Lord Nuffield's Benefaction

THE OFFER

Lord Nuffield went to see Lord Halifax, the Chancellor of Oxford University, in London on the morning of 8 July 1937. Halifax was then Lord President of the Council, becoming Foreign Secretary in February 1938. That same day Halifax telephoned the Registrar (D. Veale) about the conversation and wrote a confirmatory letter. Nuffield had told Halifax that 'he had it in mind to offer to build on the waste ground that he has recently bought below St Peter's Hall a College of Engineering'. Nuffield 'had been much impressed with what seemed to him the gap in the equipment of Oxford on those lines, and felt that Oxford compared in this respect very unfavourably with Cambridge with the result that she lost many good men'. To build such a college would cost £250 000 and Nuffield said 'he would be prepared to put up something in the nature of three-quarters of a million for endowment'. Though he mentioned only Engineering in his letter Halifax told Veale and the Vice-Chancellor that Lord Nuffield had talked in terms of a College of Engineering and Accountancy.

The offer was totally unexpected. But the work put into the Survey of Needs undertaken in 1932 and the subsequent thought which had gone into the preparation of the Higher Studies Fund Appeal meant that the Vice-Chancellor, Registrar and leading members of Hebdomadal Council were well informed about current needs and aspirations. Neither Engineering nor Accountancy had been part of the University's thinking, so that money donated specifically for these purposes would not in effect be a response to the Appeal. Any Vice-Chancellor would have
been bound to try and steer Lord Nuffield’s money into one or more of the major objectives of agreed University policy.

It so happened that the Vice-Chancellor of the time was A. D. Lindsay, Master of Balliol, who had played a prominent role in the development of Social Studies in Oxford. He had been active in the founding of the Honour School of Philosophy, Politics and Economics; had been a member of the original Board of Studies and then of the Faculty Board and had taken his turn as their Chairman; had been active in formulating the needs of Social Studies, including the idea of an Institute of Statistics, and was, as Vice-Chancellor, currently the Chairman of the Social Studies Research Committee. In the Special Number of ‘Oxford’ published by the Oxford Society in February 1937, it was Lindsay, not the Chairman of the Social Studies Board nor one of its Professors, who wrote the chapter on Social Studies in Oxford. Social Studies, singled out for special mention in the Appeal, were an aspect of University development very dear to Lindsay’s heart. He was also aware that most of the recent University appointments in the subject were financed out of a grant which came to an end in July 1940, a point stressed in the Appeal.

There was, however, a new factor which kindled Lindsay’s enthusiasm and imagination. Lord Nuffield was very interested in bringing academic learning and research into closer contact with the outside world. This had been a major reason for the very large Medical Benefaction he had given a year earlier and with which Lindsay was very familiar. The possibility of linking academics and men of practical affairs in the study of current economic and social problems had a special attraction. It was not difficult to show that an approach of this kind was likely to be particularly fruitful in Social Studies and so give Lord Nuffield what he really wanted.

Nevertheless Nuffield had mentioned Engineering which might have interested the Science Faculties who so far had obtained little or no earmarked contributions to the Appeal. A new Physical Chemistry Laboratory had been listed as necessary, the subject being then studied in two laboratories provided by three Colleges, some of the research being carried out in the cellars of Balliol. If Lord Nuffield could be persuaded to earmark £100,000 of his new benefaction to build such a laboratory one of the University’s pressing needs would be satisfied.

Nuffield saw the Registrar on 9 July. The course of the conversation (on pp. 65–6) was reported by Veale to Halifax.²