David Yates

David Yates was a part of Bristol Biochemistry for more than 40 years. Arriving at Bristol University at the same time as Professor Sir Philip Randle in 1964, David was initially a PhD student with Peter Garland. He subsequently went on to become a research assistant with Freddie Gutfreund, then a lecturer, and finally Senior Tutor and Departmental Administrator, up until his retirement in 2006.

What were the early days at Bristol like? I have many happy memories of my years as a PhD student. It was a time when practical jokes were common and very often these were at the expense of Health and Safety. In the late 1960s to early 70s when Professor Sir Philip Randle used to do many tests on rats, in order to render the rats unconscious, ether-soaked paper towels would be added to the glass tanks in which the rats were kept. The paper towels were subsequently thrown into a wastepaper bin. One day, when Randle returned to his office he promptly emptied his pipe into the bin, causing a large fire to erupt. Randle’s only words were “Ah! Ether”. Philip Randle’s notorious love of rats was celebrated when the Department had its silver anniversary with a commemorative cake in the shape of a large rat.

Professor Sir Philip Randle features greatly in David Yates’ anecdotes from his early time at Bristol. He describes the man in detail, a large man in height and build, who used to swim in the pool beneath the Student Union. According to Yates, he would stand at the deep end, at the 6’ marker, in doing so, his head and shoulders would be above the surface. Other members of staff would see the pool as a prime location to initiate or continue their conversations about Departmental affairs, but due to the extreme height difference, would be forced to conduct their business at the deep end, swimming in circles around Randle.

What was the best part of your time in Biochemistry? My favourite thing was interacting with students. After the retirement of Patience Barrow, I was asked to take over as Admissions Tutor; this was a job I relished, and held for 18 years. During this time, I would visit neighbouring schools and visit careers fairs. This really helped to give me an understanding of what students wanted and the questions they needed answering. I also remember having to give my annual speech to our students every Christmas time warning them of the need to revise, in the hope this would shock them into action.

What brought you to Bristol University? I was recruited, and enticed, by the eminent reputation of Sir Philip Randle. I was not to be disappointed.

What single thing would you say defines Biochemistry at Bristol? Bristol has a strong commitment to academic rigour. The Biochemistry programme has always had a strong chemical and molecular flavour, including plentiful immersion in quantitative methods. It is considered challenging by our students and strong training by their prospective employers.

Why do you think Bristol Biochemistry is so highly regarded? Biochemistry research at Bristol has always been world-leading. In addition, the biochemistry teaching programme increasingly became a priority for our staff. My appointment was instigated by a need to revitalise teaching practicals and to introduce new ideas to the teaching programme. In an effort to instigate change in Bristol’s
practical teaching protocol, I would write to other institutions offering an exchange of ideas. This led to me being asked by the Biochemical Society to run a group focusing on practical teaching.

The Department continued with this commitment to provide excellent teaching, by later changing the procedure by which new members of lecturing staff were appointed. David recalls that initially new members of staff were selected solely based upon their research prowess. However, a new protocol was implemented that dictated new members of staff would have to prove themselves by giving lectures to first-years as part of the interview process. This upped the ante for lecturers and served to demonstrate the desire, in Biochemistry, to provide first-class teaching for our undergraduates.

What has changed since your time at Bristol?

Of course Health & Safety requirements have become increasingly onerous. This seems to have taken much of the fun out of research. In addition, in the early days academics were pretty much free to work on whatever inspired their interest. Now grant funding is essential, is more competitive, and the pressure to produce good publications is always there. It is a far more serious business.

Most important scientific advances from Bristol Biochemistry?

Too many to choose from! The work of MRC Metabolism Unit, Freddie Gutfreund’s work on rapid reaction kinetics, Brian Chappell’s ground breaking research on chemiosmotic transport, Tony Croft’s work on mitochondria and bioenergetics, John Holbrook’s protein engineering studies of enzymes along with the protein structural studies of Herman Watson, Hilary Muirhead and (later) Leo Brady. Bristol’s strengths lie in metabolic biochemistry and bioenergetics, along with molecular genetics.

One person from Biochemistry who has had a big impact on you?

Freddie Gutfreund was always good to his technicians and was a delight to work with. Peter Garland was generous but a challenge to work for: he always thought of the best experiments first! Brian Chappell, despite his fearsome reputation, was extremely fair, excellent at administration and taught me how to be generous.

What advice would you give to new students starting out in Biochemistry in Bristol? Work hard! Keep up with your lectures and revise regularly.