

# A Conversation with Dennis Lindley

Adrian Smith

*Abstract.* Dennis Victor Lindley was born on 25 July 1923 in south London, England, and his childhood was mainly spent in Surbiton, a southwestern suburb of London. He was educated nearby at Tiffin Boys' School and read Mathematics at the University of Cambridge, where he later became Director of the Statistical Laboratory. In 1947 he married Joan Armitage, cousin of the statistician Peter Armitage, and they have three children: Janet, Rowan and Robert. He later occupied chairs in statistics at the University College of Wales, Aberystwyth, and at University College London before taking early retirement in 1977. Since then he has travelled widely, holding visiting posts at Berkeley, Chicago, Madison, Tallahassee, Washington DC, Sao Paulo, Melbourne, Purdue, Duke, Davis, Iowa, Rome and Bloemfontein. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Mathematical Statistics and of the American Statistical Association. He has a Guy medal from the Royal Statistical Society, and in 1988 was the IMS Wald Lecturer.

The following conversation took place at Imperial College London on 14 April 1994.

## HOME, SCHOOL AND CAMBRIDGE

**Smith:** Dennis, what was your family background?

**Lindley:** I was an only child and the family had little culture. Both my parents were proud of the fact that they had never read a book and they had a low opinion of classical music. It was essentially a family in which none of the ordinary cultural activities went on. When I went to Tiffin School, I realized that there were other things in this world.

**Smith:** I believe your schoolboy ambition was to be an architect?

**Lindley:** Yes. My father put roofs on buildings and nearly every evening he would come home with plans. I got fascinated by these and decided to make plans of my own—literally.

**Smith:** After secondary school you went up to Trinity College Cambridge in 1941 to read mathematics?

**Lindley:** Yes. My father wanted me to be an apprentice to an architect, but the war intervened and made this difficult, so I was allowed to stay on at

school to sit for the higher-level examinations. I passed the art exams, but did much better in mathematics. Mr. Meshenberg, the maths teacher, managed to persuade my parents that I should try for Cambridge. Much to everybody's astonishment, except Mr. Meshenberg's, I got an exhibition (a form of scholarship) to Cambridge.

Incidentally, I owed this partly to Hitler. We were being bombed and often had to go down to the air-raid shelters at school. Mr. Meshenberg could not teach the class there, but he could sit next to me, so that I had hours of individual teaching that were enormously beneficial. I don't think I would have gotten to Cambridge if it hadn't been for that.

**Smith:** Those were the days when getting into Cambridge required evidence of a broad, cultural base?

**Lindley:** The examination itself consisted of mathematics and an essay, which fortunately was on "The English Parish Church," a subject on which I was knowledgeable because of my interest in architecture. Also I had to pass a separate, Latin examination, which I failed. The summer before going to Cambridge, I did Latin and nothing else for six weeks, took three different Latin exams at the end and passed them all. So I got to Cambridge.

**Smith:** Did that experience help you acquire rigorous work habits?

**Lindley:** No, I have always been lazy. Apart from languages, school was academically very easy.

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