The long view: reminiscing about university life since the 1950s

Birkbeck Fellow and former Chair of Governors
Professor Michael Wise CBE MC looks back at a lifetime of teaching and research in London

From teaching geography to Birkbeck’s students to working with a succession of Birkbeck’s Masters, Professor Michael Wise has been part of the Birkbeck community for more than 50 years. Now aged 96, Professor Wise joined the College’s governing body in 1968, was Chair of Governors for six years in the 1980s, and became a Fellow in 1989. He retired as Emeritus Professor of Geography in 1985 after more than 30 years’ teaching at the London School of Economics, and after a lifetime of distinguished contributions to the field of geography. A former President of the International Geographical Union and recipient of the Royal Geographical Society Gill Memorial Award and Founder’s Medal, Professor Wise was awarded the CBE in 1979.

While working at LSE, Professor Wise was recruited to the University of London intercollegiate lecture programme in 1952 by Birkbeck’s then Professor of Geography, Sidney Wooldridge. Professor Wise recalled: “These lectures were held at Birkbeck because it was central – students would come from all the different London colleges. They were held on a Friday and repeated in the evening for Birkbeck students, which wasn’t too popular with my wife, because it meant I got home so late! “I lectured in economic geography for my students during the day and then gave a similar lecture in the evening. Although it was a long day for me, I never had any reluctance from the students: Birkbeck students, being older, always seemed pleased to ask questions and have some discussion. I enjoyed teaching at Birkbeck very much, and was very pleased to be involved for so many years.”

Over the years, Professor Wise has seen the College adapt to many changes and challenges, and he came to know a succession of Birkbeck’s Masters. “I knew Ronald Tress [Master from 1968 to 1977] well and then George Overend [1979–1987].” Professor Wise recalled. “As an economist, Tress took a broad approach to the subject, and was very keen on teaching – he was also good at responding to what students wanted. I liked him and got on well with him. He was a very good Master, as was Overend. “It was the same with Tessa Blackstone [1987–1997], a very able Master of whom I saw a great deal and who I worked with closely over the years.”

Now enjoying his retirement, Professor Wise attends Fellows’ dinners and is delighted to still be a part of the Birkbeck community.