

## Obituary

# PETER AUBREY SABINE (1924–2022)

Richard J Merriman\*



Peter Sabine. BGS Image P1026795. Permit number CP22/046. British Geological Survey ©UKRI 2022.

Peter Aubrey Sabine, the son of Bernard and Lucy Sabine, was born in London in 1924. In 1943 he enrolled at Imperial College, London, and took advantage of the 2 year war-time degree offered at the time to graduate in Geology in 1945. In the same year he joined the Geological Survey and Museum (GSM) as a Geologist based in Exhibition Road, London. A year later he married Peggy Lambert. His early duties were largely concerned with the post-war reorganising of specimens and showcases in the Geological Museum, which despite opening in 1935 had been neglected during the war years (1939–45). This early work, guided by the Curator Dr J. Phemister, sparked Peter's interest in igneous petrology. He subsequently investigated the minor intrusions of the Assynt district, N.W. Highlands, and

submitted his work for a PhD, which was awarded in 1951. With the departure of Kingsley Dunham in 1950 to take up a Chair in Geology at Durham University, a post of Petrographer became vacant. He was invited to fill the post and was later promoted to become departmental head as Chief Petrographer in 1959.

He soon set about modernising the Petrographical Department. Very little had changed in terms of equipment since the introduction of petrography to the GSM around 1878, when Frank Rutley produced a Petrographical Memoir. Peter Sabine quickly realised that the use of the polarizing microscope for the optical characterisation of rocks and minerals had been overtaken by more rapid and versatile techniques. He acquired the first X-ray diffraction (XRD) equipment by the late 1950s, followed by X-ray fluorescence (XRF) and differential thermal analysis (DTA) equipment. By the mid-1960s a modern X-ray diffractometer and image analysis equipment were installed. Within a decade he had transformed the Petrographical Department into the best equipped and staffed laboratory in the GSM. During this time he became involved in a variety of petrological studies. Some of his early work concerned the mineralogy of stone axes, so called porcellanites, from Northern Ireland. This work expanded into a wider study of contact metamorphism of chalk by Tertiary dolerite intrusions, and resulted in several seminal publications. Following the first landing on Rockall by the Royal Navy in 1955, Peter provided the first detailed petrographical description of the granite found on this tiny Atlantic island. He was again involved in granite petrology when the Torrey Canyon was wrecked on the Seven Stones Reef, off the Scilly Isles in 1967.

At the time of his death, Peter was the longest-standing member of the Mineralogical Society; he joined in 1945. In 1966 he became a Vice-President of the Geological Society.

Peter Sabine was awarded a DSc by the University of London in 1970, and later in the same year he was promoted to Assistant Director with overall responsibility for the geological survey of southern England. Peter was not unprepared for this new role, having acquired some experience of geological mapping on the Strontian Igneous Complex, and also on West Shetland. Alongside his mainly administrative duties, he became a member of the IUGS Subcommission on the Systematics of Igneous Rocks, and subsequently contributed to a classification of volcanic rocks using total alkali oxide–silica diagrams. Peter moved again in 1977, to become Chief Geochemist at the Gray's Inn Road office of the renamed British Geological Survey (BGS), succeeding Dr Stanley Bowie, FRS. Peter returned to Exhibition Road later in 1977 as Deputy Director, following the sudden death of Dr William Bullerwell FRS. But these were times of change for the BGS, and plans to relocate the HQ to a site at Keyworth, near Nottingham, were well advanced. Peter made it clear that he would not relocate to Keyworth, and he retired at the end of 1984.

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In retirement Peter Sabine remained actively involved in geological research through membership of several learned societies. He was particularly interested in the war-time role of British geologists, and published two articles on their forensic investigations during the First World War. One of the last articles that Peter wrote was an elegant essay on the role of the geological sciences in the development of the Athenaeum Club (Sabine, 2001). All of the giants of British geology are mentioned, as well as some of those who 'stood on their shoulders'. The detail and

the ground covered, from the 'catastrophists' to the discovery of radioactivity, is delivered with style and economy. This is one of Peter's most erudite contributions to British geological literature.

### Reference

- Sabine P.A. (2001) Geological Sciences and the Early Years of the Athenaeum. In: *Armchair Athenians : Essays from Athenaeum Life*. The Athanæum, London.