

Sidney Michaelson: computer scientist

THE death has occurred of Sidney Michaelson. Professor of Computer Science at the University of Edinburgh. He was 65.

Born and brought up in the East End of London, Sidney Michaelson gained his university education by winning a scholarship to Imperial College, London.

He graduated in 1946 with a 1st class honours degree in mathematics and planned to work in the aircraft industry. When this plan was thwarted, he undertook a series of research jobs at Imperial College and at the Electrical Research Association Laboratories before taking up a lectureship in mathematics at Imperial College in 1949.

He worked there with K D Tocher on the design and construction of digital computers. Although the only technology available to them was very elementary (Post Office relays and uniselectors), they built a working machine (ICCE1) based on a principle, subsequently known as micro-programming, which has become a cornerstone of the design of almost all digital computers.

He went to Edinburgh in 1963 when the university appointed him director of its newly-founded computer unit. There he started a pioneering computing service based on the use of land-line access to the Manchester University Atlas computer.

In 1965, he started the Edinburgh Multi-Access Project from which EMAS emerged in the early 1970s as the operating system on which the university's computing service would be based until

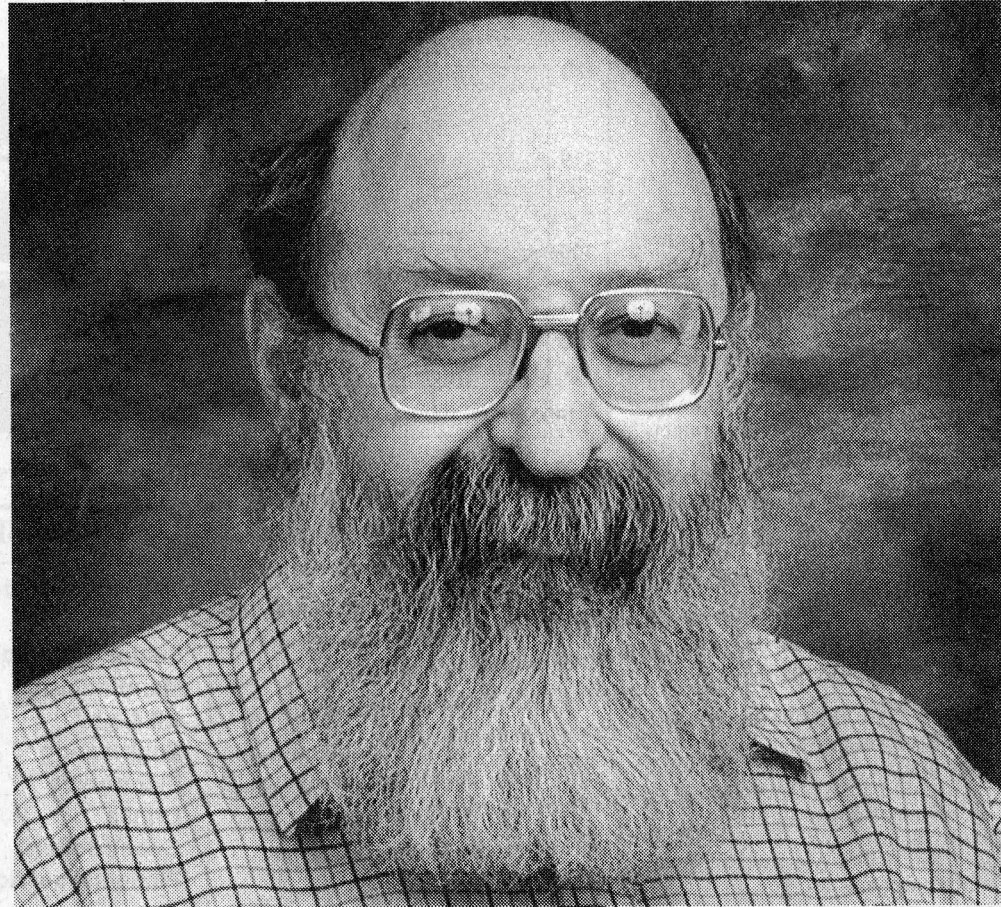
overtaken by the creeping universality of Unix in the late 1980s.

In 1966, the activities of the Computer Unit were divided into "teaching" and "service". Dr G E (Tommy) Thomas was appointed director of the Edinburgh Regional Computing Centre, while Sidney Michaelson was appointed Professor and Head of the Department of Computer Science.

From small beginnings in Buccleuch Place, the department became under his guidance one of the largest in the UK and has earned a worldwide reputation for the quality of both its teaching and research in fields as diverse as computational theory, parallel computing and VLSI design. His own knowledge of so many aspects of the subject earned him the respect of colleagues and students alike.

His influence was not just confined to the department, however, or even the university, where he served on many committees. Nationally, he played a leading role in establishing and maintaining professionalism within the British Computer Society, and internationally he founded the IFIP Working Group 10.5 on VLSI in 1982.

His enduring passion in recent years had been stylistic analysis of text, in which his seminal work with Andrew Morton was particularly exciting and rewarding. This scientific study of the usage of words to resolve literary problems of authorship and chronology has been used to cast light on the authorship of texts ranging from the Bible and the Iliad through



Prof Michaelson: pioneering computer work at Edinburgh University

Elizabethan and Jacobean drama to modern criminal "confessions".

Sidney Michaelson was never a dull character. He had a wicked sense of humour and it was sometimes difficult even in the most impassioned of arguments to know whether he was really serious. His interests were wide-ranging, taking in opera, wine-tasting

(his health precluded him from actually drinking it) and even plumbing, and he was well known in many circles in Edinburgh and beyond.

He is survived by his wife, Kitty, herself well known in Edinburgh as a lecturer and art historian with a particular interest in architecture, and their two sons and two daughters. The children were

brought up in a bustling household. There were always people staying or coming and going, for both Sidney and Kitty have been renowned for their generosity and hospitality.

Knowing Sidney Michaelson was a privilege. For his family and friends his death is a grievous loss.