

## Sir Hans Kornberg, FRS

Hans Kornberg was born in Germany in 1928 to Jewish parents. Following the advent of Hitler, the life of the family became increasingly dangerous and in 1939 Hans was sent to live with an uncle in England. Hans was educated at Queen Elizabeth Grammar School, Wakefield and left at 17 to work as a laboratory assistant at the University of Sheffield under the supervision of Hans Krebs. The latter encouraged him to study further, which led to a degree in Chemistry and a PhD in Biochemistry at Sheffield where Hans carried out ground-breaking work on urea metabolism. Postdoctoral work encompassed a period in America on a Harkness Fellowship, followed by a very productive few years at the MRC Metabolism Research Unit at Oxford during which he and Krebs (by now Sir Hans Krebs and a Nobel Laureate) elucidated the glyoxylate cycle, an important process in bacterial metabolism.

In 1960 Hans was appointed to a Chair at the University of Leicester with the remit to set up a new Department of Biochemistry. In July 1961 Hans and several colleagues set off from Oxford to visit the Department for the first time. Having lunched well en route, it was late afternoon by the time they arrived in Leicester. As it was during the long vacation the University was closed and they were forced to enter the Department, which in those days was located in the Fielding Johnson Building, via an open toilet window.

Hans' first year as Professor was largely taken up with appointing staff and converting the old chemistry teaching laboratories into accommodation suitable for biochemistry research and teaching.



*Professor Hans Kornberg overseeing the Biochemistry laboratory in 1961  
(photo: Regent Studios).*

The research of the Department of Biochemistry in the early years was predominantly focused on microbial biochemistry and soon gained an international reputation, which attracted many visiting scientists, both to work and to present seminars; the visitor's book was a Who's Who of eminent biochemists. In addition to his world-leading research on the regulation of carbohydrate transport in bacteria, Hans was an inspirational Head of Department and a superb lecturer.

Hans was the first recipient of the Biochemical Society Colworth Medal in 1963 and was elected Fellow of the Royal Society in 1965 (a first for the University of Leicester).

Following the founding of the Biochemistry Department, Hans was instrumental in persuading the University to create a Genetics Department and then to combine, with the well-established Departments of Botany and Zoology, to form the School of Biological Sciences, which was housed in

the purpose-built Adrian Building in 1967. This led to the creation of the degree in Biological Sciences, which was a pioneer in this collaborative cross-departmental style of teaching. The success of this approach was an important factor that helped to bring the Medical School to Leicester in 1975, a process in which Hans as well as leaders in the medical profession in Leicester were hugely influential. He was also involved in UK science policy, serving as Chairman of the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and of the Science Board of the Science Research Council.

Hans and his first wife Monica (nee King) had a very active social life and were extremely generous in their hospitality towards all members of the Department and the many visitors.

In 1975 Hans left Leicester to take up the Sir William Dunn Chair of Biochemistry at the University of Cambridge and was later elected Master of Christ's College, Cambridge. He was knighted in 1978. Sadly Monica died in 1989 and Hans subsequently married Donna (nee Haber). Hans retired from Cambridge in 1995 and emigrated to America to take up a Professorship in Biology at Boston University. He continued to lecture and carry out research virtually until his death.

Among his many honours Hans was awarded Honorary Doctorates at many universities and was elected to several National Academies of Science, including that in the USA. He was also at various times a Governor of the Wellcome Trust, President of the British Academy of Science and a Director of several biotechnology companies.



*Sir Hans reminiscing at the 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebrations of the Department of Biochemistry in 2011 (photo kindly provided by Chris Willmott).*

The last time Hans was in Leicester was for a reunion to celebrate the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Biochemistry Department, now the Department of Molecular and Cell Biology, in 2011. He gave a characteristically eloquent and witty speech in which he remembered his time in Leicester with great affection.

Hans Kornberg died in the United States on 16<sup>th</sup> December 2019.

Dr Colin Jones  
Dr Ken Jones  
Dr Ron Cooper  
Prof David Critchley