

September 1942 to August 1943

In a sense my association with KCL began long before I became a student there. My secondary schooling was at the Regent Street Polytechnic, which I joined in 1935. The headmaster at the time of my joining departed fairly soon afterwards and his replacement, Dr. B.L. Worsnop, was recruited from within the Poly. 'Nobby' Worsnop, as we came to know him, had been a Senior Lecturer in Physics at KCL and joined the Poly as Head of the Maths and Physics Department - for the whole institution, not just the school. He hadn't been long in this post when the headship of the secondary school became vacant, which he filled with great distinction. He was joint author with H.T. Flint of a Physics textbook and for many years after joining the Poly he edited the Methuen series of Monographs on specialised topics in Physics

'Nobby' Worsnop had been Headmaster for about three years when the second world war broke out and he led the school in evacuation to Minehead, Somerset. By June 1942 I had completed my 6th Form studies and obtained a Higher School Certificate in five subjects. There was at that time a great need for graduates to work on radar as part of the war effort so there came into being something known as the Hankey Radio Training scheme, which Physics departments undertook (somewhat reluctantly, I surmise) as part of their degree courses. This suited me well as in order to continue listening to music away from home I had become very interested in how radio receivers worked. I see in my final school report that I had a favourable comment on my Physics theory and a not so good opinion on Physics practical; this surprises me given my later career, which included the publishing of papers on practical class work at the Cavendish Laboratory. However the reputation for being good at theory was probably why Nobby supported my application for a place on the 2-year BSc (Special) Physics course at KCL under the Hankey scheme. So it was from being an evacuee in Minehead that in September 1942 I joined KCL which itself had been evacuated to Bristol.

I arrived at Temple Meads station to find much of the centre of Bristol, including some of Bristol University's buildings which were shared with KCL, destroyed or gutted by bombs. The Royal Fort, the building used for the teaching of Physics, Maths and perhaps other subjects, was in good condition. Many members of staff of the Physics faculties of both institutions were away helping in the war effort, most of them probably at TRE Malvern on radar developments. H.T. Flint was the Reader in charge. Some former members of staff, such as David Owen, notable for the Owen bridge, were brought out of retirement. Others recruited to the staff included Europeans who, it was rumoured, might otherwise have been interned - the excellent Drs. Pincherle & Ahroni come to mind. A number of lectures were given jointly to Bristol and KCL students, one particularly notable contributor in this respect being Prof. A.M. Tyndall.

I was the first in my immediate family to go to University, though I had an Uncle, Rev. Arthur Millns, who had become an AKC. Wartime travelling difficulties precluded close contact with him so essentially I started from scratch. I remember being acutely embarrassed about inconsequential things such as answering in terms of book titles when a 2nd year asked me what I was reading.

I found, or was found, digs with 6 or 7 other freshmen fairly near the Royal Fort. One contemporary I remember was Roy Harding from Liskeard and for some reason the names of the only two 2nd Years, Burvill & Pegg, have stuck. The place for socialising was the Berkeley Cafe, opposite the (gutted?) Bristol University tower. There was a joint Union building which was also a pleasant place for meeting people. I did not get involved in Union politics. I have stuck with the bank (Barclays) I joined on my way to the Berkeley Cafe from the Royal Fort.

Something of the flavour of freshmen in 1942-43 can be gleaned from a letter written to Dr. Worsnop by a group of students from the Regent Street Poly, including myself, and published in the school's magazine, The Quintinian:-

OLD QUINTINIANS

KING'S COLLEGE

DEAR DR. WORSNOP,

This is our first Poly. gathering (the Kingtinians) at King's and we are taking advantage of this meeting to send you all our news. In a similar fashion to the other Poly. circle at Cambridge we are seated round the fire, but with one difference - we have no intention of working. The beginning of this term has brought an addition to our ranks, namely, Ted Steward, who has entered wholeheartedly into the traditions of King's. We can assure you that the war will be over "in one fell swoop" now that Ted has "volunteered" for service in the S.T.C. The Poly. is well represented in the various activities at King's. Bob Hartley plays in his usual position in the 1st Soccer XI.; Bob Musgrove has been awarded his Winter Eights Scarf by the Boat Club; and John Gibbons pulls his weight in the Second Eight. "Colonel" Beck is keeping his head above water in the Swimming Club, and also takes a great interest in the Music Club. Ted has hardly had time to think about activities of this type as yet.

In spite of the change over to College life, we still have amusing lectures. The typical atmosphere of a Physics lecture runs as follows :-The Professor comes in and turns out a stray dog and then commences to lecture. After changing his glasses to look at the time he turns off the lights for a demonstration. Suddenly we hear pathetic cries of "Oh! where am I?" and on ringing the bell for the lab. steward, somebody calls out, "Mine's a bitter, please." Engineering lectures, according to Johnny, are run on similar lines, but are more noisy; this being due to lack of feminine society.

Court is now adjourning for light refreshment. Having toasted the Poly., we continue with renewed vigour.

Among outstanding examples of interesting papers given during the session are those of Doctors Femaro and Pincherle on "The Internal Constitution of the Stars" and "The Uncertainty Principle" respectively. A short while ago some of us were invited to Shuttleworth's home, where we passed a most enjoyable evening talking of the good old times. Shuttleworth is taking Honours Maths, at the Bristol University, as you know. Please convey our kind regards to all members of the Staff, and we hope to come in force to visit you some time during one of our vacations.

Yours sincerely,

H. V. BECK. J. GIBBONS. R.C. HARTLEY. R. MUSGROVE. E. G. STEWARD.

Much of my extra curricular activities arose from the College. I first tried rowing but after only a lesson or two on the river, during which I learnt to "punch at the beginnings", had to give up for health reasons. I found the Swimming Club more manageable. Sunday evening discussion groups at Bristol Cathedral probably came about through the SCM or some such body. When the Theatre Royal re-opened (its closure had not, I think, been due to bombing but to long neglect) students were encouraged to attend, I being among them. For some reason the name Gwen Françon Davies comes to mind. There was also a visit to the BBC Studios - I well remember a very attractive young woman who acted as a guide responding well to our student flirting - until a colleague of hers joined us and made clear she was bespoke! It was inevitable that I joined the Music Club.

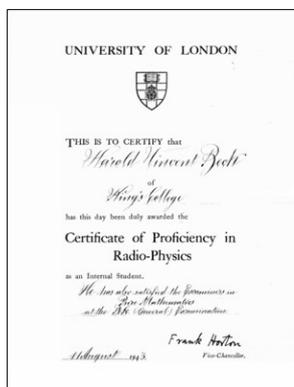
One activity I took part in on my own was to attend concerts at the Colston Hall. Pre-war, with the Queens Hall just up the road from the Poly in Regent Street and the Albert Hall quite near my home in North Kensington, I was familiar with getting tickets and going to concerts, usually with members of my family, and it was good to take this up again. Apart from the fact that they were the cheapest seats, I particularly enjoyed sitting behind the orchestra. I remember being thrilled to see Adrian Boult in a Civic Restaurant set in a bombed site in the centre of Bristol.



KCL Physics students and staff outside the Royal Fort, Bristol, 1943

One memorable occasion in Bristol was something unconnected with KCL. By chance, while visiting an acquaintance in a village near Minehead his Uncle and Aunt had called in and I had been introduced to them. He was Sir Lewis Fermor, a distinguished geologist, and on learning that I was coming to Bristol where he and Lady Fermor lived, he asked me to get in touch with him. This I did and as a result was invited to lunch, not only with the Fermors but with Sir James Jeans, the astronomer, and his wife, Susi. One thing I remember is an erudite conversation between the two Knights and Fellows of the Royal Society on the relative merits of the Times and the Telegraph for lighting fires - firewood was in short supply during the war so firelighting technique was of considerable importance. Another memory is of Susi Jeans saying how difficult it was for her to transport her harp by train to and from her recitals - petrol shortages made it essential to use the railway.

Sir James was in Bristol to address a school near the Royal Fort and I was further invited to join the Jeans and the Fermors on the visit to the school. Before his talk we went on a tour of the School's garden and I was greatly impressed when Sir James and Sir Lewis used the Latin names of the various plants. Sir Lewis told me afterwards that he had been inspired as a student by an invitation to meet an eminent scientist and wanted to do the same for me.



Another little event I remember was buying that rare fruit in wartime Britain, oranges. A ship had arrived in Bristol with a small consignment of oranges which were being sold in a particular greengrocers. I soon learnt that it was necessary to buy several pounds of Somerset apples to get a few oranges.

I didn't do as well as I should have done in the first-year exams but I got an Inter-BSc in Science to add to my Inter-BSc in Engineering obtained at school. I also received a Certificate of Proficiency in Radio-Physics, which was one of the outcomes of the Hankey scheme, and satisfied the examiners in Pure Maths.

KCL moved back to London during the 1943 summer vacation but my home was no longer there but in Blackpool whither my parents had moved to provide a safer meeting point for the scattered family during vacations or leave. So in June 1943 I made my way up North to Lancashire and spent a few weeks on a student vacation placement in the research laboratory of Pilkingtons, the glass people, in St. Helens, going home to Blackpool every weekend.

Harold Beck
May 2010