

## What are these Physics then? – Preface

This is a question that I was very occasionally asked at parents' evenings when I taught Physics many years ago. Those asking were taking in a real interest in their child's education but clearly in their own schooling had not come across the subject.

When I was a student in the sixth form at school the Science students had to have a weekly English literature lesson. On one occasion the teacher came in with a portable gramophone intending to play John Gielgud speaking the "Seven ages of Man". We were told to set the machine up and it was duly plugged in and the record placed on the turntable. The machine would not operate. The teacher went to inspect and remarked "How can we expect it to work. The wire is all coiled up and the electricity won't be able to get round". It was sometime before the hilarity died down. It would be hard to make a better case for Arts students also having a weekly lesson in Scientific literacy.

This was a long time ago and no doubt things have improved, but I still come across many instances that show folk are missing out on a fascinating and important part of our culture. I watch Richard Osman's House of Games fairly frequently. It is based to a large extent on pop-culture but also there is a wide range of general knowledge involved. That wide range, however, rarely includes any science - science which could reasonably be expected to come within the general knowledge area.

So these essays try to provide a source of information that relies on little or no previous knowledge, but which faces up to trying to give some insight into a wonderful part of our culture. The chapters are arranged to cover topics roughly in an historical order, not that it is meant to be a history of Physics – just it seems to make sense that way.

In some essays you will meet Bob and Alice. Bob has a habit of interrupting mid-argument, so I ask Alice, who has more patience than me, to explain things to Bob.

Knowing a subject makes it very hard to explain what is ingrained to those who have little knowledge – it is too easy to make assumptions. So I have tried to find folk to check the writing and send it back when it is not clear.