

OBITUARIES

JOHN HASTED, 1921 – 2002

Most people of the right age are aware of the excitement surrounding Uri Geller when he demonstrated psychokinesis on television in the 1970s. This threw a challenge to the then prevalent notion that scientists know all the forces in nature and could, in principle, understand every phenomenon around us. There was a televised debate and a period during which most physical scientists reviewed their beliefs and how they could justify them.

I first became aware that John was researching paranormal metal-bending some months after this publicity when he visited the house of my school friend. This boy's sister, I had learnt, could bend cutlery with gentle stroking. I was somewhat surprised that such an important investigation was taking place, because during the televised debate no mention had been made of such research. I later learned that although John Hasted had been able to replicate some of the early findings he had been cut off every time he had tried to make himself heard during the debate.

Professor Hasted's approach to the subject emphasised physical phenomena as being the primary concern of the physicist and he believed that we should concentrate on understanding the details. He took the attitude that the metaphysical implications were irrelevant, or at least should not influence this work. However, it must be said that there was ample theoretical speculation, during our long drives. We would, on occasions, try to propound theories and demolish each other's; sometimes both engaged in proposing the opposite to what we really intended. Surprisingly, he did not discuss his religious or political views with me; perhaps he knew that I was more interested in the physics.

John gathered information from families, encouraging them to keep a journal of any unusual events that were taking place. This boosted their interest and often provided an interesting catalogue of events. His favourite way to explain unusual phenomena was with the multiple universe model. The idea is that at every instant many alternative universes branch off and that the mind is somehow able to cause these normally separate branches to interact along surfaces or exchange objects between them over a small volume. The weakness of the theory is that it does not predict any associated energies of interaction. Mind seems to play a pivotal role between alternative realities and it is hard to reconcile this with open branching, where it too would have to become duplicated. Perhaps we need to find mind-like properties in physics.

The Physics Department at Birkbeck College, where John worked when I knew him, was an interesting place. He had a deep love of experimental science and valued people over administrative systems. I don't remember him ever becoming angry, and he let a lot pass that would, in other departments, result in reprimand. There seems to have been some pressure from the College to limit his academic freedom and close the department. He realised that his researches into the paranormal did not help his case against this. John had an

extraordinary ability to encompass social interactions and maintain a good atmosphere, both during his experimental visits, over a large range of families, and in his department. I was also particularly struck by the diversity among his students at Birkbeck, most coming from distant parts of the world. This seemed unusual for the times.

He was very intrigued by the information transfer involved in psychical phenomena. With hindsight, it is perhaps surprising that we did not speculate much on how it would be processed and exchanged. These days there seems to be some understanding dawning about the uniformity and function of such systems within the brain's cortical tissue. It seems reasonable to speculate that the mathematical similarities between physical fields and the brain may yet be incorporated within physics.

In his research John had that rare ability which enables one to leap ahead. This was one of the most interesting things about his laboratory work. It is often difficult to see the overall pattern of research that is in progress. Knowing how to shorten the deductive chain can save a lot of time. It seems to be rather similar to recognising the avenues and development in a game of chess. In parapsychology people often become obsessed with proving the first step over and over again and lose sight of this path ahead. There are more than adequate opportunities to devise experiments that provide several answers at once.

During metal-bending experiments it is necessary to maintain a certain level of vigilance without creating the impression that this is the case. I remember one occasion when the subject's hands were straying dangerously close to the sensor, so John came up with the idea of mounting it on the end of a metronome arm. This provided an opportunity to measure the distribution of signals in space as well as discouraging hand movements that would involve a collision with the arm. While most paranormal effects take place without proximity or movement of the hand, it should be understood that there are occasions where such remote movements seem to cause a response from the sensor. For example, a female subject reported that holding her hands over her abdomen, and moving her fingers, enabled her to physically feel what was inside. Uri Geller has a demonstration where he asks a member of the audience to stand across the stage, nominate a part of the body and jab the air with a needle. He then displays a drop of blood on the skin at the intended body part. This type of effect may partly explain why some of these bad habits develop.

People often asked John if he used video cameras. These do seem to produce some inhibition, but it was interesting to observe the psychological nature of this. On one occasion we had set up a split screen to show hands from above and one side, together with chart-recorder data on the video monitor. For the first ten or fifteen minutes, nothing was recorded. Suddenly the phone rang at the back of the lab, and John, who was expecting a call, hurried to take it. On the way he tripped over a lead going to the back of the television monitor, and our subject exclaimed "Oh! The cameras have gone off!" At that point some large signals were recorded. It was interesting to note, however, that the video recorder was still capturing the image, as it was only the lead to the monitor that had become disconnected. The presence of the camera affects the interaction between subject and experimenter.

I remember my first visit to see Professor Hasted at his laboratory. After I had introduced myself, he invited me into his office and gave a fascinating account of the metal-bending that he had recorded at quite large distances from a boy subject. As I was interested, he offered to let me sit in on one of the experiments. We took a chart recorder and strain gauge amplifiers in a suitcase to the subject's home in North London. After setting up, John showed me how to keep the recordings at the right scale offset and annotate necessary changes. Some ten minutes into the session the signals started, and they were brief but surprisingly large. I found this rather peculiar, because I had confidence in the equipment. John later confessed that he had been worried that I might inhibit the production of these signals, but this was not the case. We discussed the results as our train returned to London. John mentioned that this boy was sometimes able to teleport objects. I was intrigued.

As we packed and set off a week later for another visit, John brought a plastic sweet container about 3cm across. After some half an hour of the session, we stopped for a cup of tea, and it was then that we discussed teleportation. Stephen confirmed that this happened on occasions and we decided to try it. I opened the egg-shaped container and took a small spade clip from the box of apparatus. John thought that we should also include something from the house, and the subject's father provided a small flint arrow head. I was given the job of placing the objects in the plastic egg, closing and sealing it. I did this with about two feet of plastic insulating tape and signed across the end. I passed the container to the subject and he shook it and concentrated. He shook it again but it sounded the same. John suggested that we drink our tea and leave it for a while. The boy placed the container on the floor between us and slightly towards the side of his chair. After we had drunk our tea John suggested that we try again. Our subject recovered the plastic container from its position on the floor where I had it under observation. This time the sound made by shaking it was distinctly different, so he passed it to me to check. The seal was still as it had been when I closed it and I noticed that the tape was still stretched, exactly as I had sealed it. When I opened the container, the flint arrow head was still there but the spade clip had gone. This was later recovered when John asked Stephen where he thought it might have gone. He indicated a flower pot behind me, and we were able to retrieve it from just below the loose soil surface.

In the course of experiments John was able to use pure metal specimens that had a known distribution of ions implanted below the surface. Electron backscatter enables changes in this depth profile to be measured. Changes of this nature give good validation and perhaps go some way towards providing an explanation for the delayed bending that occurs after a psychic has handled a specimen.

One of the last lines of experimentation that John was working on involved similar effects in the air. We decided to measure currents from the body of a specimen to ground, induced by capacitive coupling via the subject. This provides an excellent proximity and touch detection indication. I remember how we carefully tested the extra circuit in the lab and home on introducing it into the experiment. All started well, but then as we picked up the usual metal-bending pulses we started to get signals on the touch detector. This was fine,

but the problem was that we could see that the boy had his hand nowhere near the sensor! It is probable that these effects represent one of the mechanisms by which paranormal effects act on computers and other electronic equipment. After some laboratory work we were able to demonstrate the flow of currents from hand to sensor in the tens-of-kilohertz frequency range and to detect the magnetic field from the path. This is quite inexplicable in terms of known physics.

It is interesting to know something of Professor Hasted's family background. His grandfather was Sir Arthur Arnold Barrett, or Archie, an explorer in the Royal Gurkhas. His father, John Ord Cobbold Hasted, nicknamed Jock, was in the Army. A brother officer wrote the following about Jock:—

It would be interesting to know if Hasted has ever had an enemy. His personal charm is almost greater than any man has a right to have, especially when the gods have already made that man an able soldier and administrator. But it is an unfair world . . .

John's mother was from Viceroy Harding's family and she met Jock when she took over the diplomatic work that John's grandfather's wife had been doing at the time of her death. She herself died of puerperal fever when he was three weeks old.

John Barrett Hasted was born in Woodbridge, Suffolk, on 17th February 1921. He went to a boarding school with a military bias. At the age of twelve, during a practice run, he unexpectedly won a scholarship to Winchester College. Here he was saturated with classics for the first few years. During this time he built up a library of Left Book Club and Penguin books and, one Open Day, showed Hewlet Johnson—the Red Dean of Canterbury—around the College. He found that he was not doing so well with the traditional programme until he started science at the age of fifteen. His interest in science took hold of his development and his mentors taught him much about the importance of method—how to find the answer to scientific questions. "The amateur scientists of European History were held up to us as models, which suited me admirably, since I imagined them as being, like myself, in rebellion against their class, and indulging in some form of protest."

Winchester prepared him for New College, Oxford. He was told that it was more important to win a high place in the examination roll than a scholarship. John took twenty-eight practice exams and passed the entry exam one year early. At Oxford his interest in social significance had led him to formulate the following outlook, which I quote from his memoirs:—

The world is divided into two contrasted classes, the parasites and the working people. It is difficult to move from one class to the other. Even if I have to remain in the parasite class I must still spend my life in such a way as to achieve something permanent, which will outlast the forthcoming demise of the parasites. The most permanent value is new knowledge, attained through experimental science; this leads to further knowledge, and to mastery of and maintenance of our physical environment. Physics is the most basic science, and sooner or later I will have to learn it and work in it. It is still too early for me to study biology, since the molecular foundation of the subject is weak. I must live my own life working for the public good, and must never employ servants, certainly never in a personal capacity.

In time, through meeting many famous political thinkers during the blackouts of the war, he developed a 'political consciousness'. He also came to understand

that scientists were out of touch with the social and economic problems of the world. There was a Society for Freedom in Science that defended scientists' right to remain in 'ivory towers'—failing to realise that the metaphor derives not from elephant ivory, but from Procter & Gamble's Ivory Soap, the profits from which were supposed to have funded pure research in America.

His interest in music also developed at Oxford and he started the Oxford Workers' and Students' Choir, having noticed that Oxford choral music seemed to be aimed at the 'Armies of Satan', allowing the real evils to get away without protest!

After taking his degree examinations in chemistry, John became an anti-aircraft gunner. His officer training led to command of a unit and dealing with compassionate issues. He moved on into radar as a 'Radio Officer', working all over Britain (sometimes he used radio-frequency power to boil winkles on the beach). This resulted in a period at Malvern College, the centre of radar research. There was not much active service in Britain in 1942 but he obtained a draft to North Africa.

Returning to Britain, John was accepted at the Clarendon Laboratory in Oxford to study for a PhD. But his political interests prevented his continuing at Oxford, so he moved to University College, London. There he studied atomic collisions with Harrie Massey, taking up a post-doctoral fellowship. Also while there he married Elizabeth Gregson, a student of St Anne's College. This lasted for a while, but politics, physics and musical engagements left them with little in common.

John became involved with the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament in the 1950s. During this time he took part in running a Pirate Radio Station. Lynn Wynn-Harris, a ballet dancer, helped with this and they married in 1959. Lynn encouraged him in his research and was herself very sociable. They started a tradition of inviting the PhD students to their home on Christmas Day. Many of these were foreigners and had very limited finances.

In 1968 he applied for and was appointed to the Chair of Physics at nearby Birkbeck College. Here he met David Bohm and later conducted his research into paranormal metal-bending. In the course of this research he discovered that bending occurs along a surface extending from the subject's body. His results are summarised in his book, *The Metal Benders*. He retired to Cornwall in 1986 with Lynn, who died in 1988. John enjoyed good health up until about 2001, and finally passed away on 4th May 2002.

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