# Chapter 2 Administrative and Corporate Developments

## **Chris Kirk**

As I sat down to plan this short chapter on the administrative and corporate development of the Biochemical Society, I inevitably reached for Trevor Goodwin's excellent *History of the Biochemical Society 1911–1986* [1]. My own copy still contains the letter that I received, along with the book, as a young member of the Society from Hamish Keir, who was the Chairman in 1987. Re-reading this letter, the book and reflecting on 33 years of membership of the Society before I became its Chief Executive in 2005, I was struck by a number of recurrent themes, some of which seem to have been with us for much of the past 100 years.

The story of the Society is one of constant evolution – scarcely surprising as we are in the business of acquiring and disseminating knowledge in a branch of science that has developed greatly over its lifetime. In organizational terms, the Society started life as a dining club with an annual income of less than  $\pounds$ 70, at which the leaders in the emerging field of biochemistry could discuss their experimental findings. As participants in our scientific meetings today will know, dining, or at least socializing with food and drink, remains an important part of Biochemical Society life, but our total annual income in 2010 had grown to  $\pounds$ 6.2 million. Even after accounting for inflation, this corresponds to a 1000-fold increase over 1911 levels!

The means by which we present, discuss and advance our science have changed greatly, especially during the past 25 years. Changes in our approach to scientific meetings and publishing, although reported briefly here, are discussed elsewhere in this book, but there have been other developments that have been equally important in determining how the Society now operates. The growth of the Internet is probably the most obvious and the World Wide Web is now the preferred medium through which we communicate with our members, disseminate our journals, provide educational and other resources, and promote our scientific goals.

Some of the most important developments in the Biochemical Society in the past 25 years have been driven by the golden age of biological research in which we live. The dramatic growth in our understanding of the molecular basis of life in the past 50 years has been facilitated by biochemistry. A casual glance at Nobel Prizes awarded over this period, both in Physiology and Medicine and in Chemistry, will reveal the vital role played by our subject, and individual members of the Society, in the important advances that have been made in modern biology. Paradoxically, the very ubiquity of biochemistry in modern biological research has contributed to a diminution in its integrity as a subject – if nearly all biologists now use biochemistry as a tool in their research, what constitutes a *bona fide* biochemist in 2011? Comparing the landscape today with that of 25 years ago, we have many fewer separate Departments (or Schools) of Biochemistry and fewer degree courses described as "Biochemistry" (as opposed to "something" with Biochemistry or Biochemistry with "something"), but many more scientists use biochemical techniques to advance our understanding of the molecular basis of life. Is it, perhaps, the expansion of our discipline into all areas of modern biology that has contributed to fewer young bioscientists classifying themselves as "biochemists" and has therefore contributed to a slow decline in membership of the Society over the past 15 years?

Of course, ours is not the only subject that has been forced to adapt to these challenges. It is increasingly understood that the Victorian sub-divisions of biology that served our predecessors have

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With a few exceptions, the periods of office ran from 1 January of the start date to 31 December of the end date. For reasons of space, most honours and post-nominals have been omitted. Sir Hans Kornberg, Sir Philip Randle, Dame Jean Thomas, Sir Philip Cohen, Sir Tom Blundell, Keith Gull, Chris Leaver and Steve Busby are FRS. In addition, Sir Philip Cohen, Hamish Keir, Roy Burdon, Pete Downes, Chris Leaver and John Coggins are FRSE.

Chair	Vice-Chair (General Secretary until 1990)	President	Treasurer	Chair of PEC <sup>1</sup>	Honorary Secretary, PEPA <sup>1</sup>	Education Chair <sup>1</sup>	Policy Chair <sup>1</sup>	Publications Secretary (Chair of PPL after 1998)	Honorary Meetings Secretary	Honorary Membership Secretary
1987–1989	1987–1989		1987–1991	1984 - 1994				1987–1994	1987–1992	
H. Keir	R.H. Burdon		B. Spencer	H. Baum				C.I. Pogson	A.D.B. Malcolm	
1990–1992	1990–1992	1990–1995								
R.H. Burdon	A.D.B. Malcolm	Sir H. Kornberg								
1993–1995	1993–1995		1992–1995	1995–1997	1998 - 1999			1995–2004	1992-1995	
A.D.B. Malcolm	R.B. Freedman		R.B. Beechey	E.J. Wood	E.J. Wood			A.J. Turner	C. Rice-Evans	
1996 - 1998	1996–1998	1996–2000	1996–2001	1998–2002			1997-2003		1996–2000	
R.B. Freedman	K. Gull	Sir P.J. Randle	J.M. Wrigglesworth	H. Evans			C.J. Skidmore		N. Ryan	
1999–2001	1999–2001	2001-2005			2000-2003	2000-2003			2001-2005	
K. Gull	C.P. Downes	Dame J.O.			C.J. Skidmore	E.J. Wood			R.B. Beechey	
		Thomas								
2002–2004	2002–2004		2002-2007			2003-2008	2003-2008	2005-2010		2003-2008
C.P. Downes	C.J. Leaver		I.P. Trayer			K. Gartland	J. Coggins	J. Clark		I. McEwan
2005–2007	2005-2007	2006-2008							2006-2011	
C.J. Leaver	M. Humphries	Sir P. Cohen							I. Dransfield	
2008-2010	2008-2010	2009–2012	2008-2012			2009-2014	2009-2011	2010-		2009-2013
M. Humphries	C. Kleanthous	Sir T. Blundell	J. Sayers			J. Newbury	C.P. Downes	J. Coggins		F. Michelangeli
2011–2013	2011-2013									
C. Kleanthous	S.J.W. Busby									

tonorary secretary, Policy, Education and Professional Affairs (abbreviated to PEPA within the Society). The position of Chair of PEC remained until 2002, although separate Education and Policy Committees were first created in 2000. From 2003, the Chairs of the Education and newiy created nea py the נתפ רבע was the senior officer of the potiety dealing with poth education and policy. In 1996, this fole was assur Policy Committees became Trustees of the Society and sat on the Executive Committee. nan or UNTIL 1998, THE UL

little relevance in modern scientific terms. A number of other subjects have seen their boundaries blurred and their historic niches threatened. I think that the history of our discipline and of our Society over the past 25 years will show that we have responded more confidently to these changes than have some others. The Biochemical Society *has* evolved. It has looked outward to the wider scientific community and asked itself the question "how does the Biochemical Society need to change in order to play our role in the great bioscientific revolution of the 21st Century".

In the rest of this chapter, I will review just how the Biochemical Society has adapted to these challenges. I will first consider how the internal organization of the Society has changed, especially over the period up to about 2003, when the Society adopted the basic structure that it retains today. I will also consider how we have adjusted our external relationships, especially those with related disciplines. Coincidently, the greatest changes in these relationships have occurred in the past 10 years. As I hope will become obvious, the Society's development in both these areas has reflected a desire on the part of those leading the Society to ensure that it has continued to support biochemistry and all those who work within it.

#### Internal Organization: Committees, Officers and Offices

## Early days, 1986—1990 the Society moves to Portland Place

In 1986, when the Biochemical Society celebrated its 75th birthday, it had 6762 individual members, about 760 more than it has today, but nearly 2400 fewer than in the mid-1990s when membership reached its peak. The Society had occupied premises in Warwick Court, Holborn since 1966, when it moved its Editorial Department and solitary non-editorial employee from accommodation leased from the Medical Research Council in Park Crescent. The Society's organizational nucleus was the 'Committee', whose principal officers consisted of a Chairman, Honorary General Secretary, Honorary Treasurer, Honorary Meetings Secretary and Honorary Publications Secretary. In the period up to 1990, the principal officers were elected by the membership, but the Chairman was elected by the Committee. The Honorary General Secretary was regarded as the most significant role in the Society and the incumbent usually became Chairman of the Society at the conclusion of their period of office. The separation of these two positions could be confusing to the outside world, and it is notable that the Honorary General Secretary position was abolished in 1990, when the position of Vice-Chair was created, the incumbent succeeding to the position of Chair after 3 years.



Warwick Court in Holborn, the Society's London headquarters in 1987.

The individuals who occupied all these, and the subsequent officer positions in the Society that have developed from them, are listed in Table 1.

Thus the organization that started life as a 'dining club', had grown into a flourishing learned society that ran four main scientific meetings a year as well as refresher courses and Harden Conferences which, for the first time in 1987, were organized on the "open discussion but no publication" model familiar to those attending Gordon Conferences in the USA. By this time, the Society had also recognized a need to diversify its committee structure. A number of members felt that the Society should look beyond its traditional function of organizing meetings and play a role in education, research funding and influencing Government policy. Thus, in 1985, the Society had established the Professional and Educational Committee (PEC) that administered five Regional Sections around the UK, and organized schools lectures, pre-doctoral meetings and a range of other activities. A member of the Society who delivered an early school lecture on 'Genetic fingerprinting' in 1988 was Alec Jeffreys, who went on to win the Lasker Prize, is now an Honorary Member of the Society and is still on our list of schools lecturers! A full list of Honorary Members of the Society and those elected to Honorary Membership since 1959 can be found in Table 2. Other committees in 1987 were the Publications Board and the Finance Board, chaired by the Honorary Publications Secretary and Honorary Treasurer, respectively. At this time, the Society also had 16 Special Interest Groups that organized other activities, including meetings colloquia in particular subject areas. These groups held their own devolved budgets which, in some cases, grew to considerable sums over the years!

By 1987, the Society was also organizing an annual 'Heads of Biochemistry' meeting to bring together the Heads of the many separate university Biochemistry Departments that then existed to discuss matters of mutual concern and try to establish a policy consensus. In those early days, the Heads of Biochemistry meeting held an annual dinner with an after dinner speaker, so the 'dining club' ethos was still alive and well! In 1989, Sir Mark Richmond, the outgoing Chair of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, spoke at a Heads of Biochemistry meeting on the funding pressures faced by UK departments, many of which would probably still seem familiar today. It is interesting to note that, in 2011, the Society continues to play a major role in organizing HUBS (Heads of University Biological Sciences) meetings, the body that seeks to organize the Heads of what has now become the most common organizational unit for our discipline in universities.

The internal structure of the Society in 1986 reflected these various activities and consisted of: Administration (eight staff), Meetings (six staff), Editorial (twelve staff) and Distribution and Society Membership (based in Colchester; nine Staff). By 1987, it was already becoming clear that the ambitions of the Society would outstrip both the available staff resources and the space at Warwick Court so a search was initiated for alternative office accommodation. In 1988, 59 Portland Place, an impressive Adam building, was identified as the favoured future home for the Society. The building was secured in 1989, but as it needed considerable refurbishment to make it fit for purpose. The building was officially opened on 13 December 1990 by Professor W. (Bill) Stewart, Chief Scientific Advisor to the Cabinet Office. The involvement of the Chief Government Science Advisor is noteworthy because two subsequent incumbents of this post became involved in a later move of the Society when it was seeking to establish joint offices and a London hub for UK biosciences in 2008/2009 (see page 19).

Warwick Court was ultimately sold at a paper 'profit' of £1.1million, but the Society would discover over the next 20+ years that the value of its property holdings, like that of its equity investments, would fluctuate wildly during successive periods of national financial re-adjustment. During this period, a succession of Honorary Treasurers have been prepared to lead the Society into a variety of new ventures designed to both strengthen the finances of Society itself and also to increase its influence in the biosciences sector. Examples of such ventures have included: the launch of Portland Press Limited (PPL) and the expansion of the Colchester book depot to create Portland Customer Services, hosting international congresses for

#### Table 2. Honorary Members of the Society in 2011 and their years of election

In addition to those Honorary Members listed here, the following have also been elected to Honorary Membership since 1959 but are now deceased: Sir Henry Dale FRS (1959); Sir Rudolf Peters FRS (1959); Sir Charles Harrington FRS (1961); Sir John Gaddum FRS (1965); Sir Charles Dodds FRS (1965); Sir Robert Robinson OM, FRS, Nobel Laureate (1965); Sir Hans Krebs FRS, Nobel Laureate (1967); F. Dickens FRS (1967); Albert C. Chibnall FRS (1969); Walter T.J. Morgan FRS (1969); Luis F. Leloir ForMemRS, Nobel Laureate (1969); Albert Neuburger FRS (1973); Judah H. Quastel FRS (1973); Dorothy M. Needham FRS (1974); Thomas S. Work (1979); Sir Frank Young FRS (1979); M. Dixon FRS (1982); E.F. Hartree (1982); Trevor Goodwin FRS (1985); Roy Porter CH, FRS (1985); S.V. Perry FRS (1986); R.H.S. Thompson FRS (1986); Peter Campbell (1988); Claude Rimington FRS (1989); A.T. James FRS (1990); Lord Phillips of Ellesmere FRS (1991); D.V. Parke (1991); G.A.D. Haslewood (1993); Max Perutz OM, CH, FRS, Nobel Laureate (1994); César Milstein CH, FRS, Nobel Laureate (1998); Winifred Watkins FRS (2000); Helen Muir FRS (2001); Sir Philip Randle FRS (2001).

1969	Christian R.J.M. de Duve ForMemRS, Nobel Laureate
1984	Frederick Sanger OM, CH, FRS, Nobel Laureate
1987	Eric C. Slater FRS
1988	Henry R.V. Arnstein DSc
1993	William J. Whelan FRS
1996	Herbert Gutfreund FRS
1998	Sir John Walker FRS, Nobel Laureate
1998	Sir Aaron Klug OM, PRS, Nobel Laureate
2001	Sir Hans Kornberg Kt, Hon. FRS
2002	Sir Paul Nurse PRS, Nobel Laureate
2002	Sir R. Timothy Hunt FRS, Nobel Laureate
2002	Sir John Sulston FRS, Nobel Laureate
2003	Sir Sydney Brenner CH, FRS, Nobel Laureate
2003	Sir Philip Cohen FRS, FRSE
2003	Sir Alec Jeffreys FRS
2004	Dame Louise Johnson FRS
2004	Lionel Crawford FRS, FRSE
2004	Sir Michael Berridge FRS
2004	Sir Edwin Southern FRS
2007	Dame Jean Thomas FRS
2007	Sir Gregory Winter FRS
2008	Sir Martin J. Evans FRS, Nobel Laureate
2010	Bob Michell FRS
2010	Venki Ramakrishnan FRS, Nobel Laureate
2011	Sir Tom Blundell FRS
2011	Sir John Cornforth FRS, Nobel Laureate
2011	Ron Lasky FRS

the International Union of Biochemistry and Molecular Biology (IUBMB) and the Federation of European Biochemical Societies (FEBS), expanding the Society's education and policy work, the establishment of the UK Life Sciences Committee, the Biosciences Federation and the Society of Biology and successive moves to premises at Portland Place, Eagle House and Charles Darwin House. All of these are discussed in detail elsewhere, but they have occurred over a period when the Society has been forced to adjust to several periods of economic recession during which the value of the Society's reserves, and the income derived there from, have fluctuated greatly. The Society owes a considerable debt to Brian Spencer, Brian Beechey,



The Society moved to new premises at Portland Place in 1990.

John Wrigglesworth, Ian Trayer and Jon Sayers, all of whom have held the position of Honorary Treasurer over the past 25 years.

The move to Portland Place in 1990 was accompanied by further changes to the staffing structure of the Society. In 1989, the Society had set up PPL as a wholly-owned subsidiary company to undertake its publishing and book distribution activity from the Colchester Book Depot. Apart from maintaining the highest standards for the Biochemical Journal, its flagship publication, PPL also provided a vehicle through which the Society (a charity) could undertake commercial activities, thereby securing a stronger financial base. The first Chairman of PPL was Chris Pogson, who was also the Honorary Publications Secretary at the time. He was succeeded in the role by Tony Turner in 1994. When the Society moved to Portland Place, it also established a Professional and Educational Department, staffed by a Professional and Educational Services Manager, an Education Officer and a Secretary, to work with the recently established PEC. The other internal departments

of the Society remained as in 1986, with similar staff numbers as they had at that time. Although the names of some of these divisions have changed over the years, this is still, with one notable addition, the staffing structure that exists today. It is therefore possible to compare 2011 staffing numbers with that above as follows (1990 numbers are in parentheses):

- Education (and Policy) 5 staff (3);
- Administration (including Finance) 9 staff (8);
- Meetings and Membership 7 staff (6);
- Editorial 16 staff (12);
- Portland Customer Services (Colchester) 32 staff (9).

The one major staff division that did not exist in 1990 is Information Technology (IT), where the Society currently has seven staff, with much of their time being utilised in support of the commercial activities of PPL. Apart from IT, it is clear that the biggest area for staff growth has been that of distribution and membership services in Colchester, reflecting the efforts of the Society and the management of PPL to grow this side of the business in recent years.

## Time for an advisory Council: changes in governance from 1990

While planning the move to Portland Place, the Committee had also undertaken a major review of Society Governance and Committee structure. The principal officers of the day felt that the Committee had grown to the point that it was too big to effectively run the Society, but too small to fully represent all the membership, either demographically or scientifically. Initial proposals for a new structure were published in the *Biochemical Society Bulletin* (re-launched as *The Biochemist* in 1988), discussed amongst the membership and, following the 1989 AGM, the Committee that had run the Society for 80 years was



The reception at the House of Commons in 1998 on the occasion of 1997 Nobel Laureate Sir John Walker FRS becoming an Honorary Member of the Society. From the left: Keith Gull (Vice Chair of the Executive Committee, 1996–1998), Sir Philip Randle (President of the Society), Sir John Walker, César Milstein (Nobel Laureate 1984), Robert Freedman (Chair of the Executive Committee, 1996–1998).

replaced by an Executive Committee and an advisory Council [2]. The Council was chaired by the newly established position of President and, in addition to the members of the Executive Committee, included all the chairs of the 16 Special Interest Groups, the chairs of the Regional Sections and six members directly elected from the membership. The first President of the Society was Sir Hans Kornberg. The Council would receive regular reports on finance, administration and other matters from the Executive Committee and it had the formal power to appoint the Chair, Vice-Chair, President and some other positions. The formal and legal responsibility for running the Society remained with the slimmed-down Executive Committee, now strengthened by the addition of the President. The Executive Committee were the Trustees of the Society (with the creation of PPL, now an incorporated charity) and had the legal status of the 'Board' of the Society. The Chairman of the Executive Committee was the Chairman of the 'Board', but the creation of the Council was intended to strengthen links to the grassroots of the organization and to ensure the accountability of the Executive Committee.

During the early 1990s, the roles of other Society Committees/Sub-Committees were also evolving. In addition to overseeing the activities of the five regional groups, the recently established PEC, chaired by Harold Baum, was increasingly looking outward to the rest of the bioscience sector, to the Government and to those bodies that controlled the research environment of the day. In 1992, for example, this committee responded to consultations on genetically modified organisms (an issue that continues to demand attention from the Society and its committees to the present day), funding levels for the Higher Education

Funding Council and a Government White Paper on Science and Technology. Representatives of the committee also started attending science festivals and Mark Ferguson spoke on the rapidly developing subject of molecular biology ("...from the Cradle to the Grave") at the 1993 British Association Festival. The Society has continued to support science festivals up to the present day, but the subjects covered have evolved as we have tried to appeal to wider audiences. For example, in 2009, the Biochemical Society, the Physiological Society, the Institute of Biology and the Biosciences Federation jointly sponsored a session at the Cheltenham Science Festival presented by TV and sporting personalities Ben Fogle and James Cracknell, which discussed the biochemical and physiological challenges associated with their trek to the South Pole earlier that year.

By 1994, there was growing concern at the ever widening range of biochemistry degrees on offer at UK universities and the curricula that underpinned them. The PEC launched a curriculum working party that would attempt to define a "core" biochemistry curriculum for the 1990s. This work was led by Ed Wood and Keith Elliot and the "core curriculum" was much debated by individual departments throughout the 1990s. A further update of the core curriculum was undertaken in 1999 and the Society still receives requests for this document to this day. However, since so much biochemistry is now taught as part of a wider biological discipline, there have not been further revisions to the 1999 document.

#### Let's consult the members: another new strategy!

In 1992, the Society commissioned its first survey of member opinion. This was an attempt to find out what the then 8000 members thought that the Society should be doing in addition to its traditional activities of organizing meetings, publishing journals, etc. The outcome of this exercise led to the establishment of a working party on future strategy that highlighted a number of areas including 'Science and Society' as priorities. This exercise launched a regular pattern of seeking the opinions of members (and later non-members) through commissioned opinion polls with further exercises conducted in 2000 and 2009. These regular polls of member opinion fed into a fairly continuous process of strategy review so that the annual reports and committee minutes from about 1995 to the present day reveal a process of continuing refinement.

The 1992 survey led to a draft strategy paper in *The Biochemist* in 1994 [3], introduced by the Chairman Alan Malcolm, and entitled *Whither the Biochemical Society? A Strategy for the 21st Century*. Robert Freedman, who was Vice-Chair of the Society in 1994 and became the Chairman charged with implementing the new strategy in 1996, recalls that key players involved in formulating the new policy during 1995 were Chris Pogson, Brian Beechey, Harold Baum, Keith Snell and the Executive Secretary, Glyn Jones. The outcomes of this strategic review were probably the most far-reaching in the Society's history and attempted to respond to the rapidly changing research environment in which biochemistry had become a discipline that was central to most biological research. The review prioritized engagement with other societies, developing joint working on careers, schools and other policy areas, not attempting to patrol the boundaries of biochemistry but embracing the whole of bioscience. Thus, one of the key planks of the 1995 strategy was for the Society to play a central role in fostering collaboration between the plethora of learned societies in the biosciences who were involved in a wide range of overlapping activities. This led to the launch in 1997 of the UK Life Sciences Committee, the vital role of which will be considered in detail later.

The 1995 review also led to a number of changes in internal organization that would equip the Society to better fulfil its role into the new millennium. In 1998, the new position of Honorary Secretary, Policy, Education and Professional Affairs (PEPA), whose role was to oversee the Society's policy and education work, was created on the Executive Committee; the first incumbent was Ed Wood. This change further recognized the significance of learned societies in influencing the debate on national science policy, and

the fact that the Biochemical Society was leading attempts to enable the bioscience sector to speak with a single voice on the policy front. A new Policy Sub-Committee was established in 1997, with its own chair (Chris Skidmore), but sitting under PEC. By 2000, the Society had also established a separate Education Sub-Committee as part of PEC. However, PEC ceased to exist in 2003, and the Education and Policy Sub-Committees came under the auspices of the Executive Committee with their two Chairs (Kevan Gartland and John Coggins, respectively) sitting on that committee as Trustees of the Society. Also in 1998, the position of Honorary Publications Secretary was abolished and the associated position on the Executive Committee was filled by the Chairman of PPL. A further development arose from the decision that Society should attempt to become a serious publisher of biochemistry books. PPL did publish a number of successful books in the following years, but ultimately withdrew from this activity faced by the relatively small market for specialist books and competition from the major commercial publishing houses.

Within the office, the Policy, Education, Meetings and Membership functions were brought together under the heading of Society Activities and the leadership of a newly appointed Director, Sheila Mills. By 1998, the Society's policy staff of two included Mike Withnall, who was producing a monthly *Policy Digest* newsletter, for distribution to departmental heads, politicians and civil servants, and a bi-monthly Policy Matters article in *The Biochemist*. Major policy issues of concern in 1999 included the Research Assessment Exercise, 4-year PhD studentships and whether the Society should become involved in accrediting undergraduate degree programmes. Opinions on this latter subject were divided and remained so during subsequent periods of discussion in 2006 and 2009. The Society of Biology are currently involved in discussions with Government about degree accreditation across the sector and it will be interesting to see if these are any more conclusive.

The reforming zeal of the Society's officers in the late 1990s was not confined to the policy field. Up till 1997, the Society had held four main meetings a year at UK universities. In 1998, this changed to three, although the Society also begun organizing an annual meeting for the British Society for Cell Biology, a service it repeated in 1999 and has fulfilled for other learned societies since. Also in 1999, there began a review, under the chairmanship of Peter Downes, of the Special Interest Groups that had been the mainstay of academic planning for Society meetings for so long.

The early years of the new millennium were a busy time for the Society and its Meetings Board. In 1993, the Society had successfully bid to host the 2000 IUBMB Congress, which later became a joint congress with FEBS, attracting 3000 delegates. A planning team lead by Keith Gull put on an extremely successful Congress at the International Convention Centre in Birmingham. Up until 1999, registration for members at scientific meetings had been free but, from 2000, the Society has charged registration fees, a practice that is now nearly universal amongst learned societies. A further review of meetings strategy, informed by the outcome of a MORI poll of members in 2000, decided to hold a single main meeting of the Society each year, lasting up to 4–5 days and possibly tethered to a fixed location, together with a number of shorter Focused Meetings on specialist topics. This decision led to BioScience2004 and its successors in Glasgow (see Chapter 3) and set the stage for the Society's current and extremely successful programme of Focused Meetings. The latter took over as our principal meetings format in 2008 following a review chaired by Martin Humphries that decided to discontinue the annual meeting in response to declining delegate numbers.

Another 1999 review looked at the role and the operation of the Society's six Regional Sections. Successive reports of PEC had commented on a decline in regional activity as academics came under increasing demands in the workplace and both transport links and the Internet facilitated greater interaction beyond regional boundaries. In 2002, the review group recommended the establishment of Local Scientific Events Grants to rejuvenate regional activity. These operated successfully for a number of years but, with the growing difficulties associated with arranging events in school time, their future is



The Honorary Members Dinner 2008. The Chair of the Society, Martin Humphries, is flanked by new Honorary Member and former President Dame Jean Thomas (left) and Lynne Jones MP (right), former member of the Society who hosted the event at the Palace of Westminster.

once again under debate by the Education Committee in 2011. Of the original Regional Groups, only the Irish Area Section, a group that spanned the Irish border throughout "the Troubles", continues to operate in 2011, and it maintains a thriving programme of events.

## Into the new millennium

Following the MORI poll of members in 2000, the Executive Committee initiated a number of radical changes in response to a membership that had called for increased involvement with our younger members, strategies to encourage greater public understanding of our subject and closer working with other learned societies.

Communication with our members had been strengthened in 2000, with the appointment of a full-time Executive Editor for *The Biochemist* magazine. Concerns about our interaction with young biochemists ultimately led to the Young Researcher membership category, re-launched as Early Career membership in 2011, where we now find 18% of our members. The new millennium also saw the start of on-line consultations with the membership. Subjects covered by consultations in 2002 included: strategies for the retention of young biochemists, concerns about future research funding, the Research Assessment Exercise and the Roberts consultation for the Higher Education Funding Council. The Society continues to consult on-line with its members in 2011 and our Policy Department now maintains a database of member expertise that we use to inform responses to policy consultations by the Government, Research Councils and many other bodies.

In 2002, the Society supported initiatives to strengthen the public understanding of science by choosing 'Scientific Communication in the Public Domain' as the area for the award of the first Biochemical

Society Award Lecture (which was shared by Steven Rose and Bernard Dixon). The year 2002 also saw the initiation of a number of important changes to the Society's committee structure. These arose both from the Downes review of the Special Interest Groups started in 1999 and detailed discussions in the Executive Committee, Council and elsewhere. The Special Interest Groups were the academic groupings in which the topics of the Society's scientific meetings were normally conceived. Their numbers had grown considerably over the years as new research fronts developed. However, while new Special Interest Groups had been born, few had died! The outcome of the Downes review was the rationalization of these groups into seven overarching Theme Panels with refreshed membership that covered the breadth of biochemistry. The remits of individual Theme Panels were not intended to be fixed, but to respond to developments in the subject. With some changes in emphasis, these are the Theme Panels that still serve the Society today. The advent of the Theme Panels also saw the formation of the Meetings Board, chaired by the Honorary Meetings Secretary, and including the chairs of all the Theme Panels. Further changes in committee structure saw the establishment of separate Policy and Education Committees in succession to PEC (as described earlier in this chapter), the Chairs of which were members of the Executive Committee and the Council, as was the newly established Honorary Membership Secretary. All these changes were enshrined in alterations to the Memorandum and Articles of Association of the Society that were passed by the AGM in 2003.

Another important milestone in the life of the Society in 2003 was the retirement of Glyn Jones as Executive Secretary. A lawyer by training, Glyn joined the Society in 1984 and he steered it through all the changes described above with great skill, an outstanding period of service that was full acknowledged by the Executive Committee and Council at the time. Following Glyn's retirement, the Executive Committee decided that Glyn's successor would become the Society's first Chief Executive and began the process that led to the author joining the Society as a member of staff (as opposed to a member!) in 2005.

#### Time to move again!

At the AGM of the Society in 1999, Keith Gull, the then Chair of the Society, had predicted that the Internet would become a dominant part of the Society's communications strategy [4]. He was correct, and by 2003 IT was the central plank of all office activities. The premises at Portland Place had been acquired at the beginning of the computer age but, with its Grade II listed status and warren of rooms, it was poorly fit for purpose as an office base for a growing Society in the computer age. The search for another home was on and the Officers of the Society were keen to explore the possibility of sharing accommodation with another learned society. Discussions were held, notably with the Physiological Society, but they eventually came to nought. In the end, the decision was made to take a short-term lease in a modern office building called Eagle House on Procter Street in the Holborn area of London. It was the hope of the Executive Committee that, when the lease was up for review in 2010, the climate for sharing space with other societies might be more propitious. This hope was to be realized in due course.

The move to Eagle House coincided with the appointment of Chris Kirk to the position of Chief Executive of the Society. In addition to an academic career as a biochemist, Chris had previous experience as Chair of a major arts charity and an important early task was to ensure that the Society fully complied with the 2005 Charities SORP (Statement of Recommended Practice). A review of procedures led to the establishment of formal Sub-Committees of the Executive Committee for Finance (replacing the Finance Review Group), Audit and Remuneration. The Society established a risk register for the first time and put in place procedures for its regular review.

The Chairman in 2005, Chris Leaver, had two principal goals for the Society. He wanted to improve communication with members and potential members in individual departments and he was convinced of the need to find ways for the plethora of learned societies in the biosciences to speak with a single voice



The Society returned to Holborn with the move to Eagle House on Procter Street in 2005.

in the corridors of power. As will already be clear, neither of these concerns were new to the Society, but significant progress would be made in both areas over the ensuing years. It had long been recognised that communications to Departmental or School Heads about Biochemical Society business would often not achieve a very high position on the recipients "to-do" list. Indeed, the issue was discussed by Keith Gull at the 1999 AGM [4]. Recruitment of student members was also an issue, total membership having declined about 30% from its high point of 9145 in 1994. The days when new PhD students in biochemistry would be sat down in front of a membership application form by their supervisors on their first day in the lab were coming to an end, often because the research groups in which students were working were less clearly identifiable as owing their allegiance solely to biochemistry than in the past. Students were now undertaking biochemical research in labs that might see their primary allegiance as being to microbiology, genetics, plant biology, immunology or many other disciplines. It was therefore decided to establish a network of Local Ambassadors in various university and industrial departments to act as a conduit through which the Society could contact its members, and prospective members could contact the Society. Local Ambassadors, of which there are currently more than 70 worldwide, have proved an effective means of recruiting members to the Society and organizing local events since 2005.

#### 1997–2011: looking out to the wider scientific community

The Biochemical Society has long been aware of its position as the largest discipline-based learned society in UK biosciences and it has taken seriously the responsibilities associated with this status. The Society had played a central role in the establishment of both the International Union of Biochemistry (later the IUBMB) and FEBS in the 1950s and 1960s and, as noted elsewhere in this book, it has organized international congresses for both bodies over the past 25 years.

The Society was also quick to realise that it should provide support to those involved in teaching the next generation of future biochemists in our schools. Thus, schools lectures were launched in the 1980s and the Society began to publish a number of *Biochemistry Across the Schools Curriculum* booklets as a resource for teachers in secondary schools. These were enormously successful and set the pattern for continued work in this field. In 1995, PEC, in collaboration with the National Centre for Biotechnology Education and the Society for General Microbiology, launched ClubBio as a membership forum for School Science Teachers (see Chapter 4). Support for school teachers has continued to the present day, but the medium through which this support is offered changed following a strategic decision in 2000 to focus the Society's school resources on the Internet. The Society now hosts a variety of websites (www. scibermonkey.org, www.sciberdiver.edu.sg and www.sciberbrain.org) that provide resources for school pupils from ages 8 to 18, and schools membership is offered through the Society of Biology.

Further work with the schools community included the sponsorship in 1988–1990 of a Life Sciences Award at the Co-operative Retail Society's 'Let's make a Film' Festival for Schools. In the past 5 years, the Society has again harnessed the power of the performing arts to make science more accessible to young people in a collaboration with the Islington Community Theatre. Two plays, written in collaboration with members of the Society and young members of the theatre group, have explored the modern influence of Darwinism (*Hive 9* - produced to celebrate the Year of Darwin in 2009) and the contemporary debate about stem-cell research (*Little Miracles* - produced as part of our Centenary celebrations in 2011). Both have been performed to large audiences in school science laboratories and a variety of other locations.

In the late 1980s, the Society also offered School Teacher Fellowships that were designed to give teachers a period of time back in the laboratory to refresh their knowledge and skills. These were initially popular but, as the education cuts of the period began to bite, school teachers in all but the most well-funded private schools were unable to get the necessary time off to participate in the scheme, which fell into disuse. In the past 5 years, the Society has organized a variety of in-service training activities for teachers, mostly linked to our current web resources. However, the timing of these events now has to be carefully planned to avoid impinging on the school day and the Society sometimes funds the travel arrangements of teachers who wish to take part. Clearly the pressures on our school teacher colleagues have not diminished over recent years!

#### Fighting the corner of UK biochemistry

The political upheavals of the 1980s also served to remind those in charge of the Society of the importance of political lobbying in defence of our subject. The Society, through the PEC, frequently responded to Government consultations over this period on such subjects as the science budget and the Research Selectivity Exercise (later to become the Research Assessment Exercise and the Research Effectiveness Framework). The Society also took its message to the politicians whenever it had the opportunity.

In 1987 for example, it launched a booklet on the new technology of recombinant DNA at a reception in Parliament, and in 2002 Ian Gibson MP, the Chair of the House of Commons Science and Technology Select Committee, hosted a Society reception for the recent Nobel Prize winners (and Honorary Members), Sir Paul Nurse and Sir Tim Hunt.

It was, however, clear that there were at least two barriers to effectively communicating with our political masters. The first was that scientists, whilst in their element talking about their subject to their peers, are often uncomfortable when asked to defend the importance of their research to a lay audience or the press. In the 1980s, the importance of effectively presenting our science to these audiences was already

clear and the Society began to sponsor Media Fellowships organized by the Committee for the Public Understanding of Science (COPUS) that enabled research scientists to gain direct experience of how the broadcast and print media operated. In more recent years, the Society has supported the Science Media Centre and worked with Sense About Science to sponsor a project entitled 'Voice of Young Science' in which young scientists come together to learn the skills necessary effectively to communicate the significance of their research to the press and public. It is to be hoped that the emerging generation of young biochemists will be better able to communicate with politicians and the press than were their predecessors.

The second barrier to influencing political opinion is a consequence of the very diversity of bioscience. In 2011, there are about 90 learned societies in UK bioscience, not including those of a specifically medical nature. It is therefore difficult for the biosciences to talk to our political masters with a single voice. When the Government or a Select Committee opened a consultation on an issue in the 1980s and 1990s, they would frequently receive a number of responses from individual societies that said nearly, but not quite, the same thing. This tended to dilute, rather that amplify, our effectiveness as a sector. The physical and chemical sciences had already faced up to this issue in the 1970s when they resolved the matter by uniting under the twin banners of the Institute of Physics and the Royal Society of Chemistry.

Clearly the biosciences were a long way from achieving this kind of unity of organization and purpose, but the Biochemical Society was aware of the challenge. In 1987, the Society hosted a meeting of sister societies to agree a joint response to Government plans for the future of research support to the



The reception at the House of Commons in 2002 in honour of the 2001 Nobel Laureates Sir Paul Nurse, FRS and Sir Tim Hunt, FRS. From left: Sir Tim Hunt with his daughter (Aggie), Peter Downes (Vice-Chair of the Executive Committee, 1999–2001), Dame Jean Thomas (President 2001–2005), Sir Paul Nurse, Ian Gibson, MP, Keith Gull (Chair of the Executive Committee, 1999–2001).



The Prime Minister Tony Blair with Honorary Members of the Society Max Perutz, Fred Sanger and John Sulston at the Human Genome Project video conference which was held with US President Bill Clinton in June 2000. The event was used to announce the completion of the initial stage of work to indentify all of the genes in the human body. Photo by Christine Nesbitt; reproduced with permission.

university and polytechnic sector which led to the formation of the (then) two funding councils. However, it was clear that the future demanded more than *ad hoc* joint responses to such Government consultations. Although the Institute of Biology (IoB) had held the Royal Charter in Biological Sciences since 1979 and there was an expectation among some that it could speak on behalf of the sector, the research community was not strongly represented amongst its membership and many felt that it was not equipped to fulfil this role. The 1995 draft strategy document entitled A Strategy for the Biochemical Society for the 21st Century [3] envisaged increased co-operation between the various societies representing the molecular life sciences and sowed the seeds for the formation of the UK Life Sciences Committee (UKLSC) to be their public policy face. Robert Freedman, who was Chairman of the Society from 1996 to 1998, put all his authority, skill and considerable energy behind the formation of UKLSC, which was finally launched in 1997 and enjoyed considerable support from learned societies in the sector. However, although a measure of co-operation was achieved between UKLSC and the IoB, the long-standing difference between the focus of the latter organization and the interests of the molecular life science community remained a problem in presenting a unified view on behalf of the life sciences as a whole. By 1999, the suggestion had emerged that the IoB and UKLSC should merge to form the Biosciences Federation (BSF) and thereby create a single umbrella organization that would represent the breadth of UK bioscience.

The BSF finally came into being in 2002 and the first subscribing members were the Biochemical Society, the IoB, the British Ecological Society, the British Mycological Society, the Linnean Society, the Physiological Society and the Society for General Microbiology. The Gatsby Foundation provided support of £20,000 *per annum* to get the organization going and the Biochemical Society seconded Mike Withnall, who was its Assistant Director (Policy), to run the new body on a full time basis. The monthly *Policy Digest* that Mike had previously prepared for the Biochemical Society was now circulated on behalf of the BSF. The creation of the BSF did make a difference to the way in which the sector presented itself to the



In 2009, along with co-owning sister societies, the Society for Experimental Biology and the British Ecological Society, the Society staff moved to Charles Darwin House.

outside world, but the organization still seemed like a relatively small appendage to the IoB (a true merger had not occurred) and the other Societies that supported it. Following the conclusion of the Gatsby Funding in 2005, a crunch meeting was held to decide the BSF's future. Chris Leaver, the then Chair of the Biochemical Society, set the tone of the meeting by declaring that the learned societies in the sector must finally come to together on the policy front if the biosciences were to thrive in the future. On behalf of the Society, he pledged a sum of £20,000 per annum for the next 3 years in order to maintain and develop the BSF. After some discussion, this sum was broadly matched by the Physiological Society and the Society for Experimental Biology. At a follow up meeting at London's Goodenough College, a number of other organizations, including the Society for General Microbiology, the Society for Applied Microbiology, the British Pharmacological Society and the Society for Endocrinology also pledged substantial sums.

Mike Withnall had been appointed the first Chief Executive of the BSF and, when he retired in 2005, he was succeeded by Richard Dyer, formerly Director of the Babraham Institute in Cambridge. Under Richard's leadership and with

the aid of the financial support pledged at Goodenough College, the BSF became increasingly noticeable as the voice of UK bioscience. It had now grown to a staff complement of 3.5 full-time equivalents, but was still considerably smaller than the IoB, which remained a 'member organization' of the BSF. By 2007, the BSF had grown considerably in stature and there was a general recognition that the obvious solution to the need to create a single voice for bioscience involved the formal merger of the BSF and the (physically larger) IoB into a single organization. A joint working party was set up under the chairmanship of Sir Brian Heap that worked for a year to create a plan that might be accepted by both organizations. The proposed merger required the agreement of the 50 or so learned societies that were now affiliated to the BSF and also of the IoB's 11,000 individual members. After a great deal of work by the officers of both organizations, the decision to merge was ratified with the transfer of the amended Royal Charter on 15 July 2009, creating the Society of Biology as a new legal entity on 1 October of that year. Dr Mark Downs, a biotechnologist with a background working in Government and the private and voluntary sectors was appointed as the Chief Executive of the new organization and Dame Nancy Rothwell became its first President. The new Council of the Society of Biology had the current and two past Chairmen of the Biochemical Society as members, and the Society's Chief Executive was an advisor to the group. The role of the Biochemical Society in helping to bring this new umbrella organization into being was clear for all to see.

#### A London hub for UK bioscience

Meanwhile, the Biochemical Society had been busy pursuing another route designed to foster closer working across the sector. With the encouragement of the Society's new Chair, Martin Humphries, discussions started in 2007 on the possibility of a number of learned societies co-habiting in a single office building in London. It was felt that such an arrangement would facilitate closer working in a number of areas and provide savings through the sharing of some services. It is interesting to note at this point that the Committee of the Biochemical Society first discussed the possibility of creating joint offices and a 'Science Centre' in the capital in 1950!

In the new millennium, informal discussions with a number of individuals close to the Government had suggested that this kind of move to unify the fragmented bioscience sector would be welcome and an informal working dinner was arranged with Sir David King, the Government Chief Scientific Advisor to explore ideas. At that dinner, which was held on the 19 June 2007 in Covent Garden, were Sir David, the Chairman and



Sir John Beddington, Chief Science Advisor to the Government, opens the Society's new headquarters at Charles Darwin House in 2010.

Chief Executive of the Biochemical Society (Martin Humphries and Chris Kirk), the Treasurer and Chief Executive of the BSF (John Coggins and Richard Dyer) and the Presidents of the Physiological Society (Ole Petersen) and the Society for Experimental Biology (Ian Johnston). All present were enthusiastic about the possibility of creating an office hub for learned societies in London and the BSF subsequently convened a meeting on 5 October 2007 to discuss the idea, to which all member organizations were invited. About six societies were represented at this and subsequent meetings, but it soon became clear that three societies in particular were committed to turning the dream of co-habitation into a reality.

In 2008, the Biochemical Society, British Ecological Society and the Society for Experimental Biology agreed a Memorandum of Understanding that committed the three organizations to closer co-working and the search for suitable shared office accommodation in London. This document was signed at the House of Commons in January 2009 by Martin Humphries, Malcolm Press and Ian Johnston (the Chair of the Biochemical Society and the Presidents of the British Ecological Society and the Society for Experimental Biology, respectively) in the presence of Lord Hunt (Deputy Leader of the House of Lords) and Phil Willis MP (Chair of the Science and Technology Committee). Following this agreement, the search commenced for a building in central London that might serve as joint offices for the three organizations, with additional space that could be rented to other societies in the sector and a flexible meetings suite. The search for a suitable building started in earnest in November 2008 and, in February 2009, the Chief Executives of the three societies first saw a property in Roger Street on the edge of Bloomsbury that appeared to satisfy their needs. It was a 1959 construction on five floors with a particularly large ground floor footprint that could provide the flexible meetings space. The four upper floors were open plan and spacious, providing sufficient accommodation for the three societies on the two upper floors and space



Martin Humphries (Chair of the Biochemical Society, seated), Malcolm Press (President of the British Ecological Society, left) and Ian Johnston (President of the Society for Experimental Biology, centre) sign of a Memorandum of Understanding at the House of Commons in January 2009, with Lord Hunt of Kings Heath (right). This committed the three organizations to closer co-working and the search for suitable shared office accommodation in London, which eventually led to the acquisition of Charles Darwin House in 2009.

to rent on the lower two. Following the agreement of the Trustees of the three societies, the building was purchased for £4.1 million in June 2009, at what turned out to be a low point for the London property market. Refurbishment work started in July and, in November, the three societies moved into the upper two floors and the meetings area, which now boasted an auditorium for 120 people, a breakout area and a number of other meetings rooms. The building was named Charles Darwin House in honour of the bicentenary of Darwin's birth and the 150th anniversary of the publication of *On the Origin of Species*. It was an instant success, with all three organizations rapidly adjusting to the various opportunities for co-working that the building presented. On the 7 June 2010, Charles Darwin House was officially opened by the new Chief Government Science Advisor, Sir John Beddington, who thereby became the third holder of that office to play a role in the Society moving home! A second building contract in the summer of 2010, completed the refurbishment of the lower two floors of the building and all of the available space was taken by sister learned societies by June 2011.

A recent Society to move into Charles Darwin House as this chapter was being written is the Society of Biology who purchased a 12.5% share of the building from the other co-owners in February 2011. Thus the new umbrella organization for the biosciences is firmly embedded in what we now regard as the London hub for the sector. The Biochemical Society can feel proud that they have played their part in facilitating these important changes that will help to ensure that the influence of our sector in the corridors of power grows in the coming years to better match the importance of molecular bioscience to the wealth and well-being of the nation.

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