

Open Forum 34 1978: Postgraduate Research in the OU: Part 1

Clip: Oxford Research Unit

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Narrator:

The three Open University Graduates now involved in research projects at the University's Oxford Research Unit. It occupies two mock Tudor buildings, a single storey block built as a laboratory by the eighth Earl of Barclay for his own research, and the converted stables which provide offices for the research directors upstairs and laboratories on the ground floor. These are part of the collegiate style group of buildings on the eighteen acre Foxcombe Hall Estate just outside Oxford on Boars Hill. It was bought by The Open University in 1976 to house the southern regional office which is based in the mansion itself, and the research unit.

A beautiful setting, a perfect academic ivory tower. But some might question the choice of location. Does the proximity to the other OU give it any advantages? The Director of the Unit, David Blackburn, explains how it came about.

David Blackburn:

The Research Unit in a sense is a historical accident. Ron Ham who was the first Prof' of Materials wouldn't come to a University that had no research facilities. He was quite clear about that, and so was I, because the reason I joined The Open University was in part that there was a growing research unit and we found facilities in Oxford. See when you work here you have down the road one of the best libraries in the country. You can walk into the Radcliffe Science Library and find almost any periodical in science that you care to mention, and that's nice. Add to that, the fact that in Oxford there are lots of lectures, seminars, tutorials, and so on, and you can just drop in. No-one is very formal in this area, you just become part of the general academic life of the city, whether or not you're a member of Oxford University.

The first two in were my own group and then Gerald Elliot, coming in. So that was Solid State Physics, and Biophysics. Then Simon Nicholson, with his Design Group, and in more recent times we've had other physicists in, Physiologist Richard Holmes is there, and Lyn Jones has begun to bring in some of the systems men, and that really is the Unit. It's not such a big unit as all that, we're talking about 25-30 people. There's no grand plan in the sense that we'd decide this is our research area, most definitely not. There's no one telling me, not as a director but as an individual research worker, the field in which I'm going to work. I decide that for myself, and the others decide it for themselves, and we share, naturally, a good number of facilities. Not tight sharing with specific little bits of equipment being shared closely among us. But we certainly share the workshop, the electronics shop, we share a computer, which is a baby one, but it sits between us and the main computing service in Milton Keynes. So, we will in the next month or two have quite a big data handling service which we will share. It will run nearly all the experiments of that type in the building.