaster at Lymm, that a change of school would afford him greater opportunities.)

In 1934 Finney won an Open Entrance Scholarship in mathematics to Clare College, Cambridge, and began his undergraduate career. However, his time there was disrupted by illness. During his second year it was thought – Finney believed incorrectly – that he might have contracted tuberculosis and accordingly in the summer of 1936, he was packed off to the South coast of England to benefit from the sea air. In an unfortunate turn of affairs, in August and September of that year there was an epidemic of typhoid in Bournemouth, Poole, and Christchurch – and Finney picked up the fever. His absence from his undergraduate studies was therefore for a much longer period than had been intended and he missed a number of classes. This had the unusual consequence that, in order to graduate in 1937, he took Part I of the Mathematical Tripos that year having already taken Part II the previous year.

Because of the lengthy break in his studies Finney had been unable to take a course in geometry which – with a potential career as a schoolmaster in mind – he had been eagerly anticipating. On his return to Cambridge he accepted advice to attend instead a course in statistics, a subject of which he then knew almost nothing. Reflecting on his career with the benefit of hindsight, Finney was certainly aware how fortunate he had been to catch typhoid at the age of 19!

He spent a further year in Cambridge on postgraduate studies in statistics under the direction of Dr John Wishart (FRSE 1931), before taking up a Ministry of Agriculture Scholarship for further study under Professor R A Fisher at the Galton Laboratory, University College London.

Having joined the Anglican Pacifist Fellowship in 1938, Finney was a conscientious objector throughout the Second World War and from 1939 to 1945 he worked as a senior assistant to Dr Frank Yates at the Rothamsted Experimental Station. His pacifist views were never challenged – possibly because of the importance of Rothamsted's research on food production.

He entered the academic world in 1945, when he became the first Lecturer in the Design and Analysis of Scientific Experiment at the University of Oxford. In 1954 he left Oxford to become Reader in Statistics at the University of Aberdeen, where he helped establish the Agricultural Research Council Unit of Statistics for Scotland, becoming its Director. He spent the academic year 1962-63 as Visiting Professor of Biomathematics in the Departments of Statistics and Preventive Medicine in Harvard University before being appointed by Aberdeen University as its first Professor of Statistics in 1963.

In 1966 the ARC moved its Statistics Unit to Edinburgh and Finney, who remained Director, became the first Professor of Statistics at the University of Edinburgh, retaining his Chair and Directorship until his retirement in 1984.

He was author or co-author of more than 300 papers in statistical and biological journals. Of his books the best known were probably *Probit Analysis* (1947) and *Statistical Method in Biological Assay* (1952).

In 1951 he was elected a member of the International Statistics Institute and in 1952 an Honorary Life Fellow of the Eugenics Society (now the Galton Institute). His election to both the Royal Society (FRS) and the Royal Society of Edinburgh (FRSE) followed in 1955.

From 1958 to 1961 he was a member of the Advisory Committee on Medical Research, established by the Secretary of State for Scotland. He served for 17 years as a member of the Adverse Reactions Sub-Committee of the UK government's Committee on Safety of Medicines – established in 1963, originally as the Committee on Safety of Drugs. Finney's pioneering work on the development of systems to monitor the safety of drugs achieved international recognition. (This was reflected in Honorary Doctorates from universities in Belgium and Canada.)

He was an initial member of the Computer Board for the Universities and Research Councils, chairing the Board from 1970-1974.

He was President of the International Biometric Society (1964-65) and of the Royal Statistical Society (1973-74). In 1978 he was appointed CBE.

Finney felt strongly that Statistics as a discipline was quite distinct from Mathematics and required some very different modes of thought. He was always keen to assist people working in other areas by encouraging their cooperation with experienced statisticians. Throughout his career, even after his official retirement, he travelled the world to lecture and to offer advice. At a luncheon on the centenary of his birthday the tables were labelled, not numerically, but by the names of some of the places where he had worked. The labels Boston, Den Haag, Manila and New Dehli reflected some of his globe-trotting.

He was a consultant to the to the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN and an advisor to the World Health Organisation.

Early in his career, returning by sea from a summer appointment at the University of North Carolina, Finney made the acquaintance of Mary Elizabeth Connolly ("Betty") from Washington. He and Betty married in 1950 and had two daughters and a son. Betty died in 2006. With the help of carers and supportive neighbours Finney continued to live alone in his home until only a few months before his death.

J. J. McCutcheon

**David John Finney, CBE, FRS, FSS. MA, ScD(Cantab), HonDSc(City,H-W),
HonDSciAgron(Gembloux), HonDMath(Waterloo). Born 3 January 1917. Elected FRSE 1955.
Died 12 November 2018**