

In 2011, the School of Modern Languages at Newcastle University celebrated its [Centenary](#). Find out more about the Centenary celebrations or read on for extracts from a History of Modern Languages, compiled from the University Archives by Julian Hatzig from our Erasmus partner University of Bochum

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Modern Languages at Newcastle University – A History

In 1911 the foundations for today's School of Modern Languages were laid by Albert George Latham becoming the first professor of modern languages at Armstrong College in Newcastle upon Tyne. Latham's installation, however, did not happen overnight. The history of modern languages in Newcastle already started over three decades earlier, with Gustav de Poitiers teaching French and Heinrich Schünemann teaching German in 1880. Seven years later in 1887 de Poitiers' successor Signor Catoni began to offer classes in Spanish and Italian in addition to his teaching in French. The first examinations were held in French in 1881 with an equal emphasis on translation and grammar. When examinations in German followed only one year later, both, exams in French and German already showed a more practical approach towards language by granting preference to translation.

[Early days: The first Modern Languages Degree](#)

The improvement of the conditions for modern languages in Newcastle finally became visible in 1911 when Albert George Latham, was appointed. Latham joined the university in 1894 to teach French and Italian. He was also well known for his work as a translator during which he produced a translation of Goethe's Faust for the Everyman's Library editions, published in 1905.

Under his auspices Spanish was re-established in the modern language department in 1923 through the appointment of J. Wathin Rees. Latham left the university in 1925 and was succeeded by Cuthbert Morton Girdlestone, who not only became the new director of the modern languages department, but also professor of French in 1926. In the same year the new library was opened in a building known today as the Old Library Building, which has been the home of the School of Modern Languages since 1982.

[The Interwar Years](#)

Apart from that, the interwar years were lacking major changes. It was in fact a time of stagnation. There is, however, one necessary thing to mention concerning the staff of the modern languages department. In 1937, Duncan Mennie joined the department to take a post as a lecturer in German. During World War II, Mennie and his assistant lecturer Douglas Frederick Schuhmacher Scott were on national service. Mennie, who was considered to be one of the best German speakers in the country, worked for the German service of BBC London (closed down in 1999).

[Post-War Separation into Language Departments and the Year Abroad](#)

The years after the Second World War were characterized by major changes. Scandinavian languages were introduced in 1945. Just a short time later the department of modern languages split up in separated departments. While Cuthbert Girdlestone remained professor of French, Duncan Mennie later became the first professor of German in 1959 and Kenneth Reid became reader in Spanish in 1956. Beside the reorganization of the department, there are origins of an important feature of today's School of Modern Languages to be found in the post-war period: The Year Abroad.

It developed out of efforts made to connect with other countries after World War II. The Harting-Scheme, for example, an organisation, which helps Dutch students to study at a British university for the time of one year, was even able to help Newcastle University out with students to teach Dutch when the department's budget

did not allow hiring lecturers in 1975. Newcastle students had to spend their third year abroad either studying at a university or working as a language assistant at a school.

The 60s and 70s: Expansion and Stabilisation

In the years that followed, the departments continued to grow. The German and Scandinavian studies department run by Duncan Mennie was complemented by lecturers and lectors in all three Scandinavian languages. With ten members of staff, it soon became the largest of the three departments. In 1960 Norman Cohn became the new professor of French after Cuthbert Girdlestone, succeeded only three years later by John Yarrow in the same year when the Robbins Report, which intensified the growing interest in university education, claimed that higher education places should be provided for “all those who are qualified by ability and attainment to pursue them and wish to do so”. In 1965, Portuguese was added to the department of Spanish and Latin American Studies, sponsored by the Instituto Camões (Lisbon).

A tremendous asset in this period was the opening of the Language Laboratory in 1968. The aim was to give overseas students the opportunity to improve their English. It appealed to the students, right from the beginning and was renamed in Language Centre in 1972. To provide the best teaching possible, the centre started to offer a course called “Pre-Sessional” in 1974 as one of only two universities in the country. Due to the growing range of languages taught at Newcastle University the centre added Russian, Japanese, Chinese and Korean to its curriculum in the 1980s. In 1982 it joined the Faculty of Arts. Since its opening in 1968 the centre stood and still stands, for the use of modern media like sound recordings, satellite TV and computer software to support students with their studies. In 1997 the Language Centre was transformed into the Open Access Centre, placed on the ground floor of the Old Library Building. Today it provides self-learning material for over 50 languages and is a popular venue for students from all kinds of subjects of study but especially, for those, who study at the School of Modern Languages.

The Thatcher Years: Cuts and Reunification

The upward movement was dramatically changed with the elections of May 1979. The new government around Margaret Thatcher almost immediately announced to make the first major cuts in the educational system since Robbins Report. By 1983 10% of all educational spending were cut, which meant that no less than two billion pounds were taken from education. Newcastle University felt the impact of the cuts very acute. Not only philosophy, but also Scandinavian studies, the largest strand among the modern languages, had to be cut completely.

But another major change which happened in the 1980s must not be forgotten. In 1982 a big step towards a single school had been taken. All three language departments were now part of on federal school under the direction of the first Head of School. His successors Colin Riordan and Elizabeth Andersen harmonized the teaching in the different languages by managing to establish a general introduction to literature, linguistics and film in every language in the first year before the students take part in specific seminars.

The new School of Modern Languages

The range of teaching in the School of Modern Languages was extended even further when Film studies started in 1992. Film studies at Newcastle University will furthermore be intensified when the Centre of Film and Digital Media, a new research facility, is launched in autumn 2011. One of the youngest extensions to the School of Modern Languages is the East Asian section with Chinese and Japanese. Before East Asian languages were added to the school, they were part of the department of politics. By joining the school in 2002 additional degree programmes were add to the degrees in Modern Languages, Modern Languages and Linguistics, Modern Languages and Management and Modern Languages and Film, namely Linguistics and Chinese and Linguistics and Japanese. In 2003 there were also single honours in Chinese and Japanese.

One of the corner stones of the new School, the MA in Translation and Interpreting (T & I) studies, started in 1997 in the languages centre after a developing time of three years. Newcastle University's T& I section was the first in the UK with a Chinese strand and has the best teacher-student ratio in the whole country. Overall it offers degrees in Translating, Interpreting, Translating and Interpreting and in Translation studies.

To the future: Modern Languages in a new millenium

The members of the School of Modern Languages are doing everything they can to improve their teaching and to expand into different fields of the academic world. Language teaching is not only about grammar and linguistics anymore. Starting with literature in 1890 more and more aspects were added to the teaching of modern languages in Newcastle. Historical, political, cultural and film studies as well as translation and interpretation, linguistics and literature are part of today's language teaching. Continual improvement is necessary to stay attractive for future students and to work against the difficulties modern languages have to face in the British educational programme.

The School of Modern Languages is standing strong. Despite the fact of being a medium sized department the school manages to offer a wide range of academic fields and a wide range of languages to its students. In addition to the main languages, German, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese and Japanese the school is also able to offer courses in Catalan, Dutch and Quechua. A clear advantage the school structure in Newcastle has to offer is the combination of European and East Asian languages, which are normally placed in separated departments. In the course of the centenary festivities the School of Modern Languages held a conference in March 2011 to demonstrate the diversity and interdisciplinarity of research in the school with a thematic focus on transmission. One hundred years after George Albert Latham was appointed the first professor of modern languages in at Armstrong College in Newcastle and after surviving the major cuts of the Thatcher era, the School of Modern Languages of Newcastle University is still standing strong in times where the UK is threatened to become one of the most monolingual countries in the world. Against all odds the school is still managing to prove and improve itself to secure a continuing process of growth in the future.

Appendix

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