

the year past, set up two research units in industrial relations and race relations.

One of the tendencies apparent in the council's report is a hankering after research units. The council says that the needs of interdisciplinary research are not always met within the structure of university departments and that "it is hard to avoid the impression that when any serious work needs to be done, there are powerful forces that drive the activity back into a series of separate departmental enclaves".

The 40 per cent of the SSRC budget spent on research grants was in 1969-70 awarded to 173 applicants, which implies a rejection rate of almost exactly 50 per cent and more money for fewer successful applications than in the previous year. The open-endedness of the social sciences as such is reflected in the way in which some of the council's money is spent on long-term open-ended research projects such as that under Professor J. Parry Lewis at the University of Manchester intended to devise a comprehensive urban simulation model. Support for postgraduate teaching is the most rapidly growing part of the council's budget, but the council is evidently prepared to look sceptically at the value of conventional PhD courses in the pattern of its activities.

LAW SUITS

Animal Research

THE settlement was announced this week of a libel action brought by Mr John Bleby, Director of the Laboratory Animals Centre of the Medical Research Council, against the weekly magazine *Titbits* and the British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection. In November 1968, the magazine apparently published an article about medical experiments with animals which included a photograph of Mr Bleby and allegations of cruelty to animals. The British Union for the Abolition of Vivisection was involved when it displayed in its premises in Whitehall an enlarged photocopy of the article. In the settlement out of court this week, *Titbits* and the British Union paid substantial damages to Mr Bleby and the union also agreed, in a statement in open court, to display in the windows of its Whitehall office a copy of the full report of the proceedings in court which is to be published in *Titbits*.

The chief function of the MRC's centre is to make animals more readily available to research laboratories, but it also gives advice on how to keep and house animals. One result of the centre's work is that by improving breeding techniques, inbred strains of animals can be bred more efficiently and fewer animals need to be bred for experiment than under a purely random system. Apart from research on breeding techniques, no medical research is carried out at the Laboratory Animals Centre.

SEISMOLOGY

England Shakes

LAST Sunday evening's earthquake which startled people in the northern counties of England would have gone unreported if it had occurred in one of the world's recognized earthquake danger areas. But by British standards with a magnitude on the Richter scale of

between 4.5 and 4.75, as estimated by the seismological unit of the Atomic Energy Authority, last Sunday's event rates as one of the largest to have been recorded. It was felt in Cumberland, County Durham, Westmorland, Lancashire and Yorkshire, and as *Nature* went to press the location of the epicentre had been narrowed down to the neighbourhood of the town of Kirkby Stephen on the Westmorland-Yorkshire border.

According to the geology department at the University of Durham, which makes a speciality of the study of British earthquakes, the earthquake on Sunday probably originated in either the Craven fault belt or the Dent fault, which form the southern and western boundaries respectively of the Askrigg block, named after the village of Askrigg in Wensleydale. The blocks in this area have been stable in themselves since the Carboniferous, of the order of 300 million years ago, so that faulting has tended to be concentrated at the boundaries. The Durham group are now looking up the records of an earthquake which geologists with long memories recall as having occurred in the same area in 1932.

Modern geologists will be pleased that the theory of continental drift and sea floor spreading can be implicated, although in a roundabout fashion. The likely explanation of Sunday's earthquake is that it was an adjustment of the crust related to the subsidence of the North Sea basin that has been going on since the Tertiary. It is then argued that the North Sea basin itself may be the result of the pressures that occur at continental margins as a result of sea floor spreading. An alternative explanation of the earthquake, less favoured at Durham, is that it was a dying whisper of the Alpine orogeny, the process responsible for Swiss scenery.

The depth at which the earthquake occurred is not yet known, but a quick look at the seismograph records suggests something like ten to fifteen kilometres. The surprisingly wide area over which tremors were felt suggests, however, a greater depth, possibly twenty kilometres, which places the earthquake only just within the base of the crust. When readings are received from stations outside Britain, it will be possible to fix the depth more precisely. A fault plane solution, giving the direction of movement that occurred, will be attempted at Durham. In the meantime, this earthquake was a nice reminder that Britain is not as seismologically quiet as people believe—in the past year or two there have been several earthquakes in the Bangor area with a magnitude of up to 4, probably associated with the faulting along the Menai Straits.

CHEMISTRY

Removing the Boredom

by our Education Correspondent

CHEMISTRY students at the University of Sussex may take part next session in trials of a scheme designed to make undergraduate chemistry courses more attractive and less boring. The scheme, outlined by Professor Colin Eaborn in the current issue of *Chemistry in Britain*, will be run alongside conventional chemistry courses. Its chief aim is to take some emphasis away from formal lecture courses and to base the degree on creative research work.

Professor Eaborn, who is chairman of the science faculty board at the University of Sussex, points out