



75 years of optometry a

Almost 35 years after graduating from Cardiff, **Alison Ewbank** was one of many former students returning to the optometry school to join its 75th anniversary celebrations

There was a time when a trip to Cardiff docks was an adventure in itself. Half a lifetime later, Cardiff Bay is a world away from the days when even cab drivers were reluctant to take the long drive down Bute Street to the Casablanca Club in 'Tiger Bay'.

With its futuristic architecture, luxury hotels, bars and cafés, the regenerated dockside epitomises how Cardiff has been transformed in recent times to the point where much of the city is almost unrecognisable.

Not surprisingly, Cardiff's optometry school has also seen dramatic changes over the past three decades and more. Early this year, 180 former students, staff and guests met up in Cardiff to celebrate 75 years since the school was founded at the then Cardiff Technical College and to see how much has changed.

The first mention of optics in the university archives is from November

1933, when the College reported it was to introduce a two-year full-time course in ophthalmic optics. Teaching would be provided within the physics department, with anatomy and pathology tuition in the second year at the University College of South Wales and Monmouthshire – one of the forerunners of what was to become Cardiff University, and founded in 1883.

The optics course began in 1935 under principal Mr TSP Tuck and seems to have started with just five staff, five students and three rooms. The prospectus for that year records the fees as £20 per session and students had to pay a 10 shilling deposit at the start of each session 'in respect of apparatus placed in their charge'.

The Welsh CAT

According to the College of Optometrists' archives, after World War II ophthalmic optics at Cardiff

was within the Department of Applied Physics of the Welsh College of Advanced Technology, known as 'Welsh CAT', which eventually joined the rest of the Federation of the University of Wales in 1967 to become the University of Wales Institute of Science and Technology (UWIST).

The first degree ceremony was held in July 1968 and included students from previous years who had completed the course and passed the examinations, but who had to wait for the granting of university status to receive their degrees.

During 1970-1971, ophthalmic optics became a separate department with Mr Tuck as senior lecturer. In 1974 Dr Michel Millodot was appointed the first head of department and the first chair in ophthalmic optics. At that time the department had five full-time academic staff and 85 students across three years.

When, at Professor Millodot's



The school of optometry today and how the premises looked in the 1960s

t Cardiff

instigation, the department adopted the name Department of Optometry in 1975, this was the first official use of the term 'optometry' in the UK and Cardiff was the first university to adopt the change of name. The move was very controversial and had a major impact on the profession at that time.

As the College of Optometrists records, although now an optometry department in name, the facilities had some way to catch up. 'In the 1970s the insalubrious accommodation at UWIST, three huts, was popularly known as the "sheds",' it says.

In fact these premises were used only for workshops and practicals, with lectures continuing in the biology and physics departments in buildings around the city's more imposing civic centre. Refraction clinics were held in Arlbee House, a 60s-style office block in the middle of Cardiff.

It was in 1981 that optometry moved to new premises on one site, taking up four floors of the Aberconway Building and housing an eye clinic on the ground floor. By then research was becoming increasingly important and a Laboratory of

Experimental Research took a quarter of the new space.

From UWIST to CU

In 1987, UWIST merged with University College, Cardiff to become the University of Wales College of Cardiff and later the University of Wales, Cardiff before finally being renamed Cardiff University in 2004. The department is now the School of Optometry and Vision Science at Cardiff University and is the only optometry 'school' in the UK.

In summer 2007 the school moved again, to new purpose-built premises on Maindy Road costing £21 million. All teaching, practical work and clinics are carried out in the single building, which also has a commercially run practice, CU Optometrists, offering eye examinations and specialist services to the public. As well as a lecture theatre, the facilities include rooms for small-group teaching and tutorials.

The current first year has 88 undergraduates, out of 565 applicants, and around 240 are enrolled in the three years of the course. Its postgraduate programme has more than 40 students from a variety of

backgrounds working across four research groups, ranging from clinical science to molecular biology.

With 45 academics and post-doctoral fellows, led by head of school Professor Tim Wess, plus four clinicians and 12 school staff, the school is one of the largest optometry departments in the UK and has links with many overseas partners.

The Wales Optometry Postgraduate Education Centre (WOPEC) is a newly formed centre within the school that provides training for practising optometrists through distance learning lectures, specialist lecture days and practical workshop sessions, and accreditation for schemes such as low vision and acute eye referral.

Class of 65

So what recollections do former students have of their time at Cardiff and how have the premises and teaching changed since their day?

Retired optometrist Paul Phillips was one of the class of 65, a year that also included Specsavers founders Doug and Mary Perkins. Of the 16 students graduating that year, nine attended the 75th anniversary reunion.

Phillips' family connections to the



Graham O'Regan graduated in 1977

university date back to the 1920s, when his mother studied chemistry and maths and was a contemporary of physics student Powell Tuck, who a decade later went on to be the first principal of the optics course.

Like many students of his era, Phillips had a family connection to the profession. His father was a watchmaker-jeweller in Newport in partnership with Phillips' uncle and later his cousin, both ophthalmic opticians. Another cousin was a dispensing optician specialising in artificial eyes.

Phillips' sister also studied optics at Cardiff, from 1954-1957, in a class of just four students although only two completed the course. At that time entry requirements were O levels, forerunners of GCSEs, but numbers of students started to increase when A level entry came in.

When Phillips arrived in 1961, optics was still within the physics department with mainly part-time lecturers, often local practitioners, although Len Morrison and Boon Hor Khoo were full time members of staff. The first year was spent learning anatomy and physiology, including lectures from the entertaining Ron Williams and formidable Alice James (whose often-repeated catchphrase was 'the consistency of uncooked white of egg').

Lectures were split between the 'Old' and 'New' Buildings of the Welsh CAT. Until the move to Arlbee House in Phillips' final year, the refraction clinic was on the top floor of the Technical College of South Wales and Monmouthshire building, with three or four consulting rooms divided by curtains.

A shortage of patients led to an unusual arrangement with the Salvation Army Hostel in the Splott area of Cardiff. Len Morrison took groups of students along to the hostel to test the eyes of residents, who were paid for their services. Phillips'



Class of 65 (l-r): Paul Phillips, Doug Perkins, Oliver Stevens, Rosa Phillips (née Moruzzi) Margaret Lawrence (née Jones) and Brian Langley, pictured at the anniversary reunion

recollection is that conditions were not ideal. 'If something moved you swatted it,' he says.

For Phillips, the main difference between today's optometry school and his days at Cardiff is that 'it's all under one roof'. 'It's good that there are separate clinics, such as for contact lenses, children and low vision, and I was pleased to see they're still teaching the basics – trial cases and lenses.

'The ophthalmic optician at the time had a much wider base than the more specialised optometrist of today. We were taught to do everything. Now there seems to be much more emphasis on the clinical side whereas we were able to glaze and repair frames.'

Back to the 70s

Graham O'Regan is another former student with a close family connection to optometry at Cardiff. His uncle, Len Morrison, is the oldest surviving member of staff and last month celebrated his 90th birthday. A qualified ophthalmic optician, Morrison joined the department in the late 50s and served for many years as admissions tutor before retiring in 1984.

When O'Regan arrived in Cardiff in 1974 he already had a degree in physics and was not the only 'mature' student on the course. An elderly American woman was among about 30 students in the first year and used to have a taxi waiting to take her from building to building between lectures. 'For the rest of us it was a brisk walk,' he says.

One of O'Regan's earliest recollections is a spontaneous 'strike' in a first-year biology practical when

told to dissect frogs, and a severe telling-off for one student from Mrs James for cutting a bull's eye into quarters instead of in half. He also remembers Mr Williams asking female students, who made up around half the year, 'What are you girls doing here? Shouldn't you be at home cooking?'

O'Regan recalls having evening lectures in ophthalmology from 7-9pm, the only time ophthalmologist Mr Lalla could fit them in. For hospital experience, students travelled to the Valleys to sit in on Mr Lalla's Merthyr Tydfil outpatient clinic, whereas today's students have the full teaching facilities of Bristol Eye Hospital at their disposal.

Alongside Professor Millodot, who joined the department the same year as O'Regan, staff at that time included Mr Khoo, Bill Douthwaite, Len Morrison and Sue Roberts. Margaret Woodhouse also arrived in 1974 and Richard Earlam joined the staff in 1977 (the only two members of staff remaining from O'Regan's time). Steve Taylor, Rob Green and David Henson were also lecturers at that time.

O'Regan's overriding impression of the school today is how much it has grown. He remembers practising refraction on fellow students in a single room in Arlbee House in his final year. 'Because of our small numbers we soon knew each other's prescription by heart. I think yours was -1.50/-0.50 x 180,' he says. And it was.

● Thanks to former students and staff at Cardiff University for help in preparing this article.