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www.royalsocietyqld.org.au

157 Years of The Royal Society of Queensland

The Philosophical Society of Queensland

The Society first met on 1 March 1859, just before the colony was proclaimed in London, on 6 June 1859. The first president was the first Governor, Sir George Bowen GCMG, a scholar. The term 'philosophy' then embraced more-or-less all learned scholarship.

The main purpose was "The discussion of scientific subjects, with special reference to the natural history, soil, climate and agriculture of the colony of Queensland".

The Society advocated for initiatives such as the appointment of a Government Geologist, a new reservoir on Gold Creek and a public library. It lobbied the Government to establish a public museum and this came to pass during the 1870s, based upon the Society's own collections. It published three volumes of its *Transactions*, from 1859.

The Royal Society of Queensland

The inaugural meeting was held on 8 January 1884, chaired by Governor of the day and Patron, Sir Anthony Musgrave KCMG. Mr AC Gregory, Surveyor-General from 1859-79, was first president. Members of the Philosophical Society folded into the new Society. In May 1885 permission to assume the royal title was received from Her Majesty.

The original rules specified that the Society "is formed for the furtherance of Natural Science and its application". 'Natural Science' has always been interpreted broadly and includes science-related technology, education and policy as well as academic research.

Early meetings included public lectures on microscopy, x-ray machines and travel experiences with lantern slides. The Society introduced lungfish from the Mary River to the Brisbane River, completed in 1896. It supported Mount Coot-tha as the site for a new botanic gardens and this was constructed accordingly.

The Society in 2016 while small remains in good health with a committed Council and volunteers, an agenda of topical events and active participation by experienced scientists. It remains the pre-eminent generalist scientific society in Queensland and aims to uphold the best traditions of independent scientific enquiry. While it is willing to advocate for science and to make policy submissions to government, it is not activist and does not enter into environmental or other campaigns.

Scientific publication

The concept of peer-review of learned articles is believed to have been initiated by the Royal Society of London (established in 1660) in the publication in 1665 of its *Philosophical Transactions, Giving some Account of the present Undertakings, Studies, and Labours of the Ingenious in many considerable parts of the World*.

This work displayed modern features of the scientific journal – registration (date stamping and provenance), certification (peer review by experienced scholars), dissemination and archiving. These are traditions that the Society aims to continue.

The *Proceedings* was first published in 1884 and has appeared almost annually ever since – the 2015 edition is number 120. There have also been special themed editions such as on the mulga lands, information technology and fire.

The digitisation project

The advent of electronic communications has changed irrevocably the ability of scholars and the public to access information. Stored physical volumes of a small-circulation journal (in the Society's case, only about 200 p.a.) remain inaccessible except to determined readers able to find printed copies to browse.

To researchers investigating particular species or particular sites such as for a new mining or development project, the early records of plants and animals and geological formations are a potentially useful resource, but the specific information will commonly not appear in a table of contents or an index. Full-text search capability is required to uncover a reference to specific terms including species or locations.

The Queensland Government Community Gambling Benefit Fund gave a grant of \$11,500 to digitise the *Proceedings*. The Society selected private firm Avantix. The Society records its thanks for a service exceeding expectations.

Some early volumes were digitised by the State Library with the co-operation of Queensland Museum as they were too fragile to travel. Handwritten minute books from 1883-1946 and items of early 1900s correspondence were also scanned. Ms Sue Laing was engaged via the One Umbrella Group to compile an inventory of the archives before they were lodged with the State Library for long-term curating. Member David Marlow proofread the files. The whole project was overseen by Council member Dr Ben Lawson.

Avantix then generously offered to develop a new website on a pro bono basis to better improve accessibility and capitalise on the digitised records.

Geoff Edwards PhD

President

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