

Interviewee: Mike Roberts (Dr Michael Roberts)
UoS Dates: 1986 - 2004
Role(s): Lecturer, Dept of Physics,
latterly Lecturer, Dept of Computing Science and
Mathematics



Interview summary:

Start 00:00 – Whilst at Liverpool University, MR was contacted by Ian Percival who had been appointed as the foundation Professor of Theoretical Physics and who invited MR to join him. MR welcomed the challenge and after interview at Stirling was appointed as one of the first members of staff.

01:00 – MR was appointed as a lecturer and had to help develop the undergraduate course. He was also expected to take part in research which Ian Percival directed himself. They were an active group of researchers, some brought by Professor Percival from Queen Mary College, London.

01:35 – There was one Physics Department but it was split into two groups: theoretical and experimental. Unfortunately Mike Harrison who was originally given the position of Professor of Experimental Physics had to decline, and so the position was given to Hans Kleinpoppen who specialised in atomic physics and brought his own group of researchers with him. The two groups interacted with each other often. MR also remarks there was a good deal of funding available at the time in the early days.


03:17 – The department had very few students in the first year but it eventually picked up. The number of students never increased enough to a viable level. The students they did have were dedicated though. The task of modularising the course wasn't too bad, they had to make sure that the modules worked well together as Physics is a progressive study. The pre-requisites for entry were possibly stricter than other subjects, Higher Mathematics and Physics were a must.

05:07 – The research side of the Department flourished, especially with a lot of grants coming in. There were some personality clashes between Ian Percival and Hans Kleinpoppen which resulted in Professor Percival leaving the university in 1975. Due to the funding cuts of 1981 no new professor was appointed for Theoretical Physics. Kleinpoppen was only interested in research and didn't have much to do with the teaching side of the Department and he then eventually left. The department did its best to keep going, but the 1981 cuts were the beginning of the end. The Department carried on till 1986.

07:08 – At its peak Physics had seven or eight staff with researchers helping with teaching. Very informal in the early days - much more than other universities MR had been at. He remembers having a meeting with examiners about degree classifications for the two graduate students at the time.

09:30 – Everyone got on in the Physics Department with the exception of Professors Percival and Kleinpoppen. MR

got the impression that Kleinpoppen felt teaching was beneath him. He also diverted resources from the teaching side of the Department to fund research fellows, thus restricting resources for undergraduate teaching.
10:32 – Pathfoot wasn't complete when MR arrived in August. It was due to be completed by the 18 th of September. They were all housed in temporary buildings at the Garden Cottage. Thankfully they did not need sophisticated IT facilities at the time so the situation worked fine. The campus was beautifully laid out. He recalls Henry Milne the gardener did a great job and that Tommy Dunn's wife Joyce played a big role in designing the gardens. The bridge across the loch was taller than necessary because Tom Cottrell thought the loch was good for sailing and so wanted the boats to have plenty of room.
13:12 – MR felt there was a very close interaction between everyone due to them all being together in Pathfoot. He recalls the communal coffee lounge known as J Lounge where staff and students would meet. There were also many social activities. MR was involved in the ski club and was at one point treasurer of the Bridge Club. He met his wife through such activities.
14:38 – There was a combined student staff club at the Allangrange. Worked very well.
16:30 – Looking back MR says a great deal of the subjects at Stirling were rather traditional. He recalls that when they set up Physics at Stirling an external examiner said Scotland needed another Physics Department like a hole in the head. There were not enough undergraduate students to go around to justify the staffing at Stirling - another reason for the department closing. Later developments such as Sports Studies enhanced the university's reputation. MR recalls meeting one of the first sports bursars, Catriona Matthew.
18:22 – In 1986 MR moved from Physics to Mathematics. John Forty informed him of the closure of Physics and suggested a change to the Maths Department. He recalls the previous Principal Kenneth Alexander wound down Maths. Forty interviewed MR for the role. He found the Mathematics staff very helpful.
20:45 – The structures of the two Departments he worked in were very similar. MR was an internal examiner for Mathematics, an admissions selector, a library representative as well as the chairman for the Library Users' Group.
23:00 – MR notes that Physics was mainly a male preserve but that Computing and Mathematics had more females. The Mathematics Department often accepted applicants with marginal qualifications but it was found these applicants often did better than those with better qualifications. There was also a very good tutorial system and students were encouraged to ask for help.
27.00 – MR recalls some notable figures, including Professors Dunn, Leech and Trainer.
[Ends 33:20]

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