

Interviewee: John Forty (Professor Arthur John Forty)  
UoS Dates: 1986 - 1994  
Role(s): Principal and Vice-Chancellor. D Univ (1995)



## Interview summary:

*Summary of content; with time (min:secs)*

**Start 0:20** – He was in sympathy with the ideals of the “new” universities having been the founding professor of Physics at Warwick.

**1:37** – The transition from Professor to Principal: at Warwick, JF had built a new department; here, he was contributing to building a new university

**2:50** – First impressions of Stirling: In 1986 the university was still struggling with the effects of the 1981 cuts, particularly hard for a developing university; and traumatized by loss of the first Principal, and the subsequent lack of a Principal for a year or so. JF was on the University Funding Council and was keen to help universities recover from cuts. Saw Stirling as having great potential and as a challenge. “A lot of people thought I was completely mad to come to Stirling. But I knew better”.

**5:35** – Advantages of a new university: much easier to make changes. Campus’ beauty was an important asset. Great potential.

**6:50** – Had some ideas for an initial plan, but knew that these would have to evolve. Main idea was to achieve sustainable growth, bringing in both students and funding. Tom Cottrell’s ideas were “splendid”, but he had wanted a university offering all subjects. As a result there were too many small departments: such departments are fragile, and had been weakened by cuts. Needed to reduce number of subjects to establish “strong roots for growth”. JF had “to prune” and that was very difficult. Had to get university staff “on side”.

**11:30** – In his own subject area, Physics, there were excellent people, but focus was wrong: too specialized; national funding for Atomic Physics was shrinking. Closure was unavoidable.

**13:00** – JF thought that the Arts were a strength and had potential for growth. In fact, he reversed the earlier decision to close Politics and built up the new department. English was strong, apart from “a bit of stuffiness”. History “needed a boost”. Languages were a problem, because of the national decline in applications but they were supported, especially French.

**17:27** – Business Studies was all the rage nationally. At Stirling it was “a bit out of hand” and seen as a threat by the rest of the university. The already good departments of Psychology and Sociology needed to be developed as a counterbalance. The HoD of Business Studies, Tom Cannon, was “a great go-getter and a friend” who rescued Professor & Mrs Forty when they found the Principal’s house lacked a cooker.

**21:00** – The other sciences: Environmental Science was weak but could be strengthened. “Chemistry was in a parlous

state"; Biology was strong. Education was a strength: innovative; one or two problems with leadership, but these could be dealt with. The department was unique in providing teacher training as part of the degree programme.
<b>23:30</b> – In the main senior colleagues were lot of help. Admin weakened by recent cuts. Bob Bomont "a great man. He knew everything about the university." No Finance Officer in post. A sound Administration, if needing some repairs.
<b>25:10</b> – When JF retired, "there was more to do, but "on the whole I felt we'd got there." Stronger; better financial position; larger. The intake of Scottish students was built up. Total size had gone from 2,000 to 6,000. Still needed to improve research ratings. "I felt I'd done a reasonable job." Afterwards, "I felt lost. The day I retired, I could have wept."
<b>29:50</b> – Entertaining in the Principal's house was a way of getting to know people, and also a way to encourage inter-departmental mixing. JF and Blanche (Mrs. Forty) aimed to invite every member of academic staff (and partners) to the house within the first year. Later, secretaries and technicians were invited. Made many friends.
<b>33:30</b> – There was not really any trouble with students
<b>33:35</b> – Was appointed a year before taking up the post. Came up to be presented to Academic Council, Court, and press. Press asked if he had come "to close the university". Replied that "closure wasn't on the agenda" and this was printed
<b>35:20</b> – At that time students regarded the Administration as the enemy. On one of his visits before taking up the post, JF arranged to meet the student President and Vice-President. Felt that the meeting was stiff and not very successful. But later, once in post, the President and VP took him for lunch: beer and sandwiches at the Gannochy. He instituted regular meetings with the student Presidents, every Monday morning. It was the first meeting of the week.
<b>40:23</b> – JF arranged a visit by the Minister for HE. The Minister met, amongst others, the students: JF absented himself from that meeting. One of the professors (Ron Roberts) commented that the Minister would have a rough time. But when the Minister emerged, he commented very favourably on the students' attitude. They'd had a good argument. "It was the highlight of his visit." During JF's tenure, the students were good. "I really enjoyed meeting the students."
<b>43:25</b> – It took JF a long time to realise how independent the MacRobert Centre was (unlike at Warwick). The Centre had to please the Local Authorities, its funders. It was good that the Centre brought the public onto the campus. JF felt that initially the university's relationship with the community wasn't very healthy. People in Stirling saw the university as a foreign body, a nuisance (even though it's the largest employer). The MacRobert is within the university but not a part of it; 'I'm sad about that'.
<b>46:10</b> – In response to a question about Mike Jackson (MPJ), JF replied that initially he thought that MPJ might cause problems because of his political orientation. At that time MPJ was a Senior Lecturer in Sociology, but then was appointed to the new chair in Human Resource Management. At that point JF saw that MPJ "could be a great ally," and got the Court to appoint him Deputy Principal for Academic Development. Academic departments trusted him: he was one of them. By the time JF left, "along with the University Secretary he was my other right hand." "I had a good time at Stirling. ... I'm very happy about the time I spent at Stirling: it was good."
<b>[Ends 50:16]</b>

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