OLD WORLD

British Association meets at Leicester

from our Special Correspondent
THE 134th annual meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science got under way at Leicester this week. But not with a bang. Sir Vivian Fuchs's presidential address, lacking as it did the grand pronouncements on science and society that have characterized the inaugural speeches of his predecessors, quietly presented his personal appraisal of the purpose of exploration.

Society, he said, is in danger of stifling initiative by the complexity of the rules which it imposes. Freedom to experiment and explore is being reduced by the development of a community conscience which demands that every error be followed by new restrictions. But exploration must go on. "In what state of knowledge would the human race be now if every rift had been vetoed by the imagined fears of unimaginative little grey men?"

Addressing a far from packed hall, Sir Vivian went on to say that exploration lay now not in discovering new lands but in the scientific exploration of little known parts of the world. Drawing on his own field, Sir Vivian pointed out that there is still much to learn about the polar regions, for example, and young people should be encouraged to explore such areas. "The future lies in the hands of our youth", Sir Vivian added, "and it is for us to encourage their adventurous curiosity".

But if Sir Vivian's speech steered clear of the more controversial topics of the day, other parts of the BA's programme promise not to do so. Dame Beryl Paston Brown, a former chairman of the Association of Teachers in Colleges and Departments of Education and a former principal of Homerton College, Cambridge, opened the proceedings of section L (Education) with a swingeing attack on Lord James's report on the training of teachers and issued a warning that student unrest will soon hit the colleges of education—traditionally far less militant than universities. Attacking Lord James's report as disingenuous, she warned that the administrative and financial arrangements behind the report's proposals had not been properly thought out. Teachers should be trained with practical teaching experience and the theory of teaching running concurrently, she said. These should not be separated into two separate cycles as Lord James proposed.

The Leicester meeting is the first to abandon the traditional Wednesday to Wednesday timetable, and as a result

the social weekend and the annual Sermon on Science have disappeared; but if the BA is mercifully a little shorter on pomp than usual, it is scarcely lacking in circumstance. Day-long symposia on the biological effects of pollution, energy resources in this century and beyond, and life and leisure in the city now and in the year 2000, all promise to tackle current issues in a style that is new to the BA, and the association is still busy turning itself—a little painfully—into an organization that is more relevant to the needs of science of the 1970s. Constitutional changes, which have been the subject of much soul-searching within the association for years now, were passed *nem. con.* by the general committee on Monday afternoon, even before the inaugural meeting took place. These changes actually provide the BA membership with an electoral voice for the first time in the association's 141 years, and also

go some way to making its governing bodies—general committee and the council—a more manageable size.

And if the constitution has improved, so has the association's financial position. Having made a small profit last year, the future seems much more secure than in recent years now that the Department of Education and Science is to provide £20,000 a year for the next two years through the Royal Society to help the BA continue its work. Replying to Sir Vivian Fuchs's inaugural speech, Sir Alan Hodgkin, President of the Royal Society, said that he feels that the two organizations (the Royal Society and the BA) are complementary and he looks forward to a closer working relationship between them.

The BA also has to gauge reaction to its shorter, more compact, programme—just over 200 lectures this year compared with 300 last year—and to its Monday to Saturday timetable, which

ASTRONOMY

Whose Finger Points

from our Special Correspondent
Sydney, September

THE visit of Mrs Margaret Thatcher, Secretary of State for Education and Science in the British Cabinet, has apparently brought to light a dispute between Britain and Australia on the management of the 150-inch telescope, jointly financed by the two countries and now nearing completion at a site 350 miles north-west of here. From a strictly technical point of view, the construction of the telescope has gone well, although there are some who take the view that it would have been prudent to carry out a more detailed investigation of the seeing at the site before sinking \$A13 million in it. The dispute which has arisen concerns the management of the telescope once it is a going concern. Over the past five years, it has been assumed by astronomers in Britain that the existence of the Anglo-Australian telescope would give them access to an instrument which is potentially important in the exploration of the southern skies, and it has been assumed that one result would be the appointment of a director with responsibility for the management of the telescope, including responsibility for administration, for the conduct of the user committee which, it has been agreed, will allot time on the instrument and for the continuing improvement of

the equipment (which may be quite expensive). A meeting of the six-man board of management of the telescope held towards the end of last year is understood to have confirmed this impression.

The Australian National University at Canberra is, however, far from willing to agree that the Anglo-Australian telescope should have an independent director. The university is already responsible for the management of the Mt Stromlo telescope, which is in many ways regarded as an adjunct of the university's astronomy department. To the extent that the Anglo-Australian telescope will in some respects make the equipment at Mt Stromlo appear less glamorous than it has seemed so far, it is natural that the Australian National University should wish to take the new telescope under its wing. Opposition to this proposal was voiced at a meeting of Australian astronomers held during July, and there is also a chance that the Science Research Council, responsible for the administration of the British share of the cost of the telescope, will support this point of view. The Australian National University has in defence of its view of how the telescope should be managed the cosiness of its relationship with the Canberra government and the complaint that if other potential users of the telescope are now so sure that they know how the telescope should be managed, then surely they would not have left the issue unsettled for so long.