OBITUARIES

Leslie Hearshaw

Leslie Hearshaw, the former Professor of Psychology at Liverpool University, who has died aged 85, was a strong advocate of applied psychology, long before it held a prominent place in university curricula.

In the 1950s and 1960s the opportunities and resources for development in applied psychology were limited, and the pressures within the field were rather towards academic and laboratory psychology.

Hearshaw succeeded in setting up a small remedial reading clinic at Liverpool — where he held the Chair of Psychology from 1947 until his retirement in 1975 — but plans for a child guidance clinic had to be abandoned owing to lack of funds.

Postgraduate developments in occupational psychology and delinquency also suffered because of financial constraints, but under Hearshaw’s guidance postgraduate training in clinical psychology was established jointly with the psychiatry department in 1962.

Hearshaw’s interests were mainly channelled into the philosophical and historical aspects of the discipline, but he also published a wide range of books and review articles.

He is probably best known for his biography Cyril Burt, Psychologist (1979). This was a good example of the “historian as detective”, in which Hearshaw exposed the highly suspect research data on identical twins published by the author of the 11-plus.

But, although he had willingly undertaken this task, he was dismayed by the acrimonious public debate about the affair.

The son of F J C Hearshaw, Professor of History at King’s College, London, Leslie Spencer Hearshaw was born at Southampton on Dec 9, 1907, and educated at King’s College School, Wim- bledon, and Christ Church, Oxford, and London University, where he took firsts.

The early part of his career was concerned with industrial psychology in Britain and New Zealand, where he was a lecturer at Victoria University, Wellington, during the Second World War.

When he was appointed to the Chair at Liverpool, Hearshaw had to develop a complete degree course virtually from first principles. He was ably assisted in this endeavour by Dr Agnes Crawford, who carried the main burden of teaching, especially in the early years.

Psychology had always been taught at Liverpool as a subsidiary subject, and the teaching load was heavy, even in 1947. Sustained attempts by Hearshaw to increase staff and other facilities gradually led to a considerable expansion in student numbers, and eventually to the provision of well-equipped, purpose-built premises in the Eleanor Rathbone Building in 1973.

In the mid-1950s at Liverpool, Hearshaw encouraged the staff of the psychology department to embark on a joint research venture with him into conceptual thinking — a topic nowadays subsumed under the wider rubric of cognitive psychology.

He developed what was in effect a test of high-grade intelligence. Unfortunately the computer technology that would have been ideal for developing this project was not then available, and interest in it lapsed.

Hearshaw was a voracious reader, and expert in the art of summarising published work, a skill which he once expressed with uncharacteristic vigour as “tearing the guts out”.


Hearshaw played an important role in the British Psychological Society, of which he was President in 1955.

He was also an important figure in the development of the International Association of Applied Psychology. From 1964 to 1974 he was editor of the International Review of Applied Psychology.

In the late 1950s he was honorary director of the Medical Research Council Group on Occupational Aspects of Ageing, which was linked with the Department at Liverpool. He did not undertake empirical work in this area, but he was closely associated with its research into retirement.

Hearshaw was relatively formal in his professional dealings with people. In the company of his wife, Gwen, and his four children, he was much more relaxed and jovial. On annual outings to the Hearshaw’s home, staff and students enjoyed excellent food, croquet and general knowledge quizzes.

Prof Gilbert Byle, in summing up Hearshaw’s qualities, wrote: “He is an eminently likeable person, very level-headed, direct and vigorous. I wish there were more psychologists about with his massive sanity, his ungullibility and his good temper.”

He married, in 1937, Gwendolyn Dickins; they had a son and three daughters.