

OLD WORLD

Inquiry Continues into Hovertrain's Demise

IF nothing else, last week's hearing by the Select Committee on Science and Technology as part of its inquiry into the decision to abandon the hovertrain project established that Dr Ieuan Maddock, chief scientist at the Department of Trade and Industry is an avid reader of Professor Eric Laithwaite's scientific papers. But Dr Maddock is also interested in what Professor Laithwaite says and he took exception to the statements made to the select committee three weeks ago by Professor Laithwaite about a conversation between the two men at the Royal Institution in February (see *Nature*, 242, 490; 1973).

Professor Laithwaite claimed that Dr Maddock had "clenched his fist and said 'I wish that I had known all this sooner'" when he was shown a demonstration of a new linear motor developed by Professor Laithwaite that produced both lift and propulsion. Dr Maddock, who made it clear in no uncertain terms that he did not like being quoted second hand in public, said that the situation was nothing like Professor Laithwaite claimed. Perhaps, said Dr Maddock, he had clenched his fist, but it was not over being surprised with the demonstration, but probably because Professor Laithwaite had mentioned that he had applied to the Science Research Council for a grant to pursue the work. Dr Maddock being a member of the SRC was surprised that he was not aware of the application.

Dr Maddock and Mr Lyons, Director General of Research at the Department of the Environment, who also gave evidence to the committee, displayed a remarkable degree of coolness towards the proved linear motor developed by Professor Laithwaite and his team at Imperial College in the past few years. It is far from clear, said Dr Maddock, whether in fact building a transport system based on one of these new motors would be more economical than building a system based on the older type of linear motor. And, said Dr Maddock, there were great difficulties associated with the new motor—in particular the repulsion which provides the lift is

known to change into an attraction at high speeds. Such problems had to be solved before the new motor could be considered as the basis for a transport system.

Apart from bringing out this particular disagreement between Dr Maddock and Professor Laithwaite, the select committee also spent some time delving into the reasons why the work of Tracked Hovercraft Limited was halted. It emerged that although the decision was announced in February 1973, a meeting at which Tracked Hovercraft Limited, the NRDC (through which the DTI sponsored THL) and Hawker Siddeley were represented was held in August 1972 with follow up meetings held in October and November. It is the minutes of these meetings which the select committee is now trying to obtain

in order to satisfy themselves of the reasons why support was cut off from THL and also, especially, to discover who, or what group of people, carried out an analysis of the future of THL.

Why was Hawker Siddeley the only industrial company represented at the August meeting, the select committee asked. After a suitable period for thinking and note passing the answer was that the views of industry on the prospects for the work of THL had to be represented and Hawker Siddeley was chosen to represent those views. Before Hawker Siddeley was awarded £500,000 last February to continue the THL work on linear motors, other companies were consulted and were represented at the later meetings, according to Dr Maddock. But the precise way in which Hawker Siddeley is going to spend the

BRITISH ANTARCTIC SURVEY

Icy Problems

THE disappearance over the side of the research vessel Bransfield of biological samples from the Antarctic has put back parts of the British Antarctic Survey's work by a year; replacing the lost samples could cost as much as £20,000, according to Sir Vivian Fuchs, the survey's director.

No charges have yet been made in connexion with the loss, and the two members of the ship's crew who were helping police with their inquiries at Shirley police station in Southampton last week have been released, pending the result of forensic studies.

The loss of the samples was discovered after the Bransfield, returning from the Antarctic, had left Montevideo on its way home. A survey officer flew out to meet the ship in Las Palmas, but the police were called in when he was unable to clear up the problem.

Apparently the samples were thrown overboard following a dispute over whether beer should be stored in the samples fridge in the Bransfield's scientific laboratory. The fridge contained assorted biological samples which were maintained at -40°C , a temperature considerably lower than that of the domestic refrigerators on board. Andrew Clarke and Michael Richardson, two members of the survey team, objected to the constant opening and closing of the fridge door to get beer out, as, in the hot temperatures of the tropics their

samples were likely to suffer. The crew were finally told to take their beer out of the fridge, and the laboratory was locked. But next day it was found that the laboratory had been broken into and the samples had gone.

The samples included assorted crustacea and algae, including some examples of *Boeckella sylvestri*, fresh moss, mineral ash, marine benthos and extracted lipids, as well as whole and dissected birds and fish, and blood and tissue samples taken from expedition members at the Signy Island base which were to be used in the physiological studies of the effects on man of living at extremely low temperatures for extended periods. Samples of *Notothenia neglecta*, the "Antarctic cod", and *Chaenocephalus aceratus*, one of the Antarctic "ice fish" which live in the very cold waters close to the ice shelf and which are "bloodless", having no haemoglobin, the oxygen being transported round the body in their blood plasma, were also lost.

The lost samples represent more than a year's work for the two biologists, and affect the work of four other scientists still at Signy Island. Clarke and Richardson, both of whom had been in the Antarctic for two and a half years, were there to write reports in the British Antarctic Survey's scientific series, and would probably have used the results of their work to apply for PhD degrees at a British university once the full studies on the specimens had been completed at Monks Wood research station. As it is, much of the work will have to be repeated.

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