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Cambridge labs to open up their doors to the public as Medical Research Council celebrates 100th anniversary

Written by CHRIS ELLIOTT

It is the paradigm of 21st century medical science - a cathedral to our unquenchable desire to find out how our bodies work, and why they go wrong.

The giant steel and glass edifice of the Laboratory of Molecular Biology, on the Addenbrooke's campus, is in the vanguard of research into our modern-day health problems, and tomorrow, the body that runs it, the Medical Research Council, will be a century old.

Looking at the soaring architecture of the LMB, it is hard to imagine that its origins lie in a cramped brick building in Cambridge's Free School Lane, the old Cavendish Laboratory, now based on the high-tech West Cambridge site. There in Free School Lane, brilliant scientists like James Clerk Maxwell, J J Thomson and Ernest Rutherford pushed the first boundaries of physics.

On Thursday, June 20, the MRC will stage its first-ever Open Week, offering people the chance to find out more about what it does, and the LMB will be one of the places people can visit.

Adrian Penrose, the MRC's regional communications manager, said that over the past century, the Medical Research Council had been "at the forefront of scientific discovery to improve human health."

He said: "It has its roots in the National Insurance Act, passed by Parliament in 1911. The act established schemes for health and unemployment insurance, based on contributions from employees, employers and the State, and one aspect of this — paid for with a penny per working person per year—provided for tuberculosis treatment in sanatoria, and for tuberculosis research.

"In 1913, in a report to the Treasury, the Departmental Committee on Tuberculosis recommended research should be extended to all diseases, and that an advisory council and executive committee should be established to oversee research, and administer the research funds. The funds amounted to £57,000 a year, equivalent to nearly £4 million today.

"Today the MRC is investing taxpayers' money in some of the best medical research in the world, across every area of health. Nearly 30 MRC-funded researchers have won Nobel prizes, and MRC scientists have been behind discoveries such as vitamins, the structure of DNA and the link between smoking and cancer, as well as achievements such as pioneering the use of randomised controlled trials, the invention of MRI scanning - and the development of antibodies used in the making of some of the most successful drugs ever developed."

He added: "MRC-funded scientists are now tackling some of the greatest health problems facing humanity in the 21st century, from the rising tide of chronic diseases associated with ageing to the threats posed by rapidly mutating micro-organisms.

"The idea of the Open Week events is to show people some of the work that is taking place, and the events will include an open day at the LMB itself on Saturday, with a guided tour of the building, as well as fun, family-friendly, hands-on activities."

Experts at the MRC's Applied Psychology Research Unit have carried out all sorts of research to find out how people's brains work, including how we cope under stress.

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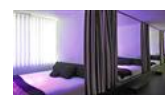
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In the 1960s, Royal Navy sailors took part in research as volunteers, including how they would perform in a room heated to a very high temperature.

More details of the Open Week events are at <http://mrc.io/openweek>

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by Taboo!



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