

The British Association at Oxford.

THE history, traditions, and amenities of Oxford mark it out as a place well suited to be the scene of the annual gathering of a body like the British Association; and it may safely be pronounced that the meeting that has just come to an end is not the least successful of those that have taken place since the Association has outgrown the questionings and misgivings that accompanied its earliest activities, and has made good its claim to efficiency and usefulness in the cause of commending the results of scientific research to the consideration of the community at large. This end has been met by the more technical and specialised communications that have formed the principal business of the sections, combined with the evening discourses delivered by men eminent in their own departments of science, with public lectures in Oxford and in neighbouring towns, and with lectures specially arranged for the benefit of older scholars from the elementary schools in the city.

The fulfilment of these various purposes has been the object of much careful deliberation and contrivance during the past year, and it is the hope of those concerned in the necessary preparations that their efforts to make the present occasion a notable one have been crowned with some measure of success. Great expectations were raised by the announcement that His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had consented to occupy the presidential chair; and it may be said at once that those expectations were amply realised. His inaugural address provided fresh evidence, if such were needed, of the interest taken in scientific progress by the highest personages in the land, and of their sense of the important bearing of a knowledge of the facts of Nature upon the welfare of the whole body of humanity. The address, admirable alike in matter and in manner, is certain, from the interesting character of its substance and the wideness of its appeal, to be of immense service in encouraging a healthy appreciation of the aims and methods of science. Nor did the good offices of the president in the same cause end with the delivery of his address. By the readiness with which he entered into the social developments of the occasion, by his accessibility, and the gracious cordiality which he showed towards all with whom he came in contact, he has done very much to promote that kindly intercourse and encourage that fellow-feeling which should affect all those who are engaged in the common task of investigating and interpreting the phenomena of Nature.

It is the opinion of many who are well qualified to judge, that the social side of these meetings, though at first sight it may seem to bear merely the appearance of a concession to the demand for amusement, has its own peculiar value in aiding that personal interchange of views and comparison of experience for which the more formal atmosphere of a scientific sitting gives often too scanty an opportunity. It is a great point gained when one scientific worker gets to know another personally. At a reception, a garden party, or on a country excursion, it very often happens that misunderstandings are removed, that causes of irritation

die down, that difficulties arising from difference of temperament are smoothed over. These surely are objects worth taking some trouble to attain; nor should it be forgotten that the coming together on terms not only of scientific but also of personal sympathy may act upon the younger worker as an inspiration, and on the elder as a quickening of his interest in the new points of view that appeal to the rising generation. These ends have been well served by the Oxford meeting.

The story of St. Frideswide may be accepted as legend with some foundation in fact; and there is no reason to doubt that the schools established in connexion with her priory, the origin of which dated from the eighth century, formed the germ of the present University. Authentic history of the city begins with the raising of the castle mound by Ethelfleda, the "Lady of the Mercians," and her surrender of Oxford to her brother Edward the Elder (A.D. 912). By the end of the twelfth century Oxford was a well-known seat of learning, and before the end of the thirteenth, the noble foundation of Walter de Merton, the model of all later collegiate establishments, had started on its way. With an academic and civic history reaching back for more than a thousand years, it is perhaps strange that Oxford should have no building capable of containing more than a very moderate-sized assembly; especially when it is remembered that among the many events of historic importance that have taken place within its walls was the session of the King's parliament of 1644; this, however, was not a numerous body. But the deficiency in question was felt as a somewhat serious inconvenience when it came to be necessary to find accommodation for all those members of the Association who wished to hear the president's inaugural address, and also for those who purposed attending at the official academic and civic receptions.

The peculiarities of an ancient University, much of the life of which is embodied in colleges—all bodies with an individual constitution, in each case largely independent of that of the University—made a certain want of concentration inevitable in the space and other facilities allotted to the purposes of the meeting. A partial remedy for this inconvenience was found in the organisation of a special system of transport, by which it was possible to reach the outlying spots in the occupation of the Association without great loss of time.

It may, on the whole, be said that these and other difficulties inherent in the situation were successfully dealt with, and that the Oxford meeting of 1926 will take its place in the records of the British Association as having contributed in a remarkable degree to the maintenance and advancement of the objects of that body. A standard has been set in this and other recent annual meetings which Leeds, the seat of the next annual gathering on August 31-September 7, 1927, may be confidently expected to follow. The meeting in 1928 will be held at Glasgow.

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