

Interviewee: Ron Roberts (Professor)
UoS Dates: 1971 -1996
Role(s): Professor of aquatic pathobiology
Director, Institute of Aquaculture



Interview summary:

Summary of content; with time (min:secs)

Start **0.00** Ron Roberts originally trained as a vet but decided better suited to research work than to practice and obtained an assistantship post at Glasgow University where he did some teaching as he worked on his PhD. RR also carried out post mortems on farm animals and other animals as part of his job. In 1966 lots of salmon came in with lesions, reminding Ron of a visit as a child to a salmon river where many fish had lesions. He became interested in salmon and known for his work with fish. There were two trout farms whose owners then consulted him about their fish and the White Fish Authority which had an experimental flat fish farm at Hunterston also consulted him. By chance, a Regius Professor of Medicine at Glasgow University, Graham Wilson, who was a trustee of the Nuffield Foundation and who happened to have one of the first fish farms outside his house, asked the owners about their procedures when fish were sick. He thus learned about RR at Glasgow University. The Nuffield Foundation had some money to disburse and Prof Wilson and Sir Maurice Yonge, their biological or marine trustees, persuaded the Foundation that fish farming was going to be important in the future and that there was little provision for the health of the fish.

03.54 RR met the Deputy Director of the Nuffield Foundation, Dr John Makkar. RR suggested setting up a research unit and was asked where this would best be based. RR was not in favour of the suggestion of setting up the unit in England, for example in Cambridge, as was suggested. He was asked to give consideration to where such a unit would be based.

05.58 RR consulted the Dean at Glasgow Veterinary School which had an excellent international reputation for developing treatment for many animal diseases, especially cancer in animals. The Dean, Sir William Weipers, was very supportive but made the point that with the money coming in to Glasgow University for both veterinary and human medical research, a fish unit as proposed would not have enough prominence. He suggested that a compatible location be found elsewhere which would enable the unit to have sufficient importance but retain the links with Glasgow University.

08.30 RR had been attending the Freshwater Group at Stirling University, run by Donald McClusky. RR had met Professor Holliday from Stirling at these meetings. He approached Prof Holliday and also decided Dundee would be another possibility. Dundee was very positive and thought it would be great for the Highlands. However, when Prof Holliday was also very enthusiastic and introduced RR to the Principal Tom

Cottrell. RR was very impressed by both Principal Tom Cottrell and Prof Holliday and by the type of university that was being created.

10.18 However, the Nuffield Foundation was not taken by the idea at first. RR called on Sir William Weipers for advice and he intervened with a plan. The Nuffield Foundation later accepted the location of the unit at Stirling with the proviso that it was semi-detached and there was an Advisory Committee to advise on how it would develop as this would be a national resource.

12.00 Nuffield provided £76 000 for a Unit of Aquatic Pathobiology to take veterinary medicine into the developing new industry of aquaculture in the UK. It started in January 1972. The unit was located not in Pathfoot as planned, but for the first 3 years in Wall St, a terrapin building near Logie Kirk. This was not ideal as there was a restricted water supply, but they worked round this.

13.50 Professor Holliday later suggested that taking on research students would be a good move for the future. This would also help the interface between the Unit and the Biology Department. Prof Holliday sat on the NERC (Natural Environment Research Council) and had secured 3 studentships for MScs for research into fish diseases. So, an MSc in Aquatic Veterinary Studies started in September 1972. This was the first time a course of this type had been offered in a university with no veterinary school. Other PhD students without a veterinary background also attended relevant parts of this taught MSc course, such as Christina Sommerville, Jim Buchanan and a few others.

16.45 The Advisory Committee was a big asset since Prof William Weipers served on it, the Deputy Chief Veterinary Officer of the UK, Director of the Marine Laboratory in Aberdeen, among others. This was a committee of powerful people who also knew about resources for funding. Nuffield provided funding for 6 years, with annual reports, expecting the research work to have significant influence further afield. The Nuffield support could be moved elsewhere if there was no evidence of such influence.

18.30 Bob Beaumont was a tremendous support as Finance Officer and later as University Secretary. RR also recalls support from outstanding Principals over his 25 years at Stirling. The MSc course started in these limited facilities and attracted several international students, who had found out about the course by word of mouth. There was an American, a couple from Turkey and three with NERC grants from the UK. There was also, Peter Dalton, who had invented a vaccine that was good for treating a problem in chickens. There was Ian McKnight who was a Glasgow veterinary graduate, and a boxer, the Scottish Universities' Student Lightweight Boxing Champion. Another student, Peter Wood, was fascinated by eels. He later set up a business called Bristol Channel Fisheries, which has 2 planes and flies baby eels across the world to save them from being caught by the Portuguese and sold as a delicacy. He takes on the EU and other groups. So, an interesting group of people. There was also a Secretary, called Elsie.

24.00 RR considers that the Queen's Visit event was a disaster for the University. The Institute staff and students were not involved in the undergraduate protest. However, Peter Dalton organized a petition of apology to the Queen and he and others went round the campus, gathering students' signatures. This gave rise to several amusing anecdotes as RR recounts here. The Queen's Visit had funding consequences for the University as a whole, but did not significantly affect the funding of the Institute.

28.10 Sir Kenneth Alexander then came in as Principal. There were rumours of Mrs Thatcher considering closure of the university to set an example. The local MP was Michael Forsyth, a friend of Mrs Thatcher, who intervened and pointed out that each university has something unique to offer, and, in the case of Stirling, this was the Institute of Aquaculture. The significance of the Institute at this difficult time was confirmed later by Kenneth Alexander in a letter sent to RR on his retirement.

30.10 The Institute had another stroke of luck in that a shipyard which specialised in fishing boats in Campbelltown, RR's home town, was given a contract from the Foreign Office to build a research vessel. This ship would be built, but not riveted, and shipped to Mombasa, taken 400 miles overland to Lake Turkana and rebuilt. It would be used to carry out a survey of the fishing potential of Lake Turkana. This was in 1974 and would be a five year survey. The Chief Fisheries Advisor in the Foreign Office. Dennis Hall visited the shipyard to review progress. He mentioned the problem of fish supply in future. The shipyard manager, John Carmichael, mentioned fish-farming, but was told that fish-farming had been tried in the Tropics but was unlikely to be a success, partly due to diseases. The yard manager mentioned the work

<p>being done on fish diseases in Stirling. Dennis Hall came to Stirling and was impressed with the work and the university as a whole. He then contacted John Stoneman, Chief Fisheries Officer in Malawi where there was a large lake and fish farms were planned. He decided to send out RR and Jonathan Shepherd to check out what the situation was in Malawi as an indication of future potential in Africa. They learned a number of interesting things in Malawi. They noticed that most documents they saw were marked with useful comments and signed by HKB – Hastings Kamuzu Banda. In fact, HKB had an interest in rainbow trout and had a trout farm in the grounds of his residence, built on a high plateau to have a cooler temperature. There were problems in that his trout were going blind and RR recounts how he was able to help resolve this problem and, on returning to Scotland, was able to write this research up with his colleague Bill Lee, Professor of Ophthalmic Pathology at Glasgow. They published the research on Zomba disease</p>
<p>40.00 Asked about offering an undergraduate programme, RR explains his view that undergraduates need broader study areas prior to studying aquaculture which requires a base of specialist knowledge in many areas. These broader studies also help in the job market. Once RR left Stirling, an undergraduate aquaculture course was introduced, although RR states it does not fit with his view.</p>
<p>41.55 Returning to the early years, RR confirms that the aquaculture area became established and started to receive many international students, from the ODA and from the UN. However, RR feels the University should have charged more in terms of fees and, particularly, should have charged for work by staff on projects at rates on a par with those of specialised consultancies. RR explains how the fees charged for work by staff were distributed three ways among the individual, the University and the Institute. Staff could opt to have their share of the fee paid into a personal research fund. This was a good as an incentive to staff.</p>
<p>44.05 In the early years, the Institute was unique in the world and was able to take advantage of that. By the time RR retired, the Institute had over 100 staff and about 100 research students, as well as approximately two thirds of the university's research income. RR talks of the advantages and disadvantages of the semi-detached status of the Institute within the University, especially in the early years. After about eight years attempts were made by other organisations to attract the Institute and some staff to move the unit elsewhere. These approaches were resisted.</p>
<p>47.45 Jonathan Shepherd was the Deputy Director for a while, prior to leaving to have a significant career in industry and Randolph Richards replaced him. There was a significant change when Fred Holliday left to go to Aberdeen. After the Queen's Visit, FH was also Deputy Principal.</p>
<p>51.40 RR talks briefly of some personal difficulties with some other university staff members which he attributed to his appointment to a promoted post, unusual at the time. He then talks about when his boss was Professor Hans Meidner, He also recounts an anecdote about how Hans Meidner dealt with students who did not meet up to his expectations in terms of their coursework.</p>
<p>56.10 Looking back, RR concludes that the Institute did very well. By the end of 25 years, the Institute had a Queen's Award for Industry, had had a visit from Lady Diana, an award for RR from the King of Thailand and was the largest non-medical research unit within the Scottish University system.</p>
<p>Ends</p>

Interview No:	SURSA OH / -	<p style="text-align: center;"> SURSA University of Stirling Stirling FK9 4LA info@sursa.org.uk www.sursa.org.uk </p>	<p style="text-align: center;"> SURSA  Oral History </p>
Interviewed by:	Bill Inglis		
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