

WOODfocus

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Fifty Years!

by J D Brazier FIWSc

*This is a shortened version of **The Institute over fifty years** appearing in the Winter 2005 issue of the Journal of the Institute of Wood Science.*

The Institute of Wood Science is fifty years old on 30th November, 2005. It was formed by a group of timber enthusiasts, many from the trade, who, in the mid-1950s, recognised that if timber was to compete effectively with other materials, there must be a better understanding of the technologies involved in its production, processing and use. It was at a time, too, when there were dramatic changes in timber supply, innovation in timber use, and the introduction of new timber products. All in all, there was much to be known and a clear need for an organisation to encourage and support the advancement of knowledge. This was, and continues to be, the primary purpose of the Institute.

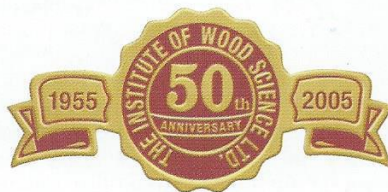
Prior to the formation of the Institute, there were courses in timber technology, available as evening classes at technical colleges throughout the country, to syllabuses provided by the Timber Development Association (the forerunner to today's TRADA). As the IWSc became established, it took over responsibility for these courses - not their provision, which remained with local authorities, but their content and the award of a qualification to candidates on completing a course, passing an examination, and, where required, the submission of a thesis. In 1969, with the creation of the Furniture and Timber Industries Training Board (FTITB) and implementation of a statutory levy, which could be offset by the provision of training, course provision was by block- or day-release at local authority colleges. This continued for a decade until, in a changing political climate, the FTITB was abolished. Thereafter, training provision was the responsibility of employers but, in a harsher competitive and economic climate, there was a significant reduction in the numbers attending courses. With falling rolls, colleges were no longer prepared to provide courses and a new strategy for training was essential. The Institute met this by providing, in 1992, a modular course for within-company training, with the support of training

providers. This was a significant change for the Institute for, from being an arbiter of performance, it also became a provider of course material on which performance is judged.

This is a situation which continues today, with the Institute providing learning material at three levels: a Foundation level, introduced in 2001 and particularly popular, with some 1000 candidates having enrolled over four years; a newly restructured and updated Certificate course, with options to meet special interests; and an advanced, Associateship course.

But course provision is not the only way knowledge is advanced or exchanged. Branch meetings were, for a time, a feature of the Institute's activities and, though these have now ceased, an Annual Conference is attracting ever more support, both from the membership and from companies and associations. The Institute's publications, the Journal of the Institute of Wood Science, published continuously since 1958 and long recognised as a leading journal in its sphere, and Wood focus, the latest in a series of newsletters, communicate new developments to members.

But an Institute is essentially an association of people having a common interest. From modest beginnings, numbers grew rapidly, reaching a peak of around 2000 in 1980. Today, there are 840 members but a comparison of figures should be made with care as they reflect, on the one hand, structural changes in the commercial and scientific communities, and, on the other, current systems for recording membership. Numbers alone do not reflect the vitality of the Institute, nor of its role which, today, is quite as important and, arguably, more so than when it was formed. It is ready to meet the challenges of the next fifty years!



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