BAAL Newsletter

**A blue plaque for S. Pit Corder**

In early September 2018, two years of conference planning was finally coming to an end at [York St John University](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/). Over three days, more than 300 people from 30 countries attended the 51st annual meeting of the [British Association of Applied Linguistics](https://www.baal.org.uk/) (BAAL), on the theme of ‘[taking risks in Applied Linguistics](https://www.multilingual-matters.com/page/detail/Vulnerabilities-Challenges-and-Risks-in-Applied-Linguistics/?k=9781788928236)’. As co-Chair (with Professor [Chris Hall](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/our-staff/staff-profiles/christopher-j-hall.php)) of the Local Organising Committee, I had had a busy summer, which included finalising the details of the four plenary speakers, one for each day of the conference plus an extra one for the final day, traditionally on the topic of second language acquisition and named after the first Chair of BAAL, Stephen Pit Corder.

On the last day of the conference, while listening to Chris introduce the [final plenary speaker](https://youtu.be/msaj5ufz_ik), I was also thinking about a semester 1 module that I was about to teach for the first time: Key Themes in Applied Linguistics[[1]](#footnote-1). The module document promised a group project and, because of the conference, I told myself, I hadn’t had time to think of a topic. When I heard Chris say, in his introduction to the Pit Corder Lecture, given by Professor [Bill van Patten](http://www.teawithbvp.com/), that Corder had been born around the corner from York St John University, on Bootham Terrace, I made a note: group project = Pit Corder.

I met my new students the week after the conference. The first session on their module was ‘Applied Linguistics then and now: the Pit Corder Project’, and I took my copy of *Introducing Applied Linguistics* (Corder, 1973) into class as a source of information about ‘Applied Linguistics then’. My other resource for that session was the BAAL conference programme, a source of information about ‘Applied Linguistics now’. We watched the video recording of Chris introducing Bill van Patten and I asked the students to look up Pit Corder online, and in the library, and tell me next week what they had found out about Corder’s life and work.

When the students came back next week, they were full of ideas for their project. They had seen the (then) rather brief [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pit_Corder) page, found the *Applied Linguistics* [obituary](https://academic.oup.com/applij/article-abstract/11/4/321-s/245276?redirectedFrom=fulltext) by Henry Widdowson, the [bibliography](https://academic.oup.com/applij/article-abstract/12/1/96/244638?redirectedFrom=fulltext) of Corder’s academic works by A. P. R. Howatt, and [Notes on the History of BAAL 1967-97](https://baal.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/history_of_baal.pdf). One group of students had taken a photo of the house where Pit Corder was born, now the [Hedley House Hotel](https://www.hedleyhouse.com/). Another, noticing the reference to the Corder family’s Quaker connections on the Wikipedia page, had reflected on her own Quaker heritage, and on the history of Quaker influence in York on business and manufacturing ([chocolate](https://www.yorkschocolatestory.com/)) and the treatment of mental ill-health (at [The Retreat](https://theretreatyork.org.uk/)). We spent some of the class time thinking about where we could get more information to add to the Wikipedia page, and how we might raise awareness of the links between York and Applied Linguistics. The students made a list of people to contact, including: the current (third) Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of Edinburgh, Pit Corder was the first, [John E. Joseph](https://www.ed.ac.uk/profile/john-e-joseph); the (at the time of the project) current Chair of BAAL, Pit Corder was the founding Chair, [Dr Dawn Knight](https://www.cardiff.ac.uk/people/view/142032-knight-dawn); Henry Widdowson; Tony Howatt; the archivists at Edinburgh and Merton College, Oxford, where Pit Corder was an undergraduate; [Bootham School](https://www.boothamschool.com/) in York, where Pit Corder studied and his father was a teacher; and any living relatives of Pit Corder.

By the following week, replies from everyone the students had contacted were in, and they were absolutely delighted by the helpfulness and the warmth of the responses. The archivist at Merton had found a photo of Corder in the College rowing team and Pit Corder’s granddaughter had sent a photo of Corder reading a newspaper. Both Tony Howatt and Henry Widdowson had replied with useful information. We logged on to Wikipedia and added the photos, and some of the new details about Corder’s work and life. I had looked up how to apply for a blue plaque for Corder’s birthplace and, in class, the students started to prepare an application to the York Civic Trust for a plaque.

After many delays, our application for a blue plaque was accepted and permission to put it up was achieved from the owners of the Hotel. The York Civic Trust published the [students’ account](https://yorkcivictrust.co.uk/stephen-pit-corder-1918-1990/) of Pit Corder’s significance to the City of York and the discipline of Applied Linguistics, and an unveiling event was planned. Finally, in February 2022, we were delighted to welcome the current Chair of BAAL, [Professor Zhu Hua](https://iris.ucl.ac.uk/iris/browse/profile?upi=ZHUAC47&openTabNum=2), to [unveil the plaque](https://youtu.be/3ZPKQnBRTO4), as well as two former Chairs, [Professor Ros Mitchell](https://www.southampton.ac.uk/ml/about/staff/rfm3.page) and Dr Dawn Knight. At a [post-unveiling event](https://youtu.be/ASTxBVXnQbc), hosted by [Professor Helen Sauntson](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/our-staff/staff-profiles/helen-sauntson.php) and the [Centre for Language and Social Justice Research](https://www.yorksj.ac.uk/research/centre-for-language-and-social-justice-research/), a statement written by Henry Widdowson was read aloud by one of the students who had written the application to the York Civic Trust, Hannah Bungard. Helen Sauntson, Zhu Hua, Ros Mitchell and John Joseph spoke about their connections to Pit Corder and his Quaker-inspired influence on our scholarly association and on thinking in our discipline.

Helen and I had planned a moment of silence at the end of the event, Quaker style. But the participants were very keen to talk to each other and so we finished in a different way that was, we later agreed, not a failure to conform to our plan but a legitimate participant initiative that we took as a sign of success, Corder style.

Rachel Wicaksono, Head of the School of Education, Language and Psychology, York St John University and BAAL Membership Secretary

**References**

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Howatt, A. P. R. (1991). ‘The Academic Works of S. Pit Corder (1918–1990): A Bibliography’, *Applied Linguistics*, 12, 1, 96–101.

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1. ‘… applied linguistics is a discipline concerned with the role language and languages play in perceived problems of communication, social identity, education, health, economics, politics and justice, and in the development of ways to remediate or resolve these problems.’ (Hall et al, 2017, p. 15) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)