

BSHM Christmas Meeting 2020

Titles & Abstracts

June Barrow-Green (Open University): “I found out myself by the triangles”: The mathematical progress of Robert Leslie Ellis (1817-1859) as told by himself.

Abstract

Robert Leslie Ellis was one of the most intriguing and wide-ranging intellectual figures of early Victorian Britain, his contributions ranging from advanced mathematical analysis to profound commentaries on philosophy and classics. From the age of nine he kept a journal in which, amongst other things, he recorded his mathematical progress. In this talk, I shall use Ellis’s journal to tell the story of his unconventional journey from home-tutored student in Bath in 1827 to Senior Wrangler in the Cambridge Mathematical Tripos of 1840.

Philip Beeley (University of Oxford): Whither the history of mathematics? Historical reflections on a historical discipline

Abstract

Beginning with the Oberwolfach meetings in the 1970s, the talk will consider some of the profound perspectival changes in the history of mathematics that have taken place over the last half century. Initially, these changes focused on giving greater weight to social history alongside what came to be known as the internalist approach, but increasingly scholars have come to see mathematics as deeply woven into the fabric of human culture and its history thus as complementary to other historical disciplines. The talk will provide an overview of this remarkable development and seek to assess its success.

Raymond Flood (Kellogg College, Oxford): John Fauvel: life, labours and legacy

This talk is dedicated to the memory of my dear friend and colleague John Fauvel (1947-2001) whose enthusiasm and support for the BSHM knew no bounds.

Abstract

As well as being the 50th anniversary of the Society, next year also marks twenty years since John Fauvel died. John was an energetic scholar, teacher and historian of mathematics and of particular importance to him was the use of the history of mathematics in education. As President of the BSHM and subsequently as Newsletter editor he fostered national and international collaboration and discussion. I am delighted to have the opportunity at this BSHM Christmas meeting to share with you some thoughts on John’s life, labours and legacy.

Craig Fraser (University of Toronto): John Charles Fields and Canadian Mathematics

Abstract

John Charles Fields (1863-1932) was a University of Toronto mathematician who was made a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1913, the first Canadian mathematician to receive this honour since the reform of 1847. At the end of his life he organized with the International Mathematical Union a prize for outstanding achievement in mathematics. He died in 1932, bequeathing his modest but not insubstantial estate to support the medal. Over the decades the Fields Medal has been awarded by the IMU at its congresses and has become widely known as the preeminent award for mathematical work, sometimes referred to as the "Nobel Prize" of mathematics.

The paper will examine various aspects of Fields life and career. In the decades that followed his death little attention was paid to him. He was not regarded as a consequential figure in the history of the mathematics department or the university, and his mathematical research itself attracted no interest. At the end of the century, as the international fame of the Fields Medal grew, his value as an asset for the branding and support of mathematics in Ontario was recognized. A research institute and building were named after him, and a lecture series in his name is open to the public. A biography of Fields was composed, and he even appears today on the Wikipedia article for the University of Toronto as one of the leading figures associated with the university.

Fields disciplinary identity and professional aspirations were influenced by a kind of grandiosity that was an integral aspect of his personality. This character trait was evident in his mathematical work, the role he took on as an advocate for government support of science, his organization of the flawed International Congress of Mathematicians in 1924 in Toronto, and finally in his last project to establish a prize for mathematics. His improbable emergence today as a symbolic figure of Canadian mathematics would likely have pleased him greatly, the final fulfillment of his sense of uniqueness and destiny.

Tony Mann (University of Greenwich): History of Mathematics: Dealing with the past

Abstract

Earlier this year University College London “denamed” two buildings previously named after the prominent statistician Karl Pearson. UCL acted because of Pearson’s eugenicist views, saying “any suggestion that we celebrate these ideas or the figures behind them creates an unwelcoming environment for many in our community.”

It might be thought that mathematical ideas are neutral – they are not affected by political or moral values. But there are big ideas in mathematics which were created by, and may be named after, mathematicians some of whose actions or writing would be unacceptable by today’s standards. Other areas of mathematics were originally developed for controversial purposes or were presented in ways which are inappropriate today. As historians we appreciate the complexities of these issues, but how should we, as mathematicians or teachers of mathematics, respond to the possibility that there might be an “unwelcoming environment” for the mathematicians of the future?

Steve Russ (University of Warwick): Onwards and Outwards

Abstract

This talk will look back to the 1990s but also peer cautiously a little into a possible future. We shall focus not so much on my time as President but on two BSHM events that I (and of course others) were fortunate to initiate and that became significant series in the work and life of the Society. These were the conference on History In Mathematics Education (HIMED90) and the one-day meeting Research in Progress (from the early 1990s). In doing this we'll draw together three themes: '... life must be understood backwards, ... but lived forwards' (Kierkegaard); a timely reflection on the European dimension of each of those events; and the essential role of context for motivation. The last of these three will be developed briefly along three axes: the public, the personal, and the problem-oriented.

Robin Wilson (Open University): The BSHM: the first fifty years

Abstract

In this talk I shall outline the history of the BSHM from its founding in 1971 to the present day, and try to answer the following questions. Who founded it, and why? What were the early talks? Who were the main people involved in its development? Which notable events have been celebrated? How have the meetings changed over the years? To what extent have the aims of the Society been met?