

Obituary

Obituary: Bill Block (1937–2023)

Ronald Lewis-Smith



William (Bill) C. Block (BSc, MA, PhD, DSc), who died after a short illness on 9 November 2023, was a terrestrial biologist with the British Antarctic Survey (BAS) for 21 years and

thereafter a Senior Research Scientist and latterly an Emeritus Scientist for a further 26 years until his death.

Bill was born in Lowestoft, Suffolk, in 1937 and educated at his local grammar school. He read Zoology at Durham University under Prof. Jim Cragg and Dr (later Sir) Martin Holdgate (both of whom strongly influenced the development of the future BAS biology programme). Bill's particular interest was in soil microfauna, which he studied for his PhD at Moor House National Nature Reserve. After completing his PhD at Durham in 1963, he took up a lectureship in Zoology at Makerere University, Uganda. He returned to UK in 1967 to take up a lectureship at the University of Leicester. During this period, he was invited by a colleague from his earlier university years - Peter Tilbrook, then Head of the BAS Terrestrial Zoology Unit of the Biology Division - to undertake a joint research project as a visiting scientist on Signy Island in 1971–1972.

He joined BAS in 1976 when Tilbrook left BAS and Bill was appointed in his place, a position he held until his retirement in 1997. In retirement, he held Honorary Professorships at the University of East Anglia (Norwich), Birmingham University and Abertay University (Dundee). Bill was also a member of the executive committee of the South Georgia Association and coordinated the South Georgia Initiative Fund, which helped to fund non-BAS research projects associated with the island and its history.

Bill's Antarctic research concentrated on micro-invertebrates, especially mites and springtails, and beetles on South Georgia. He pioneered studies of the ecology and physiology (especially cryobiology and thermochemistry) of these organisms in Antarctica and South Georgia and, over many years with his research team, developed intuitive techniques and equipment to obtain a detailed understanding of their low-temperature adaptations and survival strategies. Much of this was undertaken in the field - at Signy Research Station (South Orkney Islands), Rothera Research Station (southern Antarctic Peninsula) and Alexander Island, Victoria Land, and South Georgia - but also in the laboratories at BAS, Cambridge.

During the late 1970s until the 1990s, Bill, together with his colleagues David Wynn-Williams, Ron Lewis-Smith and Roger Worland, established several long-term research sites in which research projects on various aspects of the ecology, biota and dynamics of two typical but contrasting moss-dominated communities on Signy were concentrated (Signy Island Reference Sites; SIRS) and the Fellfield Ecosystem Research Programme (FERP). Two floristically more complex communities were similarly investigated on South Georgia (South Georgia Reference Sites; SGRS). He also extended his studies with colleagues in Alaska, on Svalbard and in the Swiss Alps. Bill fostered

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collaborations with eminent scientists both in the UK and internationally, notably in Czechia, Serbia, Switzerland, Norway, the USA, and New Zealand.

Bill Block published ~170 research papers and presented many of these at international conferences. He was awarded the Polar Medal for his contributions to Antarctic science and in recognition of his global expertise in his field of research. One of several species of Antarctic arthropods new to science discovered by Bill was named for him: *Mucronothrus blocki* (an oribatid mite).

Block Lake near Husvik whaling station on South Georgia was named after him. In mid-retirement, he made several visits to the Antarctic as a lecturer on a Norwegian cruise ship.

Bill, and his wife May, had a long association with the Cambridge Canoe Club, and, in retirement, he took up beekeeping as a hobby and was an active and expert member of the Cambridge Beekeeping Association. For many years, he was also an active contributor to courses run by the University of the Third Age in Cambridge.