

The History of the Institute



Professor Frederick Guthrie

This is a very short overview of the formation of the Physical Society and the Institute of Physics up until their merger in 1960.

'125 years: The Physical Society and the Institute of Physics' by John Lewis was published in the anniversary year and gives a full account of the Institute's formation and activities.

The Physical Society was formed by the initiative of Professor Frederick Guthrie, Professor of Physics at the Royal College of Science, South Kensington. Together with his assistant, William Barrett (later Sir W Barrett, FRS), he proposed setting up a 'Society for physical research', by sending an initial circular to 30 physicists in 1873. Emphasis was to be on practical and experimental science. The Committee of the Council on Education offered the Society the free use of laboratories and apparatus in South Kensington and, at a meeting on 14 February 1874, the Physical Society of London was formed with 29 people present. A further 99 expressed interest in joining. The Society's first president was J H Gladstone. Guthrie became 'Demonstrator' of the Society (he later became President in 1884, two years before he died).

Initially meetings were held fortnightly at the Royal College of Science and Imperial College; in 1894 the Chemical Society invited the Physical Society to hold meetings at Burlington House, but the number of demonstration papers presented dropped as it proved difficult to transport equipment and apparatus to the meetings. Although meetings and visits were arranged at other venues, by 1910 almost every meeting was again held at Imperial College, London. The Society's membership was broadly based and included schoolteachers and amateur scientists as well as eminent professors. Membership was open to women from the Society's inception. Unlike the chemists who, in 1877, had formed the Institute of Chemistry, to safeguard the interests of their profession, the early members of the Physical Society showed no interest in professional matters. The annual subscription remained unchanged at one pound until, in 1896 it was raised to two guineas. Members could be styled "Fellows of the Physical Society of London". In 1916 the post-nominal letters FPSL were adopted.

1905 saw the Society's first annual exhibition of scientific apparatus. This exhibition grew in size and popularity and was held each year, with breaks during the first and second World wars.

The first of the Society's special lectures, the Guthrie lecture, began in 1914. The special lectures later became the Society's medal awards.

The Institute of Physics held its inaugural meeting on 27 April 1921. In 1917 the Council of the Physical Society had started to explore with the Faraday Society, the Optical Society and the Roentgen Society ways of improving the professional status of physicists. The Institute was incorporated by special licence from the Board of Trade in November 1920 with the Royal

Microscopical Society and the Roentgen Society associated as participating societies. Sir Richard Glazebrook was the first President of the Institute and in 1920 Sir Joseph Thompson was elected as its first Honorary Fellow

The newly-formed Institute needed a publication and, in May 1922, a preliminary issue of Journal of Scientific Instruments appeared. Regular publication began in October 1923. The Society produced Reports on Progress in Physics, an annual publication which first appeared in 1934.

In 1924 The Physical Society celebrated its jubilee with a banquet held at the Connaught Rooms in London with HRH the Duke of York as the principal guest.

The Society and Institute shared administrative arrangements. The first secretary to the Board was F S Spiers who worked from the offices of the Faraday Society until his sudden death in 1926. The following year, the Institute acquired, rent-free, 1 LowtherGardens from the Royal Commission that had organised the Great Exhibition. A registrar was appointed and a members' library opened. H R Lang became Secretary in 1931 as an interim measure, however, his appointment was to last for the next 30 years.

The Society had established branches in Australia and India; in 1932 the first UK branch, in Manchester, was formed. The Colour Group was the first applied physics group to be formed and was followed in 1942 by the Optical Group and in 1945 by the Low Temperature Group.

During the second world war the Institute moved temporarily to the University of Reading. The Secretary of the Physical Society and a small staff stayed at 1 LowtherGardens. After the war, the Institute returned to London, first to 19 Albemarle Street, where it stayed for little over a year, before moving to 47 Belgrave Square in December 1946.

Initial talks about merging the two organisations were started in 1946 and 1947 but nothing came of them. Proposals for the Society and Institute to start a new journal in applied physics failed because post-war paper rationing made the proposition impractical.

In 1949 Proceedings was split into two sections, Section A - atomic and sub-atomic physics and Section B - macroscopic physics. This split was intended to speed the time between paper submission and publication. Members received one part free and could subscribe to the other at a reduced rate. However, publication costs continued to rise and in January 1953, subscriptions for publications were separated from those for membership. Expansion in publishing activity occurred in 1950 when the Physics in industry section of Journal of Scientific Instruments became the British Journal of Applied Physics. A monthly Bulletin was also started.

The Institute reconsidered the regulations for membership in 1948. In 1949 the graduate grade was introduced and in 1952 graduateship examinations were started.

By 1960 the Faraday Society, the Royal Meteorological Society and the British Institute of Radiology had withdrawn from the Institute. Sir Neville Mott, the Society President, re-opened the debate about merger between the Institute and the Society in 1957; this eventually took place in 1960 with the new organisation being called 'The Institute of Physics and the Physical Society'. This unwieldy name continued until the acquisition of the Royal Charter in 1970 when the title 'Institute of Physics' was adopted. Sir John Cockcroft was the first President of the combined Society and Institute. The offices in LowtherGardens became the editorial offices and Belgrave Square became the Institute's headquarters. At the time of the merger there were just over 9,000 members.