



## GUEST EDITORIAL

# Commemorating the life and work of Professor Ross Davies, 1940-2005

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – To introduce a commemorative collection of articles by colleagues and former students of the late Professor Ross Davies, a leading UK academic in the field of retail management.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Outlines the development of Ross Davies' career and enumerates his particular contributions to the development of academic studies of retailing. Summarises the objectives of each paper in the collection.

**Findings** – The paper identifies the link between the authors of papers and Professor Davies' work.

**Originality/value** – Demonstrates the ways in which an academic was able to relate sound scholarship to the practical needs of retailers, service companies and public sector agencies.

**Keywords** Retailing, Management technique, Education, Academic staff

**Paper type** Viewpoint

The untimely death of Ross Davies in 2005 robbed his academic associates, as well as retail and development practitioners, of a passionate advocate of retailing and a close and supportive colleague. As a founding Director of the Oxford Institute of Retail Management (OXIRM) and a contributor to the work of the retail management group at the University of Surrey, Ross' work paralleled and encouraged the professionalisation of the sector. This festschrift of papers, comprising a special issue of the journal, has been prepared by some of his friends and colleagues in Oxford, Guildford, London and Manchester, some of whom were his former students. The authors are particularly grateful to Emerald and to Professor John Fernie for their support in making space available in *IJRDM*. The commissioned articles address a common set of themes close to Ross' research interests in retail development and planning, retail innovation and retail-led regeneration.

As a young academic, Ross Davies studied in North America where he met and married his wife, Mary. He completed his doctorate at Reading University on the structure of shopping centres and this began a lifelong interest in the changing nature of the retail environment and the locational strategies of retail firms. He is widely regarded as one of the founders of the quantitative approach to retail site assessment and location analysis (Davies and Rogers, 1985). As a geographer, he spent over ten years at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne where he established his reputation as a retail geographer.



He was one of the first entrepreneurial academics. He set up a publishing firm to produce his own book *Marketing Geography: with Special Reference to Retailing* in 1976 (Davies, 1976). His seminal studies into the impact of large-scale shopping centres on traditional town and city centres started here. This included his research on the then biggest city centre development, Eldon Square in Newcastle and the UK's first out-of-town regional centre, Metro Centre (Bennison and Davies, 1980; Howard and Davies, 1993). It was at this time he began to be in demand as a consultant to property and planning companies, as well as to retailers setting up site assessment activities.

Not content with studying the effects of the changing impact of supermarkets on shoppers and disadvantaged consumers, he persuaded Tesco and the local council to undertake a remarkable experiment in social inclusion using what we have now learned to call e-commerce (Davies and Champion, 1980). The fact that this happened in 1979 is even more remarkable and prescient. In many ways, Ross Davies was the intellectual father of e-commerce in the UK and it is perhaps no accident that Tesco now operates the world's largest online supermarket (Davies and Reynolds, 1988).

His entrepreneurial activities found a new home at Templeton College in the University of Oxford in 1984. He established OXIRM the following year as a leading centre of research and education in retail management. "Templeton's new Institute" was reviewed by the predecessor of this journal, *Retail & Distribution Management*, (Davies and Walters, 1985). A whole generation of directors of retail companies will remember Ross' own presentations analysing retail change, and his ability to bring together a remarkable set of contributors – business people and academics – in his seminars and courses. Outside the formal aspect of these events, he enjoyed nothing more than putting people together and helping deals emerge. Indeed, industry trade journal *Retail Week* devoted a major article to his influential style of working and his extensive network: "meet the fixer" it began.

It was during the 1980s that there was an explosion of retail development, leading to what Ross called a "state of disarray" in central and local government planning policy (Davies, 1984). In his continuing attempts to bring academic and business worlds together, Ross set up the Oxford Retail Group (ORG) of major retail, property and investment firms to work for greater clarity in retail policy (Oxford Retail Group, 1989). Through this Group, his personal writings, and advisory work for the House of Commons Select Committee on the Environment, he raised the level of debate in this area with the result that a whole new set of policies emerged. One very senior civil servant observed:

I want to record my gratitude for his support and enthusiasm for retail planning and for the change in Government policy which he worked so hard for, over the last 20 years. I hope he felt that he achieved those aims and that the result was what he wanted. I will miss his passion.

He extended his interests internationally during the 1990s, first in Europe through the establishment of the European Retail Seminars at Oxford, of a quarterly journal, *The European Retail Digest*, and most recently by means of a remarkable network of academics within Asian countries with interests in retailing. Again, he was seeking to raise the level of debate.

He had an inimitable style and way of working. He had a prodigious appetite for work. He valued loyalty of colleagues above all things, and inspired loyalty in those with whom he worked. In Oxford and elsewhere, he opened the doors for his students,

and paved the way for the academic and commercial careers that many of them now hold.

Although he officially retired from Templeton College in 1999, he did not stop working. He was elected to an Emeritus Fellowship of the College, as well as to a Visiting Chair at the University of Surrey's School of Management, an association he enjoyed and valued highly. During the final years of his life, it was the arrival of grandchildren which gave him the greatest joy.

The five papers in this collection are written by a selection of individuals – academics and practitioners – who were close to Ross Davies at various points in his career. Their contributions reflect his research interests as well as their own. Three papers specifically address retail regeneration and partnership issues. Stuart Hampson, the former Chairman of the John Lewis Partnership writes of his own involvement as a practitioner in issues of retail regeneration and outlines the extent of Ross Davies' role and influence in the development of retail planning policy in the UK over the past 20 years. Professor David Bennison, who worked with Davies at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, writing with Gary Warnaby and Dominic Medway, contributes a paper on the exciting development of Manchester's northern quarter as an idiosyncratic assembly of small-scale cultural industries and retailing activities. These insights, suggests Bennison, build upon Davies's work in understanding the emerging structure and pattern of retailing. Similarly, Professor Michelle Lowe of the University of Surrey writes on the regeneration effects of central area development in Southampton and the significant and positive role which retailing plays in this process.

Two final papers examine complementary aspects of retail development. Jonathan Reynolds, writing with Elizabeth Howard, Christine Cuthbertson and Latchezar Hristov, based at the OXIRM, now at the Saïd Business School, explore the extent to which retail regeneration is dependent upon innovation in retail formats in response to a changing business and consumer environment, drawing out longer term trends in the development of the sector. Finally, Elizabeth Howard makes an additional contribution in her examination of the role of leisure in shopping. One of the distinctive features of the new forms of shopping centres which have emerged over the past 20 years in the UK has been their increasing orientation around leisure, aiding the reconfiguration of shopping as a leisure activity.

In addition to dedicating this Special Issue of IJRDM to Ross Davies, his contribution to retailing has been marked in two other ways. A seminar on Town Centres Futures, hosted by GVA Grimley and featuring presentations by academic and practitioner colleagues, took place in June 2006. Later that summer, friends and colleagues gathered in Oxford to dedicate an armillary sphere to his memory. In thinking of how we might create an appropriate physical memorial, it seemed to his friends that an armillary sphere captured both his origins as a geographer, his role as an educator and his love of gardening and landscaping. Appropriately, the sphere is engraved with details of places that were important to Ross during his life.

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#### About the authors

Jonathan Reynolds is the Director of the Oxford Institute of Retail Management and a Fellow in Retail Marketing at Templeton College, Oxford. He has published and spoken widely on e-commerce, structural changes in retailing and in the fields of database, direct and local marketing. He is a member of the editorial boards of the *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Commercial Research* and the *International Journal of Retail & Distribution Management*, and is editor of the *Journal of Targeting, Measurement & Analysis for Marketing*. He regularly features on television and radio news and consumer affairs programmes. Jonathan Reynolds is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: jonathan.reynolds@sbs.ox.ac.uk

Michelle Lowe is a Professor of Retail Management and Leader of the Retail Management Subject Group in the School of Management, University of Surrey. Her work in the area of retail and consumption is internationally recognised, primarily via her books, *Retailing, Consumption and Capital* (1996) and *Reading Retail: A Geographical Perspective on Retailing and Consumption Spaces* (2002) with Neil Wrigley, and *Commercial Cultures* (2000) with Peter Jackson, Danny Miller and Frank Mort. She has attracted research funding from ESRC, Nuffield Foundation, British Academy, Canadian High Commission and commercial sponsors such as Tesco plc, Sainsbury plc and Chelsfield plc in the retail and property sectors. Currently, her research focuses on issues of retail-led urban regeneration; managing growth – retail development, housing growth and sustainable communities; customer service and competitive advantage in retail; and landscapes of consumption.

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