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## The History of the Ergonomics Society

One sign of the maturity of a discipline is that it can generate a substantive history. Similarly, a scientific or professional organization comes of age when it can report on its origins and development. Ergonomics came of age some time ago and its maturity is indicated by the history presented in this issue.

An important historical document for the Ergonomics Society appeared as a supplement to this journal in 1974 (Edholm and Murrell 1973); however, the history in this journal issue is a more complete account in many ways. What can be found here might, on the surface, be seen as a sequel of the Edholm and Murrell history. Whilst it does not repeat what the older history covered, it is far more than an update. It is a study, in breadth and depth, of the development of an important scientific society.

The history of any complex entity may often be incomplete and will usually reflect the biases and standpoints of the individuals who write it. Reflecting these limitations, some previous histories of the discipline and the Society have mainly drawn upon personal experience and reflection and thereby can only be part of the story. This history attempts to get round such problems by making detailed use of a range of sources.

First, there is the material in the open literature; books, journal papers, book chapters and newsletters. Such material is publicly available and universal. The second source, and one that has been used extensively here, is the archive of the Ergonomics Society. This source, whilst available to any interested scholar, is less well known and less likely to be explored by anyone other than serious historians of the discipline. The third source is the record of interviews with a number of people who have been involved with ergonomics in the UK and with the Ergonomics Society. The fourth source comes from the authors themselves, it is their ability to reflect upon this considerable array of material and to make sense of it. What is particularly impressive is their interpretation of various issues within the development of the Ergonomics Society against a number of trends; technological, scientific, industrial, economic, and to a certain extent political, over a 50 year period in British and international history.

The result of this activity is an impressive document that not only describes the development of ergonomics, particularly in the UK, but one that should be an inspiration to other established ergonomics societies to record their own development. It should also encourage emergent societies to properly record and archive their activities, and it should serve as a template for their own histories at appropriate times.

This editorial, as a foreword for this issue, was felt necessary for two reasons. First, to explain the appearance of this history in this journal at this time and, second, to try to give a sense of the significance of this document.

The history was first planned to be part of the Ergonomics Society's 50th anniversary in 1999. It took longer than originally envisaged to complete the history. It was then intended to include it as the main part of a history-oriented issue of the journal. This latter project ran into difficulties and it was felt important that, as the manuscript had

been available for some time, it should appear now. Given the close association of the Society with the journal, it was seen as a natural home for this material.

Turning to the importance of this document, it is far more than a history of the Ergonomics Society. In explaining how the Society has developed, Waterson and Sell make clear how the discipline itself has been affected by a number of trends over time. The shift from a multi-disciplinary to an inter-disciplinary basis is of general interest to the history of ergonomics. Similarly, such topics as the emergence of a professional field of ergonomics are also worthy of being seen in a wider context.

Superficially, the history focuses on the development of one country's ergonomics society. However in doing so, much of the history of ergonomics itself is paralleled. Just as importantly, there is the care that has been given to the range of sources, which serves as an example for how future work should be conducted. Waterson and Sell have made clear in their abstract what they have tried to do and there is no need to repeat that here.

The breadth and the depth of their coverage is impressive, as is the way that they have linked apparently disparate topics together and produced a narrative that should explain to relative newcomers to the discipline why things are the way that they are. Waterson and Sell make clear that some things have been attempted in the past, even if they remain frustrating today. Also, some things, now taken for granted, were hard-won.

This is a history that will make an important impact. It will add to the growing number of histories of relevance to our discipline that draw on archival and personal accounts (e.g. Reynolds and Tansey 2003). It should inspire, as it already has in the present author's case, more studies of the emergence of ergonomics as a discipline (e.g. Stammers 2006). It should also help scholars writing more general histories of the discipline to know more about the emergence of ergonomics in the UK (e.g. Meister's (1999) book gives a limited and somewhat inaccurate account of British ergonomics).

Thus, we have an unusual issue of *Ergonomics*, but an important one as we look back on more than 50 years of the Ergonomics Society and nearly 50 years of the publication of this journal, itself so central to the history of ergonomics.

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