

# 50 years of SSERC

**Whilst I can claim to be one of the longest serving members of the current SSERC team and whilst it may look as though my memory stretches back to the beginning of SSERC it really doesn't. So in putting this article together I have to thank John Richardson, Director of SSERC and my predecessor, for the excellent articles he wrote for both our 21<sup>st</sup> and 40<sup>th</sup> birthday editions much of which I have - in John's words - recycled here.**

John became Director in the early 1980s and held the post for over 20 years. We all owe him a great deal for the way he managed to lead the organisation through some difficult times.

Although SSERC, or more correctly SSSERC (the Scottish Schools Science Equipment Research Centre), came into being in 1965, the origin of the Centre was a technical sub-committee of the Advisory Committee on Physics set up in 1961 to advise the Secretary of State on all matters relating to the teaching of physics. There were problems recruiting and retaining science teachers, we had outdated syllabuses, old-fashioned suffocating exams.

This pre SSSERC sub-committee chiefly assessed apparatus for its suitability in use with the modernised 'alternative' physics syllabus. They also designed prototype kit to plug the gaps where no suitable apparatus existed. This work was done by teachers in their spare time, with the help of the late Professor W.H.J. Childs. They worked in their own schools and at what is now Heriot Watt University. Incidentally, the new, but alternative, physics syllabus took only a few months to write and agree on.

By then, in England and Wales, the original Nuffield Foundation Science Project had begun. Scotland was designated a "Region" and a team was set up under the leadership of W.R. Ritchie. More development work on equipment began in schools and in the Apprentices' School at Ferranti Ltd. Figures such as "Physics is Fun", Jim Jardine, the late John Emery of Glenalmond and the late Joe Stewart all worked with Bill Ritchie. They produced groundbreaking bits of teaching kit such as the linear air track, the Venner stopclock and magnetic pucks for frictionless motion. By the Summer of 1963, several members of this group were also heavily involved with the work of the Scottish Nuffield physics team.

New biology and chemistry syllabuses were set to join the alternative syllabus already developed for physics. With the backing of the Scottish Education Department, and the National Advisory Committee on Physics, the local authorities were asked to co-operate in the setting up of a national science centre. Within 18 months, a structure for the funding and governance of such a Centre had been agreed, premises identified and refurbished.

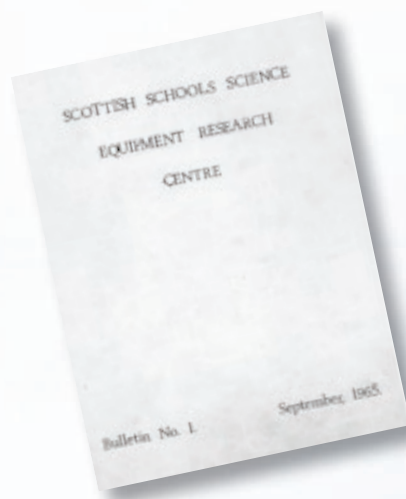


Figure 1 - The 1<sup>st</sup> issue of the Bulletin.

The original organisation from 1965, SSSERC was a partnership, one led jointly from the outset by Edinburgh and Glasgow, "Corporations". They, in turn, recruited one or two others from the City and County Councils (at that time they were the education authorities). These core partners laid the legal and administrative foundations for what was to be a national advisory centre. Only when the initial stages were complete and premises found, was membership of the scheme offered to all of the Scottish City and County Councils as education authorities. In the present, councils are continually being urged to consider setting up shared services in the drive for efficiency. In this respect, SSERC was decades ahead of its time!

From the outset, and for a long time afterwards, the Centre's team remained small (5 to 7 staff). Many of the ideas for development and testing programmes were still coming from teachers and technicians based in schools. Even now, 50 years on and with the staff team swollen by secondees, semi-retirees working part-time and other folk on short-term contracts, we remain no more than a small to medium sized enterprise - although not in output.

With the advent of the Health and Safety at Work Act in the seventies, SSERC undertook the task of interpreting the multitude of documents, designed to cover workplaces as diverse as single person enterprises through to massive corporations, and identifying which part of the legislation was relevant to schools. Ensuring that employers are able to meet their legal obligations with regard to health and safety in science and technology classes will always remain a vital component of our work.

SSERC in 2015 has a profile that has expanded radically from the early days. One area in which this change is most noticeable is in our role in supporting teachers and technicians through our involvement in the delivery of professional development programmes. With significant support from, amongst others, the Scottish Government, the National Science Learning Centre, the Wellcome Trust and the Primary Science Teaching Trust, we have over the past 10 years worked with staff from virtually every secondary school in Scotland. Our support for science and technology in the Primary sector continues to grow; through our Primary Cluster programme we will, by March 2018, have worked with all Local Authorities in Scotland to put in place experiential professional development opportunities for their

primary practitioners. Alongside our professional development work we produce new resources to support school educators in Scotland with the implementation of *CfE* and new qualifications. We strive to ensure that science and technology teaching in Scotland remains firmly practical and experiential.

It is a real achievement for any organisation to reach 50. I believe SSERC has managed this by always ensuring that its core members (the 32 Scottish Local Authorities, teachers and technicians) receive a service that meets their needs - thanks to staff who are both passionate and completely committed. On top of this, we've also had wonderful support in

the governance of the Centre. In the 50-year lifetime of SSERC, we've only ever had six folk in the chair [The late Prof W.H.J. Childs and Councillor Joe McGinley; Councillor Ross Martin, Councillor David McGrouther, Councillor Kay Morrison and Councillor Walter McAdam] (sequentially not simultaneously). Councillor David McGrouther deserves special thanks for his unstinting efforts over many years, firstly as chair of the governors and then as chairman of the SSERC Board since incorporation.

**Diamond Jubilee next!**

*Fred Young,  
Chief Executive, SSERC*

## In memoriam Allen Cochrane

Staff at SSERC are saddened to hear of the sudden death of Allen Cochrane who had been with the organisation since 1976, retiring only 2 years ago due to ill health.

Allen, as a senior chemist at SSERC, was behind the Hazardous Chemicals Manual and many other resources considered invaluable by science teachers. His immense knowledge, creativity and thoroughness earned him the respect of both teachers and support staff.

We at SSERC were also in awe of Allen's professional qualities but we shall miss him for much more than that. Exemplifying the "gentle giant" cliché, Allen was a friendly, sociable and entertaining colleague.

Whilst he was particularly fond of the outdoors, he approached all aspects of life with an enthusiasm and generosity of spirit that was evident to all who met him. Those of us at SSERC who worked with him, learned from him, and laughed with him feel immensely privileged to have known him. We will be publishing a fuller appreciation of Allen on our website.