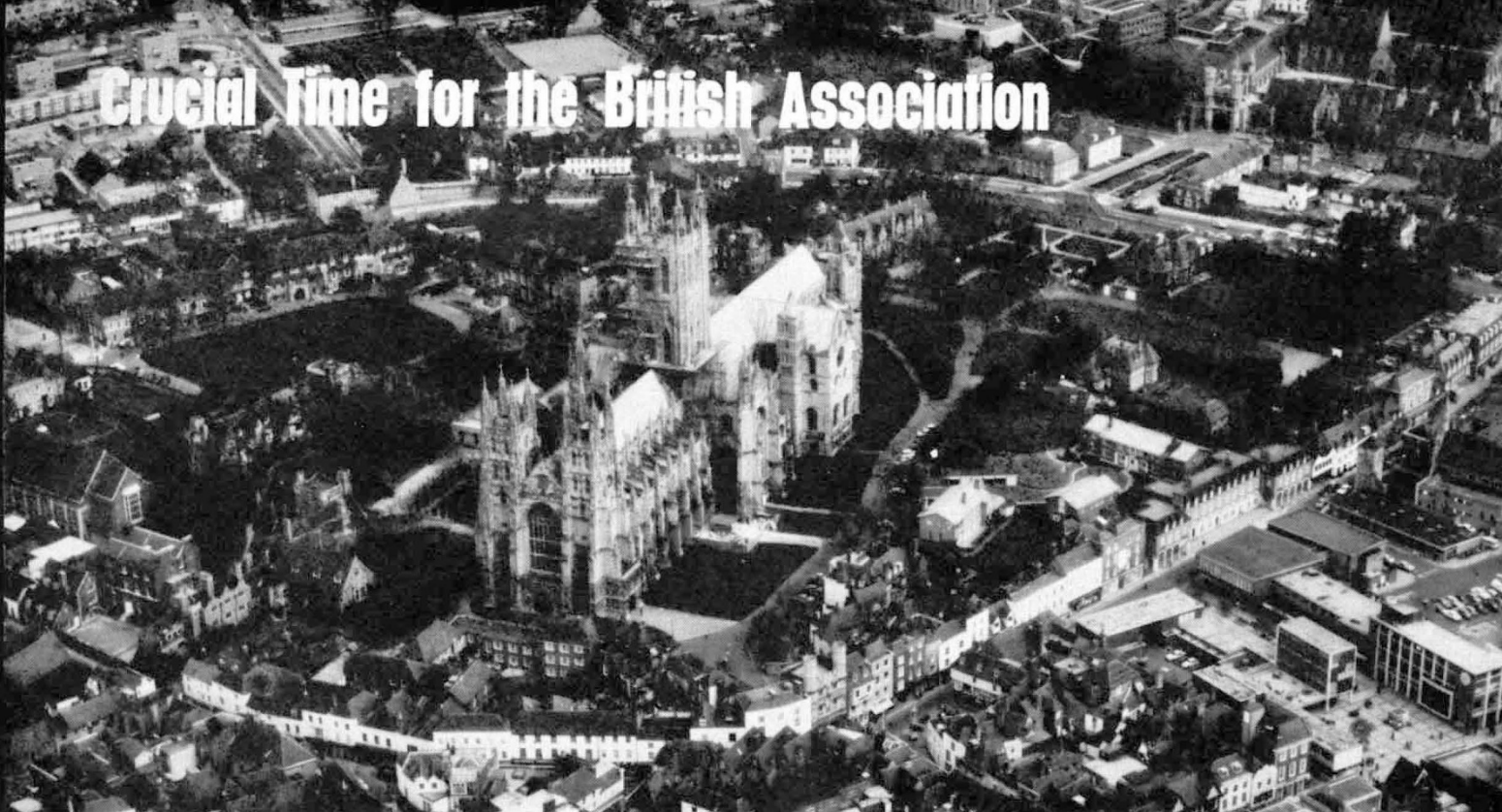


Crucial Time for the British Association



Canterbury [Aerofilms Ltd]

THE British Association for the Advancement of Science is breaking new ground once again at its 135th Annual Meeting which is to be held at the University of Kent at Canterbury next week. Through no fault of its own the association is holding its annual meeting in mid-August instead of the traditional time of early September, which might well put back its plans to increase the popularity of the meeting. And it is only a year since the association, in an attempt to shake off its rather lacklustre image, made another break with the past when it decided to compress the annual meeting into a week beginning on Monday instead of spreading the delights over the best part of two weeks with a relaxing weekend in between.

These outward signs that the association is serious about coming to terms with the 1970s do not constitute the entire story, for the most significant changes have been taking place behind the scenes. Since the annual meeting at Leicester last year the Privy Council has approved drastic changes in the association's constitution which, for one thing, will turn the gargantuan general committee into a more manageable body of close on sixty members, more than half of them being elected. This committee will have the powers to elect a council of twenty-two members which will have as its chairman, for the first time, a paid officer of the association. These changes will be instituted, not before their time, after the annual meeting next week and there is little doubt that the association from now on will be a much more wieldy body that should be a better barometer of thoughts and concern in Britain about science and its implications.

As luck has it, the streamlined BA is now in a good position to fight off the challenge, and that is what it is, from the newly formed Council for Science and Society which was set up with generous support from the Leverhulme Trust (see *Nature*, 244, 191; 1973). The stated aim of this council is to identify areas of research with important social consequences and to study these objectively. The comparison of this new council with the much criticized British Society for Social Responsibility in Science is clear, but there are also obvious clashes between its aims and those of the BA. The Royal Society grant to the BA—which amounts to £20,000 a year—is ostensibly for the purpose of “the popularization of science and the conducting of a responsible public

debate on the social consequences of science”. And it must be asked whether, in the long run, this competition—if it will develop—will do the BA more good than harm. This is the question which will be at the front of the minds of delegates to the conference this week. The BA has a head start on the Council for Science and Society and the first reports of the association's investigations, instigated in 1972, to look into matters of scientific concern should be available early in the new year. It is, however, essential that the momentum which has been generated by these investigations into the social consequences of research in biology and genetics and into the place of research in higher education in Britain should be maintained by other studies, and it is significant that the association has now put the responsibility of choosing topics for investigation on to its executive committee.

But the BA is best known for its annual meeting which has been held during all but six of its 141 years of existence. Last year the meeting, to be blunt, attracted rather less support than anyone would wish and it remains to be seen whether the enforced change of date to the middle of the holiday season will boost attendance. The association, after a great deal of soul searching, has decided to persevere with the annual meeting, a decision to be admired, but it is to be hoped that as time goes on that the meeting becomes less of the centre of the universe as far as the association and its members are concerned and that other activities will come into their own and receive due attention.

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