

David Turner obituary

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My father, David Turner, who has died aged 77, was a highly respected and renowned computer scientist whose name will always be associated with functional programming, and the lead that the UK still takes in developing and fostering the discipline. David was an early advocate for functional programming, which promises a higher-level, more abstract approach to writing software. He will be particularly remembered for designing and implementing three programming languages: St Andrews Static language (SASL, 1976), which is the basis of implementations of compiler and operating systems to this day; Kent Recursive Calculator (KRC, 1981); and Miranda (1985), which became the first “lazy”, purely functional language to be commercially supported. The elegance and simplicity of these languages showed David’s taste and skill in choosing and combining language features, and their impact can be seen in languages in use today, particularly the later Haskell language. His first academic job was as a lecturer in computer science at the University of St Andrews in 1972, where he remained for five years. He then spent most of the rest of his career (1978-97) at the University of Kent, going on sabbatical during the 90s to spend a couple of semesters as visiting professor at the University of Texas in Austin, before taking early retirement, retaining the title of emeritus professor of computation. A research post at Queen Mary, University of London followed, then a research professorship at Middlesex University (2002 to c2006). As an active member of the International Federation for Information Processing working group up until his death, he was involved with developing international standards in programming and informatics, frequently giving guest lectures in the UK and abroad. Born in Battersea, south London, to Yetta (nee Phillips), a secretary, and Peter Turner, a salesman who became a company director, David grew up in Thornton Heath, where he attended Selhurst grammar school, before studying physics at Oxford University. He went on to obtain a doctorate of philosophy from the university, where he was supervised by Christopher Strachey, Oxford’s first chair of computer science. David’s parents were second-generation Jewish immigrants. David decided early on that he was an atheist but had continued to feel connected to his Jewish roots, relearning Hebrew in his later years. He had an expansive knowledge and love of literature, the arts and history, and was passionate about social justice and civil rights in politics. A brilliant orator, he was skilled at engaging and persuasive discourse. He was deeply distressed by the Israel/Palestine conflict and strongly advocated for equal rights for Palestinians. David is survived by his wife, Una (nee Williams), whom he met in 1968 in Oxford, where she was a lab technician, and married in 1970; his children, Sarah, Daniel and Benjamin; grandchildren Luke, Caleb, Elijah, Chloe and Alice; and his brothers, Simon and Paul.