



A Profile of Robert Welham

At Thomas Graham House in Cambridge, Robert Welham is currently preparing the next Business Plan for the Royal Society of Chemistry's (RSC) publications. He admits to finding this a slightly unreal exercise, because later in 2002 he will retire as Director of Publishing, after eighteen years in the job.

Born in Twickenham, Robert was educated at King's College School in London and then Oxford. His chemistry degree there entailed a fourth year spent on a research project. He chose to do research in the history of chemistry rather than a laboratory project. Nevertheless, after graduating he went to work in the chemical industry initially, but after a year he decided that a career in science publishing looked more attractive. For quite a while his main involvement was with science books, but latterly the emphasis has been increasingly on journals.

His first job was a 'book handler' for Methuen in 1963. This role combined house-editor tasks with direct dealings with typesetters, printers and binders. Within the then Associated Book Publishers combine, he soon transferred to Chapman & Hall (C&H) as a commissioning editor. There he gained his first experience with journals, and had an involvement in the launch of several new journals including *Journal of Materials Science*, still one of the most successful titles of C&H's successor Kluwer. After four years he moved to Longmans at Harlow as 'science

publisher', in effect a senior commissioning editor. In 1976 he became Director of University and Further Education Publishing at Longman; again his responsibilities lay mostly with books.

In 1984 he was appointed Director of Information Services at the RSC. This post involved the RSC's printed journals and books, computer-based abstracting and indexing services, the distribution centre at Letchworth, and the RSC Library, and had originally been created for the late Dr Tony Kent. In 1984 the Society's view was that the primary journals, though still financially healthy, would inevitably decline, and that the computerised secondary services would grow to become the major product line. The reverse has actually been the case, and Robert's title became Director of Publishing a few years ago. This change saved him from receiving unsolicited mail and telephone calls directed to the Society's IT Manager, although he has recently added direction of that function to his responsibilities. On the other hand, he no longer runs the distribution centre at Letchworth, since Turpin Distribution Services was sold to Swets in 1999 – it was not seen a part of the RSC's core business, Robert says. In his early years at the RSC he also had to plan and oversee the relocation of more than half of the Society's staff from Nottingham and London to Cambridge, a delicate and complex human and logistical task, since no

interruption in the workflow could be allowed.

In secondary services, world-wide competition is intense, and in chemistry no-one can compete with *Chemical Abstracts*. Many of the former RSC secondary services have been closed or sold off – *Chemical Business NewsBase* went to Elsevier, and Robert is pleased that Elsevier chose to run it from their Cambridge offices, so that the transferred staff suffered little disruption to their personal lives. The position of the primary journals still seems much stronger. Each title has a sort of monopoly – if an important paper is in your journal, it isn't in anyone else's. So the competition is for the top authors; with them on board, your journal should be a 'must-read' for other scientists and thus a 'must-buy' for libraries. The RSC's long-established journals do show a gradual decline in print sales, as they have for twenty years, but the long-predicted 'catastrophe-theory' event – the year when sales drop like a stone – gives no sign of showing up.

Robert sees his major task now as the management of a portfolio of successful journals in an environment where market pressures and attrition of subscriptions are limiting revenue, and economies can be made, but often only after the cost of sizeable technical investment. Nevertheless, significant economies are being achieved in the processing of 'manuscripts', in postage, and in distribution. New revenue from consortium deals and other electronic services is growing fast, but it is still only a small proportion of the whole.

These modest proposals show that Robert is no revolutionary. But then neither are his employers and customers, the chemical community. He and his staff try to meet as many chemists as they can, younger and more junior ones as well as members of the Society's editorial boards, to find out what they want of RSC publications. At present it seems that generally as authors they want their work to appear in printed journals, whilst as readers they prefer increasingly to access the electronic versions. Thus, although the RSC has launched three new e-only journals and will persevere with them, they are only a modest success so far in terms of number of articles submitted.

As well as the career advancement gained through their publications, chemists also obtain personal satisfaction and a sense of belonging to a

real community when they see their work in print in a well-regarded journal. RSC editorial boards insist that the journals must be of high quality, and rejection rates have risen to almost 50% during Robert's term of office. Currently over 10,000 papers per annum are submitted and 5,000 published. And delays have been cut too: currently the RSC believes it is the quickest major chemistry publisher, with submission to (electronic) publication times of around three months, averaged across all its titles.

The quality-control guarantee of a well-known journal title is important. The daily newspapers give most prominence to those news stories that they feel their particular readership will think most important. In a sense scholarly journals do the same. They gather papers of interest to the community they serve. If the community they aim to serve is research chemists as a whole (as for *Chemical Communications [ChemComm]* or *Journal of the American Chemical Society [JACS]*), papers will be received and refereed for wide interest and significance. On the other hand a journal specialising, say, in the chemistry of brewing will receive and publish papers of interest to the community of brewing chemists, which would be quite inappropriate for *ChemComm* or *JACS*. What is a 'good' or 'interesting' paper depends upon the audience, and the mix of primary journals enables a sorting and gathering of material into useful groupings. This process is valuable to the reader. It's rather like the difference between national and local newspapers – you know where to look for certain types of news.

It's that sort of thinking that informs Robert's views of authors' self-archiving. Of course it is possible, but getting someone else to organise the presentation of your work in a place where related work of a similar standard is gathered seems so obviously a sensible arrangement that authors are unlikely to want to waste their time with something less effective. Search engines may find it in either place, but in a journal (even if it exists only in electronic form) some sort of seal of approval has been given.

Scholarly publishers, assisted by the secondary services, provide a structure and a certainty to the scholarly literature that users find helpful. Disciplines clearly differ. The physicists are happy with a preprint server, but chemists are

concerned with patenting and assurance of priority dates, and many are unhappy with publication before refereeing.

Although he is working on the business plan, like others in the journals field Robert finds it difficult to predict where the field will go after his retirement. The RSC has successfully negotiated many consortium deals for its e-journals, but as it is only medium-sized, it may need to go into partnership with other medium-sized publishers to ensure that it is not squeezed out by the biggest players. They have launched some new titles – something they failed to do in the palmy days of the 1960s and 1970s – to reflect major areas of development, and with the intention that sales of these will help somewhat to offset the attrition of sales of longer-established ones. Robert believes that the traditional structure of the scientific paper will prevail, whatever the medium. Although many subject areas, like crystal engineering, benefit greatly from multimedia presentation and cannot be printed, the structured argument of a scientific paper should still be there. A paper is more than the sum of its parts.

And what of Robert himself after retirement? He confesses he does not know what he will do although there are one or two publishing-related

possibilities being discussed. He is interested in many things and reads widely, but his only active hobby is bell-ringing, which he modestly says he isn't very good at, although his offer to organize the archive of the Saffron Walden ringers has been accepted. More time with the family, perhaps? He and Edwina have two grown-up daughters. The elder initially followed in her father's footsteps into chemistry, but has just completed a PhD in the Archeology Department at Sheffield University, with the two disciplines coming together in the study of ancient glass, and the younger is a local government officer.

However he fills his time, he can derive considerable satisfaction from his achievements at the RSC. He says he hasn't always been courageous enough in backing his judgement when he felt that radical change was needed. But he has brought a deeply conservative institution successfully into the era of electronic publishing, with the minimum of pain for its authors, readers and staff. His cautious, non-revolutionary approach was probably essential for that. And *Serials'* interviewer can attest personally that Robert's charm, courtesy and friendliness contributed greatly to his success in carrying the staff and members of the RSC with him through the changes.