

chance to survey possible sites before their irrevocable destruction, and the opportunity to preserve those sites of special importance. A message from Mr Peter Walker, Secretary of State for the Environment, which was read at the meeting and which expressed strong sympathy with "Rescue's" aims indicates, perhaps, that their call will not go unheeded.

#### INDUSTRIAL RESEARCH

## Rise and Fall of BCURA

SIR JOHN EDEN, Minister for Industry, recently praised the work of the British Coal Utilization Research Association, pointing out that its "rate of growth as a contract research organization has been impressive", and that its prospects seem "excellent". But the National Coal Board evidently does not share that opinion, because it announced last week that BCURA is to be closed down. The NCB intends to withdraw its financial support from BCURA and, because the board is the only industrial member of the research association, BCURA will die from lack of funds.

The chief reason for the closure is that the National Coal Board has decided to concentrate its research activities at the Coal Research Establishment at Stoke Orchard, near Cheltenham. Some of BCURA's units and facilities will therefore be transferred lock, stock and barrel, while others will be closed down. A few of the association's 130 or so staff, who were informed only last week that the establishment is to close by the summer, will also be offered jobs at Stoke Orchard. On the face of things, the decision to concentrate resources seems sensible, but there are a few rather surprising aspects. Last October, BCURA opened a Materials Characterization Unit—it was this development which provided the platform for Sir John Eden to praise the establishment—and this is one of the units which will be transferred to Stoke Orchard.

The reason why the Materials Characterization Unit was not established at Stoke Orchard in the first place probably lies in the peculiar constitutional position of BCURA during the past two years. BCURA was established in 1938 as a government supported research association, but because the National Coal Board eventually became the dominant industrial member, it was decided in 1968 that the government's grant would be run down, and that the NCB should take the establishment over as a wholly owned subsidiary. Consequently, all the industrial members of BCURA, except for the NCB, resigned on December 31, 1968, and rejoined as associate members, and the NCB took over full

responsibility for BCURA on January 1 this year. The Materials Characterization Unit was therefore established before the NCB had complete control over the affairs of BCURA, although the coal board was the chief party involved in the planning of the establishment.

Over the past few years, BCURA has been building up its contract research, and it is estimated that the contracts this year would have brought in about £150,000 compared with about £80,000 last year. But the annual expenditure on the BCURA laboratories is about £800,000 and it seems that the NCB has decided that BCURA's income from contracts would have been unlikely ever significantly to reduce the financial burden on the NCB. As for the outstanding contracts which BCURA holds, the NCB is hoping that those which cannot be cancelled will be completed by the summer.

#### CHEMICALS

## Shell Rethinks

THE Shell group of companies seems to be feeling the full effects of inflation. During the past week the company announced that work is to stop temporarily on the expansion of the Carrington chemicals complex near Manchester and Stanlow oil refinery at Ellesmere Port, Cheshire, while a reappraisal of the cost of the whole project is carried out.

The original plans were laid down about eighteen months ago and at that time the cost was estimated to be about £225 million, of which £150 million was earmarked for the Carrington project. Some of the Carrington plant was expected to be in operation by 1972 and completion was planned for 1975. Shell Chemicals UK Ltd and Shell UK Ltd now estimate that the total cost may be inflated by as much as 40 per cent.

The situation is considerably aggravated by the abolition of investment grants announced by the government at the end of last year and their replacement by investment allowances. Excessive inflation within the UK deals a second blow to the chemical industry under an investment allowance scheme because the international nature of the industry (and particularly of the Shell group) means that prices in Britain must keep in step with those elsewhere. Profits inevitably fall, and only a steadily reducing proportion of the overall investment in, say, the Carrington and Stanlow projects can be recouped from taxation. The result is a cash flow problem in one of the most capital intensive industries in the UK—the chemical industry utilizes 15 per cent of industrial assets but only employs about 5 per cent of the total industrial labour force.

## Parliament in Britain

### Food Contamination

MR JAMES PRIOR, Minister of Agriculture, announced that he has instituted a scheme for monitoring certain heavy metals in canned and fresh fish, and other foods important in the national diet. The Laboratory of the Government Chemist, the Government Fisheries Laboratories and the Plant Pathology Laboratory will analyse a primary sample of about 3,000 items a year. This will be supplemented by tests carried out by local authority analysts.

Methyl mercury will be the chief metal under consideration initially, but the pharmacology subcommittee of the Committee on Medical Aspects of Food Policy will later advise the Ministry of Agriculture on other heavy metals to look out for. The results obtained from the monitoring will be collated by scientists at the Ministry of Agriculture, and published at half-yearly intervals. They will also be submitted to the pharmacology subcommittee of the Food Additives and Contaminants Committee.

Special checks of the level of mercury compounds in food will also be made in areas in which local pollution may be abnormally high. (Oral answers, January 19.)

### Radioactive Fallout

ALTHOUGH fission products from nuclear tests were detected in rainwater in Britain in 1969 and the first half of 1970, deposition was insufficient to cause detectable levels of  $^{131}\text{I}$  in milk. There was also little change in the total deposit of  $^{90}\text{Sr}$  and  $^{137}\text{Ce}$  in the first half of 1969 and the corresponding period of 1970. This information was given by Mr Anthony Royle, Under Secretary of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office. He also said that the fallout from the recent nuclear tests was small compared with that from the tests in 1962–63, and that the government will make no representations to France and China about the abandonment of nuclear bomb tests. (Written answers, January 25.)

### ESRO

THE government's policy towards the European Space Research Organization was the subject of questions from Mr Tam Dalyell to Mr Frederick Corfield, Minister of Aviation Supply, and Mrs Margaret Thatcher, Secretary of State for Education and Science. Mrs Thatcher said that the government's policy remains unchanged, but it may have to be altered if the French and Danish governments carry out their intentions to secede from ESRO. Mr Corfield said that despite doubts in some European countries about the future of ESRO, the British government has no intention of withdrawing its support from the organization. (Written and oral answers, January 20.)