

On a Saturday evening in the winter of 1913, the inaugural meeting of the Sydney Technical College

Chemical Society was held in the college's newly built Turner Hall in inner city Ultimo.

Twelve founding fathers including some of the country's most famous chemists – H.G. Smith and A.D. Ollé – formed the first council, and the 'grand old man' of chemistry at the college – W.J. Clunies-Ross – was elected President.

An annual subscription of five shillings was set, and the first scientific presentations were given, on ferrozyl indicators and the analysis of commercial red lead.

One hundred years later to the day – on Friday, 2 August 2013 – the UNSW Chemical Society, as it is now known, held a special meeting, or 'conversazione', to celebrate its centenary.

Among the more than 100 people who attended the gathering in the UNSW Scientia Building were 16 past presidents of the society and 11 of the descendants of H.G. Smith. Two distinguished UNSW chemistry professors, now in their nineties, were also present: Ken Cavill, who was society president in 1959, and Stanley Livingstone, who was president in 1966.

Professor Livingstone's former PhD student, Professor Len Lindoy, of the University of Sydney, was among the key speakers, discussing his research on metals and cyclic macromolecules.

He was joined by Professor Sam Stupp, of Northwestern University, who spoke about his research on the self-assembly of biomaterials and Dr Edith Chow, of CSIRO, who spoke about her career and research on chemical sensors.

'The UNSW Chemical Society is one of the oldest in Australia and it has moved with the times and with the location of UNSW', says the current president, Dr Neeraj Sharma.

'It is built on collegiality, sharing of

ideas and thoughts, appreciation of excellence in scientific and technical endeavours, and the desire to bring the world's best chemists to UNSW to inspire the next generation.'

In preparing for the celebrations, organisers from the UNSW School of Chemistry trawled through nine boxes of archives, uncovering many historical gems, some of which were on display at the conversazione and reproduced in the program. They included the society's first book of minutes as well as copious amounts of correspondence.

The records reflect the changing times and tell of major events, such as the world wars, says UNSW's Professor David Black, who was society president in 1995 and who spoke about the society's history at the meeting. 'It is quite fascinating to read the very polite, formal responses to invitations to attend meetings,' he says.

On 27 October 1917, for example, a letter was received from Mr S.R. Davison expressing regret that he could not present his Exhibit that

UNSW Chemical Society

100 years on

BY DEBORAH SMITH

**One of Australia's oldest
chemical societies looks back
on 100 years of memories.**

evening because he was 'in the Light Horse Camp'. And in 1918, a correspondent wrote to say her unnamed brother – presumably a member – had been killed in action on the western front, dying as a result of 'gas poisoning'.

Several meetings in 1919 had to be postponed due to the influenza epidemic.

The archives also reveal that women were not welcome in the society in the early years. In July 1923, Eileen Grogan, an analytical chemist from Willoughby in Sydney's north, applied to become a member. She received a letter explaining that a ballot of members had previously been held on the question of whether 'ladies engaged in the profession' should be admitted to the society, and 'the majority were not in favour'.

Miss Grogan was instead extended 'a hearty welcome' to attend the meetings as a visitor – a 'kindness' she thanked them for. 'I am more than grateful for the privilege and quite understand why my application for

The Sydney Technical College Chemical Society in 1914 on a trip to the small arms factory in Lithgow. W.J. Clunies-Ross with pith helmet; H.G. Smith (with beard and hat in hand) on left of him. A.D. Ollé (far left, front row)



UNSW

membership could not be accepted,' she wrote back.

Within a decade, however, the barriers had dropped and the first 'lady member' of the society – Phyllis Mahoney - was admitted in 1933, the records show. Dr June Griffith, a chemist, was the first woman to graduate from UNSW, in 1955.

Master of ceremonies for the 100th anniversary celebrations was Professor Barbara Messerle, head of the UNSW School of Chemistry. UNSW Deputy Vice-Chancellor (Research), Professor Les Field – a chemist - and the UNSW Dean of Science, Professor Merlin Crossley, also spoke.

One of the first endowments to the society was a £100 gift received in 1915 from Parke Pope, chairman of the directors of the retail firm Farmers & Co Ltd. It was donated to help equip a new research laboratory, according to a historical report on the society published by RACI in 1960.

When the laboratory moved into the college's new chemistry building, a press photographer recorded the

moment. On 22 September 1933 the *Sydney Morning Herald* published a photograph of a dapper chemist – Dr Robert Murphy – sitting on a stool beside a bench of glassware, staring intently at a piece of equipment.

He had prime spot on a newspaper page containing an interesting mix of images – positioned next to the Japanese battleship *Hiei*, and above an elderly Dulwich Hill couple celebrating their diamond wedding anniversary and a group of young army volunteers receiving rifle training.

Today the society manages a number of endowments, including for six distinguished lectures – the Andrews, Cavill, Dwyer, Howard, Jeffery and Mellor lectureships. This generosity has allowed the society to invite more than 100 leading chemists, including eight Nobel Laureates, to come and speak.

The centenary event was an opportunity to help raise funds for the Dwyer Lecture and Medal, named after Professor Frank Dwyer, who was

appointed Head Teacher of Inorganic Chemistry at Sydney Technical College in 1934.

'He was one of the most brilliant chemists Australia ever produced – a pioneer of the very important and thriving field of biological inorganic chemistry,' says Professor Black, who was taught by Dwyer as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney.

One hundred years may have passed since that inaugural society meeting in Ultimo, but the names of those present live on, notes Black. 'The H.G. Smith Memorial Medal is the RACI's pre-eminent research award, based on the previous ten years of published research. The Ollé Prize is for the most significant published work of the previous year.'

Deborah Smith is the media and communications officer in the UNSW Faculty of Science, and a former chemist.