

ICMS – the early years

Professor Abdus Salam, Physics Nobel Laureate, founder and Director of the International Centre for Theoretical Physics, Trieste, when accepting the inaugural Edinburgh Medal in April 1989, challenged Edinburgh to create new science institutes engaged with both developing countries and local industry.

The audience included Heriot-Watt University's Vice-Principal, Professor Robin Knops, who together with colleagues John Ball and Jack Carr responded by approaching Ian Wall, of the City of Edinburgh Economic Development and Estates Department, with a proposal for a mathematics research centre in Edinburgh. The potential was quickly grasped. A Working Group, enlarged at Ian Wall's suggestion by Edinburgh University's Elmer Rees and Terry Lyons, developed fully-costed plans. Adequate financing could be obtained from a successful competitive bid for a SERC funded national mathematics research institute, seen of strategic importance to the UK's international position in mathematics. The Group's application, although highly commended, failed.

Undeterred, the Group unanimously determined to seek alternative resources, and resolutely aimed to achieved world prominence.

On 6 December 1989, the City's Lord Provost, Heriot-Watt University, the University of Edinburgh, the Scottish Development Agency, and ICTP, Trieste, signed a Protocol to create an Edinburgh mathematics research centre to foster mathematical research, international conferences, short courses, especially for developing countries, and collaboration with industry.

The Protocol marks the formal foundation of the Centre. The name, however, was adopted only in May 1999 at the first meeting of the Steering Committee, formerly the Working Group, chaired by John Ball. A committee structure, of rotating membership, overseen by an independent Board, was organised and survives intact.

A feasibility study, commissioned in January 1999 by the Scottish Development Agency on Ian Wall's initiative, gave unequivocal endorsement. Heriot-Watt University and the University of Edinburgh assumed joint ownership, and each has subsequently provided annual subventions of £25,000. Early regular generous donations came mainly from the Edinburgh Life Assurance Offices. The Royal Societies of London and Edinburgh, the Edinburgh and London Mathematical Societies, Lothian and Edinburgh Enterprise Limited, and the City of Edinburgh District Council also provided support. The first workshop on *Geometry and Physics*, organised by Elmer Rees in March 1991 at Newbattle Abbey College, attracted over 100 participants from twenty-three

developed and developing countries. Equally successful workshops soon followed, many on topics underrepresented in the UK, (A list is posted on the website.) Each workshop, however, required separate application for a SERC grant.

Financial viability was secured in 2010 when John Toland, then Scientific Director, persuaded EPSRC to award a rolling grant, subsequently renewed. Then in 2020 the UKRI awarded a major grant of £5m to expand activity in education and training.

The Centre originally operated without dedicated premises, Thanks to Professor David Ritchie of the James Clerk Maxwell Foundation, from April 1994 accommodation was rented in 14 India Street, James Clerk Maxwell's birthplace. Increased activity, however, necessitated removal in 2010 to a converted church in South College Street, before moving in 2018 to its present location in the nearby Bayes Centre.

ICMS has acquired world-class status while adhering to the 1989 Working Group's legacy and to the Protocol's mandate, sure foundation for future prosperity.

R.J.Knops

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