



Title 10

The first Professor of Chemistry in England was August Wilhelm **Hofmann** (later von) FRS (1818–1892), seen as the first on the right in this contemporary (1840) drawing by Trautschold and von Ritgen, showing **Liebig's** original chemical Laboratory in Giessen. In 1845 Hofmann was appointed Professor in the new Royal College of Chemistry in London, following the advice of Liebig to **Prince Albert**. Hofmann's twenty years of teaching and research at the College were vital to the development of Chemistry in England. The College was later re-named Royal College of Science, where the author studied chemistry from 1934 on and was awarded the Associateship of Royal College of Science, the ARCS, in 1937. He is proud of this direct 'link' with Justus von Liebig. *Courtesy the University of Giessen.*

The Imperial College of Science and Technology, to give it its full name until after the end of World War II, when 'Medicine' was added, consisted in my days, the 1930s, of its three constituent Colleges: The City and Guilds Engineering College, The Royal College of Science and The School of Mines. Imperial College dates back to 1910, although the Royal College of Science was much older.

It grew from the The Royal College of Chemistry, founded as the first chemistry teaching establishment in England in 1845. It was Prince Albert who wrote to Justus von Liebig, Professor of Chemistry in Giessen, asking him to recommend an outstanding pupil to head the new College. Liebig in his reply suggested none other than his own Assistant, August Wilhelm Hofmann [1818-1892], elected FRS in 1851, later von Hofmann. He was appointed the first Professor of Chemistry in England. He lectured at, and was Director of the New College of Chemistry in London and his twenty years of teaching organic chemistry there made him one of the most influential teachers of the 19th century. Contemporary illustrations of Liebig's 'Institute' show Hofmann among Liebig's elegant students wearing top-hats and frock coats.

There can be no doubt that all chemistry laboratories in the world are direct descendants of the original Liebig laboratory, the 'Institute' of 1840 in Giessen, and that Liebig may rightly be called the founder of the practical philosophy of modern research chemistry in addition to his other great fame as the originator of agricultural chemistry by fertilisers.

I entered the City and Guilds College as an undergraduate in 1934 to study aeronautical engineering. However, this was a postgraduate subject, and I had to follow the First-Year curriculum like every other student of engineering. One of its highlights was the Wednesday afternoon practical course in the large engineering workshops below street level. There we found a number of excellent foremen who could make the simple—sounding 'filing-flat' into an exasperating exercise of trying to reach perfection. It is a skill that can be learnt only after weeks and months of application, and was in the 1930s still considered essential for a good engineer I never mastered it.

Another memory I have of my first academic days was the inauguration address by the Dean of Engineering. He told about 300 first-year engineering students: "Never refuse to do an engineering job, even if it will give you dirty hands, you will always learn something and you can easily wash them afterwards." My failure at the end of the first year was my mathematics examination and I decided to study chemistry instead at the Royal College of Science where my first year's study in engineering was fully recognised and where there was no further need for much detailed mathematics.