60 YEARS OF BIOPHYSICS IN BRITAIN

Tony Watts (Chair, BBS, 2002-2008; 2010-2017)
John Seddon (Secretary, BBS, 2008-2013)
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Adapted from “A history of BBS”, by David Hornby, Sheffield, 2010

The British Biophysical Society (BBS) is 60 years old this year. We are celebrating with the BBS 60th Anniversary Meeting, the inauguration of a new prize (the BBS Kendrew Doctoral Thesis Prize) and this - a brief history of our roots and progress as a learned society.
The British Biophysical Society (BBS) was formed in 1960 following a report from a Working Party on Biophysics and Biophysical Chemistry initiated by the Council of the then Faraday Society of London. The first full meeting of the Working Party on 4th February, 1960 included DD Eley, LH Gray, AF Huxley, JC Kendrew, CFA Pantin, RD Preston, JT Randall, FJW Roughton and PMB Walker and a new Society eventually called "The British Biophysical Society" was founded:

"For the application of physical and chemical concepts to biological systems".
FIRST MEETING

THE BIRTH OF A SOCIETY

The first meeting of the BBS was held at King’s College (London), organised by Prof JT Randall. The birth of the BBS can be said to date from this inaugural meeting held on 19th and 20th December 1960. The meeting took the form of two symposia on Comparative Studies of Muscular Contraction and on the Structure of Ribonucleic Acid, together with sessions for contributed papers. Minutes of the Steering Committee held on 8th December record that there had already been 183 applications to join the Society and 177 to attend the meeting. By the end of 1960, the membership totaled 224. At the King’s College meeting WT Astbury and AV Hill were elected Honorary members.

EARLY YEARS

1960s

The first official meeting of the new BBS Committee was held on 21st February 1962 at King’s College London, with Dr JC Kendrew as the first Honorary Secretary, Prof DD Eley as Meetings Secretary, and Dr PBM Walker as Honorary Treasurer. The Committee elected Prof JT Randall as its first Chairman. Other committee members were S Brenner, JAV Butler, AF Huxley, RD Keynes, RD Preston, JWS Pringle, FJW Roughton and JT Weiss.

It is clear from this roll call of committee members, in the early 1960s, that the British Biophysical Society embraced a wide range of topics in Biology. The first major scientific meeting of the BBS was held at the Royal Institution, London on 12th-13th December 1961 (on The Structure of Globular Proteins and the Function of Proteins) and a report on proceedings authored by Professor H Gutfreund (one of the Society’s founder members), appeared in the journal Nature in February 1962.
Today, the BBS has about 500 members, and its committee meets three times a year, organising and sponsoring both specialist meetings and a more general meeting biennially, in the years that the European Biophysical Societies’ Association (EBSA) does not have its congress.

BBS also supports travel bursaries for younger scientists and is the adhering society to the International Union for Pure and Applied Biophysics (IUPAB) and of EBSA, which Peter Bayley (former editor of the European Biophysics Journal, succeeded by Tony Watts (2000-2015) and then Rob Gilbert) was a founding member. Tony North was General Secretary of IUPAB for about 12 years, and a founding and long-standing member of BBS, missing its first meeting only through being on sabbatical in the USA. In 2007, BBS was the national society organising the 6th EBSA/BBS congress at Imperial College, London, with Mike Ferenzci (then at Imperial College, London) as the local organiser and Tony Watts (University of Oxford) as scientific chair, attracting over 1350 participants and about 800 posters.

The BBS 50th Anniversary Meeting in Cambridge in July 2010 was a special meeting, not least because Venki Ramakrishnan was elected an Honorary Member of BBS in the same year that he was awarded a Nobel Prize for his outstanding work on the ribosome and gave a plenary lecture at the opening ceremony. He joins many highly distinguished Honorary Members of the BBS, including John Walker, Gregory Winter, Richard Henderson and about 70 more. A complete list can be found at https://britishbiophysics.org/about/.

A highlight of the 2012 Biennial BBS Congress in Durham was the Plenary Lecture by Brian Kobilka, just before his Nobel Prize was announced. The joint IUPAB/EBSA Congress in 2017, with some 1,300 participants was hosted by the BBS and the Biological Physics Group of the IOP in Edinburgh, co-chaired by Tony Watts and Andrew Turberfield (University of Oxford). A highlight that year was the award of the Nobel Prize to BBS Honorary Member 2003, Richard Henderson.
The BBS has recently established a number of new Prizes. Firstly, the Sosei Heptares Prize for Biophysics which recognises substantial contributions to Biophysics or Biophysical Methods was initiated in 2018. The first recipient, Elspeth Garman (University of Oxford), was recognised for her outstanding contributions to the understanding of radiation damage in protein crystallography. The BBS Young Investigator Award (recent awardees: 2018 - Lorna Dougan (University of Leeds); 2016 - Adam Perriman (University of Bristol); 2014 - Tuomas Knowles (University of Cambridge); 2012 - Marina Kuimova (Imperial College, London)) was renamed the BBS Louise Johnson Early Career Award in 2020 in recognition of Louise Johnson (BBS Honorary Member 2004) as an outstanding biophysicist and mentor of others, especially in the early stages of their careers. The BBS Kendrew Doctoral Thesis Prize was initiated in 2019 to honour the seminal contributions made to biophysics and to the BBS by John Kendrew who was instrumental in founding the BBS, was its first Secretary (1960-62) and one of its early Chairs (1964). It will be awarded for the first time at the BBS 60th Anniversary Meeting. The BBS 60th Anniversary Meeting, co-organised by Dave Scott (University of Nottingham) and Claire Friel (University of Nottingham), was supposed to have taken place in Nottingham in July 2020. However, due to Covid-19, the decision was taken to run it as a virtual Zoom meeting and move the dates back to 14th-17th September 2020. Distinguished Speakers include Venki Ramakrishnan, Richard Henderson and Dave Stuart.

Like the society it represents, the BBS Committee has changed beyond recognition since 1960. It currently comprises 17 members, almost 50% of whom are female! Membership of the committee is periodically refreshed. If you think you would like to get involved, please contact us (bbs@britishbiophysics.org).