

Amersham International

Academic symbiosis flourishes

To sponsor a fellowship at the University of Cambridge, in a department (biochemistry) run by a knight (Sir Hans Kornberg) who is also master of a Cambridge college (Christ's), as Amersham International is about to do, may seem slightly odd for a company that thinks of itself as an adventurous creature newly emerged from the confining chrysalis of public ownership. But the Amersham Fellowship is a recognition by the company of the extent to which its growth, diversification and profit depend upon the progress (and demands) of academic research.

Dr J.C. Maynard, chief executive of the research products division — one of three into which the company is now organized — estimates that he has about 120 collaborations with academics, including sponsorship of several projects. That is largely why the company was able to market 130 new research products last year, many of them the result of an opportunist approach and many of them unrecognizable as products of what was, until 1981, the Radiochemical Centre.

The change of name followed a change of managing director and preceded the sale in 1982 of shares in the company by the British Government. (That move is reckoned to have cost the taxpayer dearly because of a gross underestimate of investor demand for the shares, which more than doubled in price after the sale.)

One striking change of business strategy has been that Amersham is taking a leaf out of the British dairy business's book. Just as the system of daily delivery of milk to British households is now being exploited to offer anything from meat to bread, so

Amersham has decided to exploit its system for the speedy delivery of labile radiochemicals to market other products. The main thrust has been in the direction of molecular biologists. Since they all take deliveries of radiochemicals, why not offer them restriction enzymes as well?

Amersham seems to have made a considerable success out of just that, obtaining the enzymes from the Japanese market leader, Takara Shuzo. Perhaps five per cent of the sales of research products, which accounted for about a third of the company's £78 million turnover in 1983, is accounted for by restriction enzymes. But, as marketing manager Dr Brian Ellis is quick to say, Amersham faces much more competition in the sale of enzymes than in radiochemicals. Like all enzyme companies, Amersham would dearly like to have some unique enzymes on its list and would also like to offer reverse transcriptase, an essential enzyme for almost all molecular biologists.

Other burgeoning sales to molecular biologists come from reagents for the cloning, packaging and sequencing of DNA. Most of the reagents are not radioactive, many are offered in convenience kits. (There is even an anti-DNA kit, not so much an anti-research product as an aid to diagnosing the presence of antibodies to DNA in clinical blood samples.) Like many other companies, Amersham is also looking hard at the possibility of supplying non-radioactive alternatives to the current DNA probes but so far none is of sufficient sensitivity, says product manager Mahomed Jassat.

More in the traditional line of the company, but typifying its new approach,

Taxing problems

MANY readers of *Nature* who have been alarmed to learn that foreign visitors earning income in the United Kingdom will in future be taxed like residents (*Nature* 26 April, p.762) have nothing to fear. The proposed changes in tax relief for non-domiciled employees working in the United Kingdom for non-resident employers, now in committee stage in the British Parliament, do not affect those working as teachers or professors at a recognized educational establishment, or those who are undertaking research that is for the benefit of the general public.

People in these categories will continue to enjoy total freedom from taxation in the United Kingdom, provided that the visit is for less than two years. Under double taxation relief agreements, this exemption is reciprocal and so would apply also to British academics visiting foreign countries to teach or carry out research.

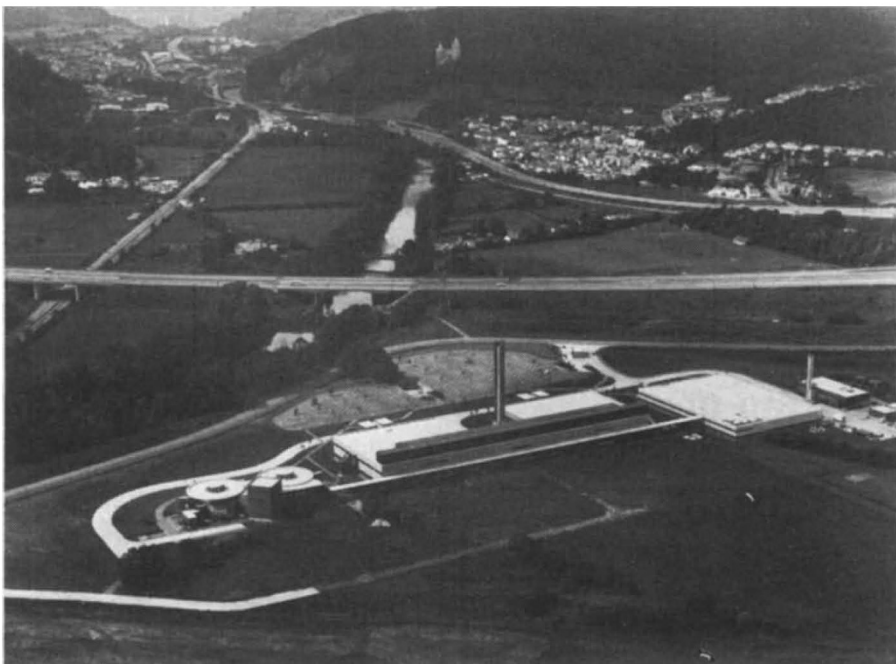
Those unfortunates who are not teaching, or whose research is for the benefit of private individuals or companies, will not in future benefit from the special reduction for short-term visitors to the United Kingdom, currently calculated at a deduction of 50 per cent on earnings. From 1987 the relief will be reduced to 25 per cent and from 1989 it will be withdrawn entirely. □

are radioisotopically labelled ligands for receptors on the surfaces of cells. "It's a flavour of the month business", says Ellis. The trick is to be very quick off the mark to produce new ligands after their discovery and before they are displaced by something better. It can take Amersham as little as three months to launch a new product. Some may sell for not much longer than that, and to the tune of only a few thousand pounds, but still be worthwhile.

Financially as well as physically, Amersham has been growing since it went public in 1982. The half-year figures for 1983 show sales and profits more than 20 per cent up on 1982. More than 80 per cent of sales are overseas, business is booming in Japan and the company feels it is gaining on its arch-rival, New England Nuclear, in the United States. In physical terms, the staff of Amersham now tops 2,000, the administrative staff is to move into offices being built close to the Amersham site and research staff will soon start to occupy what was the Pollards Wood Research Station of the Institute of Cancer Research, a few miles away.

That move is part of the two-year plan under which expenditure on research and development will increase from 8 per cent of sales to 10 per cent. As long as price resistance does not hit sales, Amersham will soon be in better shape than ever to take advantage of the many ideas that seem to be flowing from its contacts in academic life.

Peter Newmark



Signs of growth — Amersham's new facilities at Cardiff.