

The Naming of The Merchant Venturers Building

A Historical Context

Table of Contents

ABBREVIATIONS	2
SUMMARY	3
THE SMV'S CONNECTIONS WITH BRISTOL'S FACULTY OF ENGINEERING ...	4
FOUNDATIONS.....	4
EARLY RELATIONS AND TENSIONS	7
SMV'S MAINTENANCE BEYOND 1920.....	9
MERCHANT VENTURERS BUILDING.....	11
RELATIONSHIP ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	11
THE MERCHANT VENTURERS BUILDING.....	12
CONCLUSION	15
BIBLIOGRAPHY	16

Abbreviations

SMV Society of Merchant Venturers

MVB Merchant Venturers Building

BA Bristol Archives

UoBSC University of Bristol Special Collections

Summary

The 1996 Park Row Development was named the Merchant Venturers Building (MVB) due to the Faculty of Engineering's long-standing connection with the Society of Merchant Venturers (SMV), which was recognised with a £100,000 donation to the Faculty by the SMV in 1995. The Merchant Venturer's Technical College, which merged with University College Bristol's engineering department, was the foundation of the University's Faculty of Engineering, originally housed in the Technical College's buildings in Unity Street. The SMV continued officially to financially support the Faculty of Engineering until 1949. Whilst the University and the SMV had an unsteady relationship in the first half of the twentieth century, the University has acknowledged the contributions of the SMV at various points in its history through a plaque on the Queen's Building, and then through the naming of the Merchant Venturers Building in 1996. Firstly, this report details the SMV's connections with the Faculty of Engineering throughout the first half of the twentieth century. This historical context is important for understanding the relationship between the two institutions. This frames the second part of the report, which considers the naming of the MVB more specifically. The report has consulted and used the SMV records in Bristol Archives, the University of Bristol's Special Collections, and a collection of Faculty newsletters from the 1990s, now housed in the Queen's Building Library.

The SMV's Connections with Bristol's Faculty of Engineering

Foundations

The SMV have long-standing connections with the University that date back to the nineteenth century and the existence of University College Bristol. For example, during an 1874 appeal of the University College, the SMV promised a £1000 donation.¹ However these connections morphed into a form of rivalry, when, in 1880, the SMV took over the running and financing of the Bristol Trade School, renaming it the 'Merchant Venturer's School.' They hence founded their own educational facility.² The SMV purchased premises in Unity Street to meet the needs of the school for £5,000, although the building was not fully constructed until 1885 and ended up costing nearly six times as much to complete.³ In 1894, the school was renamed the 'Merchant Venturers Technical College' (Figure 1 shows the college before 1906).⁴

Figure 1 - Merchant Venturers Technical College before 1906 (SMV/5/5/5/9, Bristol Archives)⁵



¹ J.W. Sherborne, *University College Bristol, 1876-1909*, Issued by the Bristol Branch of the Historical Association, the University of Bristol (1977) p.7

² Sherborne, *University College Bristol*, p.19

³ G.W. Charles, 'The Merchant Venturers' Technical College, Bristol' *The Vocational Aspect of Secondary and Further Education* Vol.3, No.6 (1951) 86-89, p.87

⁴ Charles, 'The Merchant Venturers' p.88

⁵ BA SMV/5/5/5/9

Figure 2 - Fire at Merchant Venturers Technical College in 1906 (SMV/5/5/5/9, Bristol Archives)⁶



By 1905 the Technical College had become a ‘rival focus of higher education,’ to University College Bristol.⁷ However, following a fire that destroyed the college in 1906 (Figure 2), the SMV were encouraged to consider the Technical College’s future. The SMV and the College needed money and supporters.⁸ Consequently, in December 1906, the SMV suggested that the Technical College should become a part of the new University of Bristol. After three years of discussion, the Technical College merged with the University College’s existing faculty as the new Faculty of Engineering, under the charter that created the University of Bristol in 1909.⁹ The merging of the two institutions resulted in a nexus between the SMV and the University. For example, academic staff who transferred from the Technical College to the Faculty of Engineering were ‘appointed by the Society,’ but then needed to be officially ‘recognised’ by

⁶ BA, SMV/5/5/5/9

⁷ Don Charleton, *A University for Bristol* (1984) p.19

⁸ Charleton, *A University for Bristol* (1984) p.19

⁹ Sherborne, *University College Bristol*, p.24

the University.¹⁰ The Faculty's teaching would be carried out in the Unity Street Buildings, and the SMV would provide 'generous equipment.'¹¹ The Faculty soon began advertising, with courses costing £26 5s per year, or £10 10s for students whose parent's incomes were under £350 a year.¹² The Faculty taught a range of subjects, which included: applied mathematics, engineering subjects including drawing and design, workshop practice, theory of machines and machine design, theory of structures and structural design, strength and elasticity of materials, electrical technology, hydraulics, surveying, theory of heat engines, design of electrical machinery and apparatus, generation, transmission, and distribution of electric energy, motor car engineering, chemical engineering, magnetism and electricity, inorganic chemistry, organic chemistry, and applied chemistry.¹³ Early Faculty staff included John Munro, Professor of Mechanical Engineering (Figure 3).

1909 - Faculty of Engineering University of Bristol Staff¹⁴

Applied Chemistry	Professor/Dean of Faculty	Julius Wertheimer
Applied Chemistry	Lecturer	Hugh Alexander Millar Borland
Mechanical Engineering	Professor	John Munro
Mechanical Engineering	Lecturer	Francis Renton Barry Watson
Civil Engineering	Professor	Robert M. Ferrier
Civil Engineering	Lecturer	F. J. Broadbent
Civil Engineering	Assistant Lecturer	J. Lees
Applied Mathematics	Professor	Edmund Springfield Boulton
Electrical Engineering	Professor	David Robertson
Motor-car Engineering	Professor	William Morgan
Electrical Engineering	Lecturer	O.J. Williams

¹⁰ Severn, *Faculty of Engineering*, p.38. For example, Wertheimer wrote to the VC in 1918 to request that lecturers in Aircraft Manufacture and Electrical Handymen's classes be "recognised" by the University. 16th October 1918, DM883

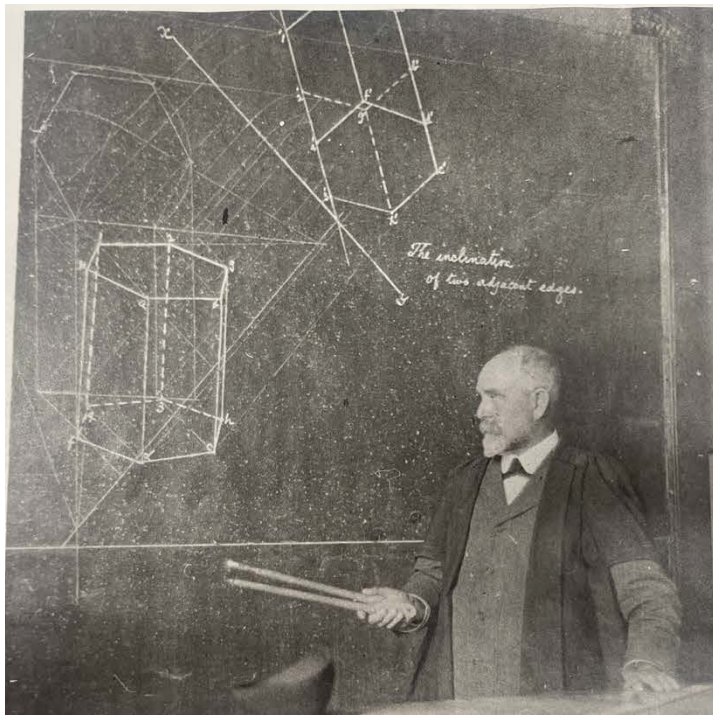
¹¹ Charleton, *A University for Bristol*, p.23; DM 883, University of Bristol Faculty of Engineering, Report for the Session 1909-10

¹² 'Merchant Venturers Technical College' *Western Daily Press*, 2nd September 1909, p.4, *The British Newspaper Archive*

¹³ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1

¹⁴ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1

Figure 3 - Professor John Munro (Professor of Mechanical Engineering) (DM418 University of Bristol Special Collections)¹⁵



Early Relations and Tensions

The agreement made between the SMV and the University of Bristol had twenty-one clauses, including that the SMV would ‘provide and maintain the Technical College of the Faculty of Engineering.’¹⁶ The SMV agreed to ‘not only provide houseroom and equipment for the Faculty of Engineering ...’ but also to ‘pay all outgoings, partly out of fees, partly out of grants of public money, and partly out of their own private resources.’¹⁷ Students that were already studying at the Merchant Venturer’s Technical College in 1909 were able to complete their studies either in the Faculty of Sciences, or Faculty of Engineering.¹⁸ The buildings on Unity Street were disposed to the Faculty ‘together with fully equipped laboratories, and all plant, equipment and appliances necessary for the educational requirements of that Faculty.’¹⁹ If the Society, for whatever reason in the future should ‘surrender and give up the Faculty of Engineering,’ then the Society would resume ‘exclusive possession of the said buildings in Unity Street.’²⁰

It was agreed that if any grant was paid directly to the University ‘in respect of the University Classes of the Merchant Venturers’ Technical College,’ then the University had to ‘hand over to the Merchant Venturers a sum equal to that which they should have received in any given year.’²¹ This sum would be paid annually to the Treasurer of the Society. However,

¹⁵ UoBSC, DM418, John Munro

¹⁶ BA, BK/647 p.1

¹⁷ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1

¹⁸ BA, SMV/5/6/3/2 J Wertheimer to C. Lloyd Morgan, 5th July 1909,

¹⁹ BA, BK/647 p.4

²⁰ BA, BK/647 p.6

²¹ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1

it was specified that this would only be the case if the funds contributed to the University had ‘connection with or for the purposes of the Faculty of Engineering or the Technical College.’²²

There were tensions between University College Bristol and the SMV, the most significant of which stemmed from this clause concerning grants.²³ This resulted in two years of disagreements, occurring within the context of the Faculty’s fast growth that the SMV simply had not predicted. Indeed, the SMV wrote in 1912, ‘though they were prepared for some growth of expenditure upon it [...] they were far from expecting that the growth would be so vigorous as it actually has been.’²⁴ As such, when in 1912 the Board of Education issued a grant of £7000 to University College Bristol, the SMV argued that they should receive a proportion of this grant, due to their maintenance of the Faculty.²⁵ However, the University argued that they did not need to provide SMV with a proportion of the funds, due to the separation between the Technical College and the University of Bristol. The SMV eventually sought legal advice, as both parties were eager to keep things ‘friendly.’²⁶ After another year of discussions and negotiations, it was decided that solicitors Messrs. Benson Carpenter Cross & Co. would write to the Board of Education. In November 1913, H. Frank Heath replied, and stated that the Exchequer Grant’s purpose was to aid ‘University Colleges.’ Heath wrote:

As Bristol Merchant Venturers College is not one of the colleges to which such grants are made, no part of the Exchequer Grant allocated to Bristol University on the recommendation of the Board’s Advisory Committee was made in support of work conducted at the Merchants Venturers College, which is financially independent of the University.²⁷

This was not well received by the Vice Chancellor nor the SMV. They were ‘disturbed by the statement’ because it implied that the Advisory Committee might have ‘been forbidden by the Board to take into consideration the students in the Engineering Faculty,’ since this was maintained by SMV.²⁸ They thought that this might have been the justification for Bristol’s significantly smaller grant than those awarded to universities including Newcastle, where engineering students had been taken into consideration.²⁹ The solicitors also deemed Heath’s reply as useless, and that ‘no answers had been given.’³⁰ Instead, in January 1914, the solicitors suggested asking the Chancellor to write to the Board of Education to clarify their answers.³¹ On April 4th 1914, George Henry Pope (SMV Treasurer) and Julius Wertheimer (Dean of the Faculty) had an interview at the Board of Education with Heath. Heath confirmed that because the Faculty of Engineering was conducted in an institution not financed by the University, then the ‘Exchequer Grant’ had not been afforded with the Faculty in mind. Thus, the SMV accepted that they had no claim to the Exchequer Grant. The SMV apologised for the ‘trouble occasioned to the University in connection with the matter.’³² However, the SMV went on to write to the

²² BA BK/647 p.3

²³ Other tensions for example, included the transfer of library books from the Technical College to the Faculty. Wertheimer and the University’s VC had a disagreement over who had drawn up a list of books ready for transfer (See UoBSC, DM883)

²⁴ BA, SMV/5/6/3/2 To the Registrar, University of Bristol, May 1912

²⁵ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 J Wertheimer to G.H. Pope, 19th July 1912

²⁶ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 George H. Pope to The Registrar University of Bristol, 13th December 1912

²⁷ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 H. Frank Heath to Benson Carpenter Cross & Co. 8th November 1913

²⁸ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 J Wertheimer to the Registrar, 12th November 1913

²⁹ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 J Wertheimer to the Registrar, 12th November 1913

³⁰ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 Messrs Benson Carpenter & Co. to University of Bristol & SMV 28th November 1913

³¹ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 Messrs Benson Carpenter & Co. to University of Bristol & SMV 19th January 1914

³² BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 6th April 1914

Board of Education again, requesting that they consider including the Faculty of Engineering students in future allocations of Exchequer Grants.³³

SMV's Maintenance Beyond 1920

The SMV continued to maintain the Faculty, and when advertising for lecturers and demonstrators, the advertisement described the Faculty as the:

Faculty of Engineering (provided and maintained by the Merchant Venturer's Technical College).³⁴

The Faculty continued to receive financial support from the SMV. For example, immediately after the First World War, the SMV created ten scholarships to cover the annual course fee of 30 guineas, for the 'sons of officers killed in the war, whose mothers or guardians are in needy circumstances.'³⁵ Again in 1920, Wertheimer (Faculty Dean), informed Mayor of Bristol, George Bryant Britton, that the SMV had 'on his suggestion' decided to 'establish in their College a scholarship giving free education in the Faculty of Engineering to a young man of Bethune (Bristol's adopted town).'³⁶

Throughout their working relationship, the University was eager to keep good public relations with the SMV. For example, in 1928, the Editor of *Nonesuch* (a magazine for Bristol alumni) asked the Faculty of Engineering for a short history to include in its latest edition. The Registrar, E. Geoffrey Francis, wrote a short piece, and sent it to Professor Andrew Robertson to approve. Francis queried whether there was 'any likelihood of [him] causing offense to any persons or persons by the final paragraph which refers to the Merchant Venturers.'³⁷ Indeed, Robertson advised Francis that it would be 'inadvisable to refer in any way to the rivalry which existed between the University College and the Society in the days before the University was started.'³⁸ The article, entitled 'Thirty Years Ago,' hence presented a more harmonious picture of the Faculty's founding.³⁹

In 1921, the SMV agreed that they were 'no longer able to find such large sums for the College as it had found in the past,' due to the 'large increase in income tax.' It was suggested that the SMV might be 'willing to give up its absolute control of the financial arrangements of the College.' Whilst the SMV did not give up complete control, they did acknowledge that their funds were limited and could not finance the expansion schemes of the Faculty.⁴⁰ By 1929, the SMV altered their agreement with the University originally set out in 1910. The SMV agreed to continue maintaining the buildings for the Faculty, however, they reduced their support to the Faculty to three quarters of its previous amount and paid any grants received due

³³ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 Letter to the board of Education

³⁴ UoBSC, DM883, 'Appointment of a Lecturer in Electrical Engineering,' January 1919

³⁵ Severn, *The Faculty*, p.51

³⁶ 'For Bethune Students,' *Western Daily Press*, 11th November 1920, The British Newspaper Archive

³⁷ UoBSC, DM883, E. Geoffrey Francis to Andrew Robertson, 2nd November 1928

³⁸ UoBSC, DM883, Andrew Robertson to E.G. Francis, 3rd November 1928

³⁹ UoBSC, DM 883

⁴⁰ UoBSC, DM1521 Draft of Material Which Might be Incorporated in the Remarks of the Master From the Chair in MUTC Files 1899-1950

to the Faculty, to the University.⁴¹ The University would then pay the treasurer of the SMV the amounts due to them on 'account of Faculty work.'⁴²

The SMV continued to support the Faculty until 1949.⁴³ Discussions surrounding the renewal of the Society's support for the Faculty began as early as 1944, where the University agreed with the Local Education Authority on the use of the Technical College's buildings should the SMV cease control of them.⁴⁴ In 1947, the SMV suggested to the Local Education Authority that it proposed to 'allow the Society's Education Trust to terminate on 31st December 1950.'⁴⁵ By May 1948 it became clear that the SMV would 'desire to terminate the agreement with the University and [would] not wish to enter into a new one.'⁴⁶ The 1948 Dean's Report reported on the 'end of the long connection between the Society of Merchant Venturers and Faculty of Engineering.' As of September 1949, the Society of Merchant Venturers were 'no longer be responsible for the administration of the College and the Faculty,' and the title Merchant Venturers Technical College ceased to exist.⁴⁷ Whilst the SMV stopped supporting technical education, the buildings in Unity Street were still used by the Faculty of Engineering until the completion of Queen's Building (Figure 4).⁴⁸

Figure 4 - The Queen's Building designed by Ralph Brentnall in 1947⁴⁹



⁴¹ UoBSC, DM1521 An Agreement made in 1929 between the University of Bristol, of the one part, and the Master Wardens and Commonalty of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol, of the other part. (1929)

⁴² UoBSC, DM1521 An Agreement made in 1929 between the University of Bristol, of the one part, and the Master Wardens and Commonalty of Merchant Venturers of the City of Bristol, of the other part. (1929)

⁴³ BA, SMV/5/6/3/1 Report as to an interview with the University Grants Committee on Tuesday, June 7th 1921

⁴⁴ UoBSC, DM1521 Badock to H.G. Tanner, 24th February 1944

⁴⁵ UoBSC, DM1521 'Merchant Ventures' Technical College'

⁴⁶ UoBSC, DM1521 'University, City and Merchant Venturer's Technical College,' 10th May 1948

⁴⁷ W.H. Severn, *The Faculty of Engineering*, pp.71-72

⁴⁸ Basil Cottle and J.W. Sherborne, *The Life of a University*, (University of Bristol, 1951) p.71

⁴⁹ Sarah Whittingham, *The University of Bristol: A History* Sarah Whittingham (Portishead Press: Bristol, 2009) p.46

Merchant Venturers Building

Relationship Acknowledgements

The relationship between the SMV and the Faculty of Engineering has been acknowledged throughout the Faculty's growth. The Queen's Building included a memorial tablet that was unveiled by Winston Churchill. The tablet reads:

This tablet commemorates the establishment and provision of the Faculty of Engineering in the University from 1910 to 1950 by the Society of Merchant Venturers: Robert Sinclair, Master, 1953.⁵⁰

Churchill's unveiling was reported widely in the press, for example the *Edinburgh Evening News* stated that Winston Churchill, the university's 'longest-standing Chancellor' made a tour of the £1 million Department of Engineering and '[unveiled] a tablet recording the close association of the city's Society of Merchant Venturers with the University.'⁵¹ The acknowledgement of the relationship was echoed at the building's opening on the 5th December 1958 by the Queen. A contemporary report from the Faculty stated that the 'University, after forty years of its invaluable help from the Society of Merchant Venturers, now has its Faculty of Engineering housed in the midst of the other university departments...'⁵² Again it was stated that a plaque 'placed on record the Merchant Venturers' contribution to sustaining the Faculty of Engineering.'⁵³ The plaque (and the relationship more generally) was clearly held in high esteem, as a photograph of it was included in the booklet that accompanied the Queen Elizabeth's opening of the building in December 1958 (Figure 5)

Figure 5 - Image of the Queens Building Plaque to the SMV in the Ceremonial Opening (DM 883 (DM418 University of Bristol Special Collections)⁵⁴



⁵⁰ Severn, *The Faculty* p.73

⁵¹ *Edinburgh Evening News*, 26th November 1954, p.7 *The British Newspaper Archive*

⁵² J.F. Baker, 'Science and Technology in the University of Bristol: Opening of the Queen's Building,' *Nature*, no.4656 (1959) p.217-219

⁵³ Don Charleton, *A University for Bristol* (1984) p.61

⁵⁴ UoBSC, DM 883 Engineering Department/MUTC Correspondence

The Merchant Venturers Building

This acknowledgement continued in the naming of the Merchant Venturers Building. The site of the building originally held the School of Veterinary Science, which was built in 1948, and later demolished.⁵⁵ The MVB was designed by Atkins Walters Webster, and completed in 1996.⁵⁶ (Figures 6 and 7).

Figure 6 – Artist’s Impression of the Park Row Development⁵⁷



Figure 7 – Artist’s Impression of the Park Row Development⁵⁸



⁵⁵ LynchPin, Bristol Engineering, University of Bristol 2009 Centenary, p.21

⁵⁶ LynchPin, Bristol Engineering, University of Bristol 2009 Centenary, p.21

⁵⁷ University of Bristol, The Park Row Development

⁵⁸ University of Bristol, The Park Row Development

The decision to name the building after the SMV was first discussed in 1995, led by the University. In a Senate meeting in 1995 it was noted that:

Discussions had taken place with the Merchant Venturers, in view of their historical association with Engineering education in Bristol, and a recommendation would be made to Council that the building should be named the Merchant Venturers Building. The Master and Senior Warden could make a formal visit each year and it was hoped that the association would have financial benefit for the University.⁵⁹

The decision to name the building the 'Merchant Venturers Building' was decided on the 15th of November 1995 at a University Council meeting.⁶⁰ Here it was noted that the 'Master of the Society has indicated that the Society would like to contribute to the University by making a donation of £100,000 to the Faculty of Engineering in respect of its occupation of the Park Row Building.' Thus, the association did bring the 'financial benefit' that the University had hoped for. The minutes recorded that the SMV 'hoped that this [would] cement the relationship between the University and the Society.' This would be emphasised by the 'display in the Building of the Society's arms.'⁶¹ On the 27th November 1995 it was acknowledged in a Senate meeting that the new building was to be named "'The Merchant Venturers Building'" (with no apostrophe) in recognition of a donation of £100,000 and to cement the relationship between the Society of Merchant Venturers and the University.'⁶² Both the SMV, and R.T. Severn have suggested that the naming of the MVB came from the University's recognition of the SMV's role in the founding of the Faculty, alongside its ongoing financial support, including 'fitting out' the new building.⁶³ This 'fitting out' likely refers to the £100,000 donated made by the SMV. Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh (an honorary member of the SMV) officially opened the building in July 1996 (Figure 8).

Contemporary reports on the publicity of the naming decision can be followed through copies of *The Brief* (the Bristol Engineering Faculty Newsletter). In the summer term edition of *The Brief* in 1995 the building's name had not been released, referred to as 'the new building' and the 'Park Row Development.'⁶⁴ However, in Spring 1996, *The Brief* (Alumni edition) the Dean's report (Professor David Blockley), stated that 'perhaps the most significant event this year will be the opening of our new building in Park Row [...]The Merchant Venturers Building, as it will be known, will confirm and renew a long-standing relationship with the Bristol Society of Merchant Venturers.'⁶⁵ The Autumn 1996 *The Brief* reported on the opening of the Merchant Venturer's Building by Prince Philip, although no discussion of the naming of the building is mentioned in this edition.⁶⁶ Hence, the reasoning behind the building's name was publicly released as a recognition, confirmation, and renewal, of the Faculty's relationship with the SMV.

⁵⁹ UoBSC, University of Bristol, Minutes of Senate, 1995-1996, p.17

⁶⁰ It has been suggested that the University first intended to name the building after one of its famous graduates, but this was refused by their family. Information from Caroline Duckworth, Treasurer, Society Merchant Venturers.

⁶¹ UoBSC, University of Bristol, Minutes of Council 1995-1996, p.9

⁶² UoBSC, University of Bristol, Minutes of Senate 1995-1996, p.168

⁶³ R.T. Severn, *The Development of the Faculty of Engineering in the University of Bristol 1909-2009* (Bristol: 4word, 2009) p.189

⁶⁴ *The Brief: Bristol Engineering Faculty Newsletter* no.2 (1995) University of Bristol Library, Engineering

⁶⁵ *The Brief Alumni Edition: Bristol Engineering Faculty Newsletter* no.4 (1996) University of Bristol Library, Engineering p.14

⁶⁶ *The Brief: Bristol Engineering Faculty Newsletter* no.5 (1996) University of Bristol Library, Engineering

Figure 8 Prince Philip Unveils the Opening Plaque of MVB in 1996⁶⁷



⁶⁷ Queen's Library Collections, University of Bristol

Conclusion

To conclude, the naming of the Merchant Venturer's Building was a result of the SMV's role in the foundation of the Faculty of Engineering, the ongoing relationship between the SMV and the Faculty throughout the twentieth century, and the £100,000 donation made by the SMV in 1995. The SMV's Technical College's merging with the existing University College Engineering department established the foundation of the Faculty of Engineering as it is known today. The SMV's ongoing financial and physical support until the mid-twentieth century resulted in new equipment for the Faculty, alongside a number of scholarships designed in part to support students. This relationship was firstly acknowledged through the Queen's Building plaque, and then again through the naming of MVB, which was solidified through the SMV's donation.

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