

Introduction

Some Institutions periodically commission historians to write their history. In other places, old documents are simply collected in boxes. Sometimes the boxes are strong and well looked after; in other places they are flimsy and left to fend for themselves. The Physics Department in Bristol has in the past fallen somewhere in between these extremes. But over the years, a number of people have written histories of the department, or set down their recollections, and we have gathered together a number of these documents here as a substantial record of the history of the Department, from the early days of University College, Bristol to the recent past.

To set the scene, we start in Chapter 3 with a series of pictures of the Physics building and its surroundings, and then move on in Chapter 4 to a brief account by a professional historian, J.W.Sherborne, of the genesis of the old Physics building, which was formally opened by Sir Ernest Rutherford in 1927: the brochure produced for the opening is reproduced in Chapter 5.

The founding father of physics in Bristol was Professor Arthur Tyndall, and in 1956 he wrote the first history of the Department, covering the period from 1876 to 1948 (Chapter 6). This was followed in 1992 by Professor Norman Thompson, who continued the story from 1948 to 1988 (Chapter 7). These two histories between them cover the first 110 years of the department's existence in considerable detail.

These histories are followed in Chapters 8 to 13 by a series of reminiscences by distinguished members and ex-members of the department, starting again with two contributions from Tyndall himself: one a short radio talk he gave at the time of his retirement in 1948; the other a longer address to the Senior Common Room in 1958. These are followed by short contributions by Sir Bernard Lovell and Sir Nevill Mott (which, like Tyndall's 1958 reminiscences, first appeared in print in the book 'University and Community', published in 1976 to celebrate the centenary of the founding of University College, Bristol) and a longer 'Fragment of Autobiography' by Cecil Powell, sadly left unfinished when he died in 1969. Finally, another long-term contributor and astute observer of the Department of Physics was Kevin Tindall, who retired as Laboratory Superintendent in 1987 after first coming to the Royal Fort as a junior employee of the Admiralty (who occupied part of the building during the war) at the age of 17 in 1940. He felt moved to record his experiences in 1991.

For many years the department has been in the habit of maintaining a Portrait Gallery of distinguished alumni (irreverently known as the Rogues' Gallery), which is to be found outside the Powell lecture theatre, and our last and longest chapter reproduces this collection of photographs, arranged in alphabetical order, with a very brief cv attached to each photograph to provide a little more information.

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