

British Association

Science festival fun and furore

NORMALLY as British as cricket and cream tea (to be consumed after a charabanc ride to a site of local scientific interest) this year's meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science at Bristol was electrified by the fierce blasts of controversy. First among the outspoken was undoubtedly Mrs Wendy Savage, just cleared of charges of professional incompetence arising from her work as an obstetrician, and ready to put men in the dock for trying to take away control over childbirth from women.

To a crowded lecture theatre Savage quoted some startling statistics. In the United States the caesarian birth rate has risen to 20 per cent from 5 per cent in a little over ten years; Britain has just reached 12 per cent. But in neither country has there been commensurate improvements in perinatal survival rates. Savage cites numerous other cases of needless medical intervention: routine ultrasound scans and ever-rising birth induction and forceps delivery rates. Whereas in 1960, 30 per cent of British babies were born at home, now women have "lost confidence in themselves and in their ability to give birth". Mrs Savage most of all blames male obstetricians' desire to control women for the "medicalization of birth".

The main themes of the conference, appropriate for the year, were industry; the powers and limitation of science and technology; and computers and intelligence. Inevitably, industry meant how research, particularly basic research, could better serve industry. But new ideas were



The world's first scientific street performer? Dr Francis Evans of Sheffield Polytechnic was out every day during the British Association meeting explaining the principles of water power (and getting very wet) on a street corner. He claims to have seen one young "entrepreneur" passing the hat around among the crowds he attracted.

few and far between: listeners were launched onto a veritable ocean of platitudes as speakers listed the endless benefits of basic research, the peculiar aptitude of the British for it, and the shameful irresponsibility of the government in failing to give the support it requires. What of the great British inventions that were commercial flops? According to Sir George Porter, president of the British Association and the Royal Society, the universities are now enthusiastic about industry and "the days of ivory tower snobbishness about 'pure' research are long since past".

It took Professor John Ashworth, vice-chancellor of the University of Salford, to let in fresh air with the iconoclastic suggestion that Britain's vaunted record in winning Nobel prizes might really be a symp-

tom of weakness. His argument is that universities have, through the "peer-group pressure of the academic establishment as transmitted through the University Grants Committee" increasingly concentrated on the production of those "fitted for one very specific kind of vocation — that of research scholar". The latest moves by UGC to grade universities by research results are but the culmination of this process. It is assumed, he says, that those who fail to become scholars will find another vocation (in industry?) for which their scholarly training will stand them in good stead. He put his question bluntly "do failed Nobel laureates make the best recruits to industry?"

Ashworth's opinion is that industry needs a more highly educated workforce at all levels. His radical solution is to increase student numbers by a third, and to replace the three-year honours degree with a two-year general degree. A further two years' honours course would be provided only for those who need to specialize.

Elsewhere the British Association meeting continued in its own way: a curious pot-pourri of informing the general public of science (while avoiding being too outspoken), and involving the young in science (without attacking the education system) and allowing all, very politely, to have their say at question time (even the garrulous eccentrics). Two thousand of the meeting's three thousand attendees were young people, brought in by the sterling work being done by the British Association for Young Scientists, entertained by boffins from every conceivable discipline (more than 200 lectures and events in five days) and if they had a spare moment able to choose among a "feminist history walk", a tour of country pubs and a geological visit to the Mendips, to name but a few.

Alun Anderson

Murder charge for anthropology student

Washington

THE graduate student who found anthropologist Dian Fossey murdered in her mountain cabin last December is now the target of an international warrant for arrest issued by Rwanda's minister of justice. Wayne McGuire, a University of Oklahoma doctoral candidate, fled the African country last month.

McGuire came to the camp on Mount Visoke in mid-1985 with the intention of spending two years studying the dwindling population of mountain gorillas whose plight Fossey had fought to publicize. He had worked with Fossey for only five months when she was killed by a machete blow to the head. Fossey's vigilante tactics in nabbing poachers who attacked her animals won her many enemies; initial speculation as to her murderer's identity focused outside her own camp. McGuire proceeded with his work until late July when,

according to McGuire, a consular official hiked to the camp and advised him that he should seek legal advice.

McGuire claims Rwanda's charges were trumped up to avert negative publicity. He suggests the Rwandans, who received over \$20 million in US economic aid last year, fear that reports of Rwandan citizens killing well-known Americans would leave a bad taste in the mouths of US budget committees. The Rwandans are sticking to their guns; but, lacking an extradition treaty with the United States, their guns are not exactly loaded.

The University of Oklahoma has offered McGuire a teaching position starting this spring, but without access to the gorillas, his dissertation is scuttled. McGuire's attorney has written to the State Department requesting its assistance in having the warrant recalled so McGuire can return to Mount Visoke.

Karen Wright