

# The history of the Stoke Poges Brains Trust

By Mike Dewey



**This is the final article in the series in which we have been considering the history of the premises currently occupied by the Khalsa Secondary Academy in Stoke Poges, and which has caused so much controversy recently in the local community.**

In previous articles we have seen how the site was originally part of the Stoke Park Estate in Stoke Poges, until some 40 acres of land were bought in 1885 by Frederick Pritchard from Bayswater, London. He built on the site a summer residence which he called Carton Tower, this being located on the southern side of the road which was then called Uxbridge Road, now Hollybush Hill.

In 1908 this was bought by publisher Walter Judd, who greatly extended the house and renamed it Holly Hill. Walter Judd died in 1931, but his family continued to live at Holly Hill until 1945. As reported in the Slough Observer it was then sold in October of that year to Colonel Wallace C Devereux “as the home of the Research Institute he has founded”.

Devereux was at that time the UK's leading industrialist in the rapidly developing "Light Metal" industry. "Light Metals" are alloys based on aluminium and magnesium, which were, and still are, essential to the aviation industry. Devereux had established High Duty Alloys(HDA) on the Slough Trading Estate and was now in the process of forming the industrial conglomerate Almin Ltd. This comprised companies involved in all aspects of the light metal industry, including HDA. He needed a research & development facility to underpin the development of these companies.

He therefore established the Fulmer Research Institute (FRI) at Holly Hill in Stoke Poges. The Institute was formally opened on July 2 1947 by the prominent member of Clement Atlee's Labour Government, Sir Stafford Cripps. In his speech he stated that "the Institute, the first of its kind, will act as a Brains Trust to industries anxious to translate scientific discoveries into practical industrial processes".

FRI, which employed some 50 staff at that time, was thus the first of what became a new breed of industrial research & development (R&D) establishments. These spanned the gap between academic research such as that carried out at Universities, and the practical development work done in industry. Known as Contract Research Organisations these worked on a contractual basis for companies in industry and for Government Agencies throughout the world. The early death of Col. Devereux in June 1952 at the age of 59 was a blow to the development of FRI because it led to the break-up of Almin Ltd, so removing a semi-captive market for its R&D services. Recognising this as a possibility, the Directors of FRI rapidly arranged an Open Day at Holly Hill on Sept 30 1952. This served two purposes - a commemoration of the visionary life of FRI's founder Wallace C Devereux, and secondly an opportunity to invite industrialists and high-ranking Government and Civil Service officials to Holly Hill to promote to them the R&D services available at FRI.

This Open Day was successful in raising FRI's profile, so much so that a new engineering laboratory building became necessary. This was formally opened on Nov 2 1954 by no less a person than the Duke of Edinburgh.

Although FRI continued to prosper under the leadership of its Director of Research Mr E A G Liddiard, the final break-up of the Almin Group in 1961 caused uncertainties about its best ownership structure to begin to surface. However the answer was close to home. A member of the FRI Board of Directors, Sir James Taylor, was the Chairman of Imperial Aluminium, and was also the Hon Treasurer of the Institute of Physics (IoP).

In 1965 it was arranged for FRI to be acquired by the IoP, in what was seen as a mutually beneficial arrangement. At that time FRI employed over 100 staff.

With its stability thus assured, FRI could now once again look forward with confidence to its future. Another new laboratory building of 6,000 sq ft was commissioned, adding to the 40,000 sq ft already available.. This was formally opened on September 30 1966 by Sir Paul Chambers, Chairman of ICI Ltd, which had offered generous terms to finance the acquisition of FRI by the IoP. At the end of May 1969 Mr Liddiard retired after 23 years as Director of Research at FRI. He was succeeded by Dr Eric Duckworth, previously Assistant Director of the British Iron & Steel Research Association. FRI's Silver Jubilee was celebrated in 1971 with Open Days in June. At this time the revenue streams were equally divided between industry, with a substantial proportion from overseas, and UK Government Departments.

There now followed a period of rapid expansion of FRI, mainly by the acquisition of other research companies, and a move away from R&D into product development and testing. In May 1973 FRI merged with Yarsley Research Laboratories, whose expertise mainly related to polymeric materials and their applications. This complemented FRI's expertise very well and the R&D work at Yarsley's laboratory in Chessington was transferred to Stoke Poges. The merger also meant the acquisition of Yarsley's premises in Ashted, Surrey.

In October of the same year a small contract R&D organisation, Aeon Laboratories, was acquired. Another company, Independent PLastics Engineering Centre (IPEC) based in Newhaven, Sussex, was acquired in March 1975.

FRI now owned laboratory premises in Ashted and Newhaven, both of which were working with polymeric materials and complemented much of the ex-Yarsley work at Stoke Poges. The decision was therefore taken that suitable premises for the merging of these activities should be sought. These were found in Redhill, Surrey, and the transfer of the activities to be relocated there began in 1977, and completed in 1979. The resulting company, a wholly owned subsidiary of FRI, was named the Yarsley Technical Centre, YTEC.

The headquarters of FRI, and the main R&D activities involving metallic, and the emerging high-strength non-metallic, materials continued to be carried out at the Stoke Poges laboratories.

However in the 1980s it was becoming clear that the increasingly purely commercial activities of FRI were becoming less compatible with the charitable status of the IoP. Attempts to sell FRI and its subsidiaries as a single entity failed, so in 1990 Fulmer at Stoke Poges and YTEC at Redhill were disposed of separately. Fulmer merged with the British Non-Ferrous Metals Research Association, and moved to their premises in Wantage. YTEC was sold to the Swiss-based company Society General de Surveillance.

The Stoke Poges site was now vacant and eventually sold to the Taiwanese company Pioneer High Fidelity who demolished all the buildings. In 1992 Pioneer began the construction of a “two-storey office building with a basement incorporating a service workshop”.

In September 1993 the opening ceremony was performed by Slough Councillor Sheila Thorpe, and Beaconsfield MP Tim Smith was “on-hand to welcome two divisions of the Pioneer company to their new home”. Early in 1994 Pioneer donated equipment to the Stoke Poges Duke of Edinburgh Awards Group.

By 2005 Pioneer were employing 159 staff at the premises. However Pioneer decided to vacate the site in 2012, their tenure in the village had only lasted 20 years.

The premises did not remain vacant for long, but its new use as a Sikh Faith school was controversial from the start. In July 2013 the then Education Secretary Michael Gove decided to allow the premises to be used for 12 months by the Khalsa Secondary Academy. This was against the wishes of the local councils, and local residents, who had delivered a 5,100-strong petition opposing the planning application to Downing Street.

As was expected the permission was extended beyond the initial 12 month period, and the controversy has continued to this day.