

GODFREY HAROLD HARDY

1877–1947

Last year English mathematics suffered the loss of that mathematician who has more than any other been identified with the English School from the early 1900s to the present.

Godfrey Harold Hardy died of heart failure in 1947. For a considerable period his work had been restricted by bad health, which came as a special misfortune to a man whose career for many years had been identified not only with great mental activity, but also with a large measure of interest in all those games in which a ball takes part, and for whom this interest involved a very considerable share of personal participation. He was an encyclopedia of information concerning cricket, and to the very end nothing delighted him more than to witness a match.

Hardy came from a family with artistic and intellectual traditions. He went to Winchester and then to Trinity College, Cambridge. The milieu in which he developed as a mathematician is one which it is particularly difficult for those outside of the English tradition to understand, and even rather difficult for those belonging to the newer English tradition which Hardy himself had so much hand in establishing.

It all goes back to the disputes between Newton and Leibniz concerning the invention of the calculus. At present we have not much doubt of the fact that Newton invented the differential and integral calculus, that Leibniz' work was somewhat later but independent, and that Leibniz' notation was far superior to Newton's. At the beginning the relations between the Leibnizian and the Newtonian schools were not hostile, but it was not long before patriotic and misguidedly loyal colleagues of both discoverers instigated a quarrel, the effects of which have scarcely yet died out. In particular, it became an act of faith and of patriotic loyalty for the British mathematicians to use the less flexible Newtonian notation and to affect to look down on the new work done by the Leibnizian school on the Continent. For a while there was no scarcity of able English mathematicians of the strictly Newtonian school. For example, we must mention Taylor and Maclaurin. However, when the great continental school of the Bernoullis and Euler arose (not to mention Lagrange and Laplace who came later) there were no men of comparable calibre north of the Channel to compete with them on anything like a plane of equality. Part of this must be attributed to the fallen status