

Durham and the Department of Geography Fifty Years Ago in 1955

A reflection by Professor John Clarke

Fifty years ago, when I arrived as a young Geography lecturer in the Durham Colleges in the University of Durham, the county, the city, the university, the colleges and all the departments were very different from those of today.

County Durham was much larger than now and stretched from the Tyne to the Tees. It was still dominated by the heavy industries of coal mining, iron and steel, chemicals, and shipbuilding. More than 100,000 miners were working within the county and there were pit heaps everywhere, although the focus of active mining had shifted from the shallower pits of West Durham to the deeper, bigger pits of East Durham's concealed coalfield, leaving many villages of West Durham in a declining 'category D' state.

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In contrast, Durham city was smaller than now, with less than 20,000 people and few surrounding housing estates. There were three railway stations (Gilesgate and Elvet were still open), and the current A167 was then the Great North Road, the A1. All traffic through the centre of the city went over Elvet and Framwellgate bridges via the Market Place, where a policeman sitting in a box controlled its flow. You still saw helmeted miners in the city, and the Wear was heavily polluted. Cathedral and castle were not floodlit at night, and tourists were few. The small number of students living out of college were in lodgings rather than flats, and unless special dispensation was given, all members of staff had to live within three miles of the cathedral; but a nineteenth-century terraced house could be purchased for well under £1000, within the range of a young lecturer earning £500 per annum (paid in two-monthly instalments). Although those salaries now seem small, we were better paid than nowadays, especially in relation to the cost of housing.

The Durham Colleges were one division of the federal University of Durham, which also comprised the much larger Kings College in Newcastle and two smaller affiliated colleges overseas: Fourah Bay College in Sierra Leone (where in the early 1960s I spent two happy years as a professor on secondment) and Codrington College in Barbados. At that time, the university system in Britain was tiny; there were only 15 other universities in England, four in Scotland and one in Wales, containing in all about 90,000 students, just one in thirty of the eligible age group - a far cry from today's target of 50%.

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The Durham division, always then known as the Durham Colleges, was mostly centred on the peninsula, except for St Mary's College which had been completed in 1952, the three training colleges for teachers (Bede, St Hild's and Nevilles Cross) which were also licensed halls of residence for university students, the Science Site, and a few scattered buildings in Old Elvet, Elvet Hill and Kepier. The administrative headquarters of both the University of Durham and the Durham Colleges and most of the non-science departments were still on the peninsula, so little wonder that

the Durham Colleges were accused of being rather introverted and ivory tower. The largest colleges, University and Hatfield, had only 259 and 217 students respectively, and colleges and societies were closer knit and all single sex, with evening exeats being given to encourage segregation of the sexes. College scarves were a sort of uniform in that more regimented era. Remember that almost all staff had done military service and that it was still compulsory for men, so the Officers Training Corps and Air Squadron played prominent roles, especially for cadets destined for commissions in the armed forces.

In the 22 teaching departments in the Durham Colleges there were 1153 students (about the equivalent of one large college today) and only 20 professors; yet there were three in Theology and two in Classics. An indication of the academic balance at the time was that Theology and Oriental Studies had the largest academic staffs, with 13 each.

“ The West Building housed Mathematics, Geography, [and] the Science Library ”

From 1948 until the early 1950s Geography had been housed on the Science Site in one of the collection of 13 temporary huts, which survived much longer than anyone expected as accommodation for research units, before moving into part of the West Building. In 1955, the only other substantial building on the Science Site was the elderly Dawson Building which was the main home of most of the laboratory sciences. The West Building housed Mathematics, Geography, the Science Library, along with the Applebey Lecture Theatre (the only large one available in Durham) and various other smaller lecture theatres, but Geography also had some rooms for research students in South End House.

Geography was a slightly below-average size, with five academic staff, 60 students taking honours courses and 52 taking other courses, and a chair was not established until the end of the session in 1956, when W.B. Fisher, who had been appointed Reader and Head of Department in 1954, was promoted. He remained Head of Department for 27 years until he retired in 1981, when I took over for three years under the newly adopted rotational system of headships. A dedicated expansionist with great entrepreneurial flair and wide-ranging ability, he was undoubtedly instrumental in creating a large and highly productive department, as well as being the founder Principal of the Graduate Society, the first Director of the Centre for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies and a long-term Public Orator. In those days of authoritarian heads, he was the decision-maker who asked for advice but was not consensual and not to be crossed. He was a big man, a bachelor for whom the Department was his home and his family. Always affable to friends, his heavy strides and guffaws could be heard all over the West Building, which he was already beginning to fill with historic maps and orientalia. One quirk was that he did not take coffee or tea with other Science Faculty staff in a room behind the Applebey, but he was first to arrive in the Department and last to leave, and was always on the ball.

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Apart from W.B. Fisher, usually known as W.B.F. and only much later as Bill, the four full-time lecturers were Charles Holmes (appointed in 1945), Howard Bowen-Jones (1947), John Dewdney (1953) and myself, the new boy. I was W.B.F.'s first appointment, having been one of his undergraduate students in Aberdeen five years previously who had gone on to the Sorbonne to undertake doctoral research in Tunisia, followed by military service as an Education Officer in the R.A.F., and an assistant lectureship at Aberdeen. In addition, there was one Honorary Lecturer, Len

Slater the Master of University College, who had preceded W.B.F. as Reader and Head of Department since 1947 but had been appointed to a lectureship in 1939 just before leaving for war service, mainly in Asia. We also had one full-time technician and cartographer (Gordon McWhirter) and one half-time secretary. All five full-time academic staff had rooms in a small corridor at one end of the first floor of the West Building, where there was one telephone for us all, each of us having a different number of rings! Another vivid contrast with today is that I was the only member of staff with a car, a small pre-war Morris 8 for which there were no parking problems.

The federal nature of the university imposed its influence over the departments through joint faculties and boards of studies with Kings College Newcastle, meetings being held alternately in Durham and Newcastle. In 1955 the Geography department at Newcastle had a professor (George Henry Daysh) and one more lecturer than Durham, an imbalance that W.B.F. did not take long to rectify. The two departments had broadly similar course structures and the two staffs knew each other well, many being co-examiners for the University of Durham School Examination Board marking O and A levels in Geography. Indeed, the smallness and the nature of the Durham Colleges before separation from Newcastle in 1963 and subsequent growth meant that we were less departmentalized and perhaps more interactive than now.

In 1955-56, undergraduate courses in Geography were given to BA and BSc general degree students, BSc general degree with honours students, BA and BSc honours students in Geography and to BA honours students in Geography and Anthropology (which was taught then from Newcastle, but three years later a lectureship was established within the Department). With a limited number of staff, the Department had to focus on what it then perceived as essentials. Physical, human and regional geography dominated the courses with increasing specialization by year, along with practical classes in cartography and field courses during the Easter vacation for first and second year honours students. All the teaching staff had full quotas of lectures, practicals, tutorials, seminars, local field excursions and Easter field courses. They were also closely involved in colleges/societies, in giving extra-mural courses of 24 classes a year and serving as school governors in parts of the county, as well as serving on various university committees.

In my first year, I was allocated (there was not much choice) eight lecture courses and two 3-hour honours practical classes each week, three tutorial groups, and a seminar class. Keeping one step ahead in that year was a nightmare. In the Easter vacation of 1956, accompanied by two research student demonstrators, I also had to take a field course to Edale in north Derbyshire, though I knew the area well through having been in an R.A.F. Mountain Rescue Unit in Derbyshire. The report of that field course became the first publication in the Department's Occasional Papers Series.

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There was very little time for research, although I managed to finish off my PhD thesis, and the Warden's Report at the end of the year contained only articles written for a reference volume on the British Commonwealth edited by W.B. Fisher. Moreover, nobody could take a sabbatical term until staff numbers had increased. Inevitably, we had to be generalists, with little time for specialization except when it linked with our teaching. The main group research activity, involving three academic staff (Fisher, Bowen-Jones and Dewdney) and several research students, centred on problems of land use and agricultural geography of Malta, and was funded by the Colonial Office. This arose partly from the Head of Department's interest in the Middle East, gained during wartime service and which had led to the publication in 1950 of his major textbook *The Middle East: A Physical, Social and Regional Geography* in Methuen's Advanced Geography Series. Most of the staff then and many

later were to develop research interests in the Middle East and/or Mediterranean, particularly because towards the end of that session the Rockefeller Foundation made a major grant of £17,000 to the Geography Department for the development of Middle Eastern studies over a period of five years. This was a huge fillip that led to many appointments of staff and research students, long before Research Councils had been created granting abundant research studentships. Until recently, the rather opulent Rockefeller Room in the Department, adorned with Persian carpets, Arab coffee pots and bowls, symbolized the significance of this research grant fifty years ago to the subsequent growth and external orientation of the Department.

I retired from the University of Durham as long ago as 1990, after 35 years' service, when it was nearly five times the size of the Durham Colleges in 1955, but still less than half its current size. The Department had grown commensurately and, even then, was one of the largest in Britain, with three professors (more than the average at that time), five readers and four senior lecturers in a total academic staff of about 24. Since then its size and reputation have continued to grow, so that it is now one of the finest in Britain and indeed in the world, and one is happy to reflect on being part of the small nucleus from which it has burgeoned.

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