

### Société Royale des Sciences Naturelles du Laos

THE Société Royale des Sciences Naturelles du Laos was recently founded at That-Luang as a private and non-political society of leading Laotian scientists. The objects of the society are to initiate and encourage scientific research in Laos, to promote the development of scientific ways of thought particularly among the young, and to strengthen the links between the scientific and commercial communities of Laos. To these ends it will organize private meetings and public conferences on scientific matters; it will arrange for the publication of Laotian scientific activities in its own bulletin, and it will contribute to the creation and development of a library and a museum. The Society is at present based on the laboratories of the Ministry of Agriculture at Vientiane. The president is Mr. Khamphay Abhay, and the general secretary is Mr. Oroth Choulamountry, Ministère de la Culture, Vientiane.

### The Decimal System and British Coinage

ON December 19 Lord Mills announced in the House of Lords that the Government, after considering the question of decimal coinage, in the light of public interest following the joint report of the Committee of the British Association and the Association of British Chambers of Commerce, thought real advantage would follow from adopting a decimal currency. In view of the widespread use of accounting and other monetary machinery, the transitional cost would be substantial, but could be limited by choice of the size of the new units and careful timing of the change-over. The Government considered, therefore, that a full-scale investigation into the best form of decimal currency, the steps by which the change could be effected and the cost of the change-over to the economy as a whole, was desirable and had decided to set up a Committee of Inquiry, with Lord Halsbury as chairman, to advise on these three points. Lord Mills added that the Government was very conscious of the importance of reaching firm decisions as soon as possible and would discuss with the chairman ways and means by which the Committee, the membership of which would be announced early in 1962, could be enabled to make rapid progress. The other Commonwealth Governments had been informed of these proposals. In reply to further questions, Lord Mills estimated that 12-18 months might be required for the Committee to form its conclusions and advise the Government. He did not think that the Government could hold itself committed to changing over at this stage. A similar statement was made at Question Time in the House of Commons on the same day by the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who emphasized that the Committee was being asked to consider methods and not whether the change should be made.

### Development Contracts and the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research

SINCE the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research announced in May 1959 its intention of supporting science-based development in industry by a contract system, the Department, in consultation with the National Research and Development Corporation, has been examining a number of potentially valuable ideas. It was clear from the beginning that the choice of suitable projects would be difficult, for the Department is only concerned with projects which show a reasonable probability of achieving an

important technical advance. They might, for example, introduce a major departure in basic design principles; or introduce into industrial practice the results of advanced research; or link in a single design developments in different technological fields which have not previously found practical application in industry. While projects must be judged on their technical merits, they must not, of course, be of such a nature that their ultimate commercial success is very improbable. The fact that a project has originated in a particular firm will obviously be a strong reason for placing the eventual further development work with that firm; but the Department would have to satisfy itself of the firm's general ability to carry out the work as well as the competence of its research, design and development team. In all cases, the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research is likely to require the selected firm to make a substantial contribution to the cost of the project; in addition, the Department will seek a return on its own contribution if the project is successful.

The first development contract under this scheme has been made with Craven Brothers (Manchester), Ltd. of Stockport, for the development of a large gear-grinding machine. Craven Brothers will contribute towards the development costs and also provide the special capital equipment necessary for the manufacture of the machine. The Admiralty is also interested in this project, which is based on earlier research work sponsored by it to meet its particular requirements. The whole development, for which Craven Brothers will considerably expand their design and development team, is expected to be complete in 3-4 years. Support from the Department of Scientific and Industrial Research will cease when the prototype is successfully demonstrated.

### British Programme for Nuclear Propulsion of Shipping

IN replying for the Government in an adjournment debate on the nuclear propulsion of shipping in the House of Commons on December 15, the Parliamentary Secretary for Science, Mr. Denzil Freeth, said that within three weeks of the Minister of Transport's announcement on November 28 of the decision to undertake a research programme, under the guidance of a working group with the Permanent Secretary to the Ministry of Transport as chairman and including Sir William Cook, Sir Victor Shephard and Prof. Diamond, the group had approved the general lines of a programme of research submitted by the Atomic Energy Authority which will carry the main responsibility for the programme. The programme will involve expenditure of about £3 million over about three years and the organization will be comprised of a branch dealing with research into reactor design and experimental engineering; a second body concerned with research in nuclear physics; and a team to investigate the problems of the design of nuclear ships, construction and application, to which staff will be seconded from the British Shipbuilding Research Association. The two chief difficulties will be to design a reactor sufficiently robust for operation under violent motion, and to construct relatively small reactors with sufficiently low capital and running costs to be more attractive propulsion units than those driven by conventional fuels after allowing for further developments in the efficiency of such methods. It is, at present, intended to study four reactor systems: a modified version of the pressurized water reactor; the steam-cooled