GEORGE E. HIGGINS
(1916–1999)

By John B. Saunders
Leyburn, North Yorkshire, England

George Higgins died of coronary heart disease in Horsham on August 26, 1999, at the age of 83. He was born in South London in 1916 and went to Battersea Grammar School, from where he obtained a scholarship to the Royal School of Mines in 1935. He studied oil technology under Professor Vincent Illing, leading to a B.Sc. in 1938. Such a course no longer exists. It was designed to consider the geology of oil, the sort of rocks in which it occurred, how it was formed and trapped, then the methods of finding and extracting it and the tools that were available at the time to do so.

Illing was a well-known teacher, and he was much in demand as a consultant. He had many interests in northern South America, so it was natural that George should be sent out to Venezuela to work for Ultramar. His job was to carry out geological surveys in the bush in south and central Guanaco, and also gravity surveys using torsion balances.

George moved to the neighboring British island of Trinidad in 1941, where he worked for Trinidad Leaseholds Ltd. in both development and exploration geology, and also served as liaison officer and geologist attached to Seismic Services Ltd. In the early 1950s, he became senior geologist in charge of exploration.

In 1956, an American company bought Trinidad Leaseholds Ltd. (or Trinidad and Tobago Oil Company, as it was then called) and it became Texaco Trinidad Inc. George continued as senior exploration geologist until he was transferred to Texaco’s London office in 1971. There he worked as an exploration geologist on their North Sea leases until he was placed in charge of geochemical studies and worked on well and outcrop data used for crude oil source rock relationships.

In 1981, he retired but was kept on as a consultant doing regional studies on the Moray Firth in the North Sea. He was finally forced to give up for health reasons, which were resolved by a successful quadruple heart bypass operation.

In Trinidad, he produced many excellent field reports and became a master in the art of augering, as outcrops in the south of the island were few and far between. Many a younger, less experienced geologist can bear witness to the patience George displayed in giving a helping hand when it was needed. Also, he seemed to be the only one who knew where to locate the vital map for the job in hand. We all made use of his knowledge unashamedly.

His retirement years were spent in Horsham in Sussex. After he regained his health, he took on the mammoth task of compiling a History of Trinidad Oil. This was completed and published in Trinidad in 1996 as a book of 498 pages. This picture of the development of the oil industry in Trinidad since its beginnings in the late 19th century is a fascinating piece of oil history. The profits from the sale of the book will go toward providing bursaries for students of petroleum engineering at the University of the West Indies.

George belonged to several learned societies, but the two he appreciated most were the Institute of Petroleum of London and the AAPG. He was an Emeritus member of the latter and found issues of the Bulletin and the Explorer of great value as a means of keeping up with events and staying in touch with his many friends in the industry.

While in Trinidad, he developed an interest in mud volcanism, and he wrote several papers on the subject. One of these papers documented the submarine eruption of a mud island off the south coast of Trinidad in 1964, and this paper was published in the Bulletin (Vol. 51, 1967).

George was a keen sportsman. When young, he was offered a position as a professional player with the Crystal Palace Football Club. He continued to play for the Leaseholds team in Trinidad. He was a skilled and energetic squash player, renowned for his patience in coaching the young. There is now a squash court named after him in Pointe-a-Pierre.

Golf was always his great love, and he played with skill and enthusiasm right up to the end. This was when he was not tending his orchids, a hobby he began in Trinidad. He lovingly tended more than 200 plants of Cattleya and Phalaenopsis in his enclosed and tropically heated porch in England.

George was a devoted family man. He married in the Anglican Church in Pointe-a-Pierre, and Muriel was his soul mate for more than 50 years. They have a son and daughter and five granddaughters all living in the south of England.