

Introduction

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In southwest Surrey, thirty-five miles from London and twenty-five from the south coast, the Greensand hills rise up to give a view from their modest crests to the Hog's Back in the north and southwards over the seemingly tree-filled depths of the Weald to the more distant chalk hills of the South Downs. Their leafy lanes even today preserve a feeling of remoteness and it is now all but forgotten, except by the survivors, families and friends of those who worked there, that for over 40 years this quintessentially rural English location was the home of a major British scientific institution. Today it appears a somewhat unlikely spot for a research laboratory; even more so for a National Institute of Oceanography (NIO).

Though in continental terms a mere stone's throw from the sea, by British reckoning the 30-odd miles separating the scientists from the element they were studying was indeed a considerable distance. But the Institute, in its choice of location as well as other aspects, arose from initiatives begun during the latter phases of the Second World War, and in its final form it represented a compromise between the aspirations of the different groups of scientists and administrators involved in its creation, and practical considerations. It was largely the latter that led to the choice of an ex-Admiralty building at Witley as the home of NIO. The arrangement worked sufficiently well for research to continue on the site from 1953 until 1995 when the laboratory, by now expanded and renamed the Institute of Oceanographic Sciences Deacon Laboratory, moved to a new purpose-built waterside facility, the Southampton Oceanography Centre (now the National Oceanography Centre, Southampton).

This book tells the story of NIO from its origins until the considerable expansion and first change of name took place in 1973. It begins by showing why there was perceived to be an urgent need in the United Kingdom for an institution of this kind, so much so that proposals were put forward in the early 1940s, while the nation was still at war. To expedite matters, as negotiations between government bodies dragged on, the Admiralty set

up its own oceanographic research group (named Group W for waves) in 1944. Group W had already proved its worth by the time the Institute came into being in 1949. This revival of British marine science, especially physical oceanography which had been almost totally neglected in this country during the first half of the century, quickly led to the Institute assuming an active and prominent role on the world stage. It was a time when oceanography was expanding globally as its significance in both war and peace became more widely recognised, while at the same time new ideas and new technologies were opening up exciting opportunities in the exploration and understanding of the oceans. International co-operation in the planning and carrying out of new projects was also becoming increasingly significant and the Institute became the focus for British participation in many such programmes. The contributions of individual scientists, and that of their leader for much of this time, George Deacon, were recognised at home by a cluster of elections to Fellowship of the Royal Society, the UK's highest scientific honour, and by equivalent awards overseas.

Though it throws light on the complex web of political and scientific influences that shaped the development of oceanography during the second half of the 20th century, the book does not attempt to provide a comprehensive account of wider issues. Its purpose is to give a first-hand account of the laboratory itself, and of the individuals who worked there and their scientific contributions, while this is still possible. It has been written almost entirely by surviving former scientific personnel of Group W and NIO who were therefore directly involved in the events related here. Until now NIO's story has been accessible only through the medium of official reports and scientific papers, material that may faithfully record a sequence of events but does not always explain it.

This is a story that deserves to be better known, of a young institution quickly making its mark on a rapidly developing area of scientific enquiry, and helping to lay the foundation for important work still continuing today. Some introductory chapters are also included to explain why, given that British scientists of previous generations had been much involved with the nascent science of the sea, there was not already an institution of this kind here, similar to those already existing in some other countries. These also show how the idea of an institute of physical oceanography, as originally projected, came to be modified during the discussions leading to its formation, so that the National Institute of Oceanography that came into being on 1 April 1949 was a more inclusive organisation in which all major branches of oceanography were represented. As such, it inherited both ships and personnel from the Discovery Committee which had been responsible for a major government-sponsored programme of scientific investigation of the Southern Ocean and whales and whaling in the 1920s and 1930s.