A History of the Department of Philosophy at York, 1963 - 2012

1963-1969: Inception

In early 1963, the University of York was constructing its first degrees and departments, with influential input from the Professors that were to run them. The ethos was that the University should be built from the ground up with academics and experts involved at every stage. The inaugural Professor of Philosophy was many miles away, however, on a ship from Australia. Professor John Mackie had left his post as Challis Professor of Sydney University to take up the first Chair of Philosophy at York. Professor (then Mr) John Benson was appointed as the other member of the fledgling department and with a staff count of two they were joined by a student number of two. This poor take-up rate was due to there being no members of staff present before the beginning of term. Fortunately, first-year undergraduates were to quickly exceed numbers of lecturers.

In this first, cautious year of teaching, Philosophy was only offered as a subsidiary option in a Main/Subsidiary degree. In the years following, as the members of staff increased in number, Philosophy was offered as part of an equal degree and then as a Main in a combined degree. It was held by members of the department that philosophy should form part of a varied University education. Professor Mackie was vociferous in this view as he had experienced the varied Australian education system, and taken Literae Huminares at Oxford (otherwise known as ‘Greats’, a multi-disciplinary humanities degree). A single-subject degree was deemed incompatible with this aim and put off for these reasons. This view of education was to be particularly important as the department matured and much of its success came in the form of new, combined degrees.

The teething years for the University meant that the department moved around a considerable amount. Originally in Heslington Hall (where all departments were), it then moved to the historical grounds of Kings Manor for the year of 1964. After this, the department moved to Derwent college, the construction of which had only just been completed. Langwith and Derwent were the original colleges built to house academics as well as students. The department was again to move in 1969 for a short time to Alcuin but soon returned to Derwent where it resided until recently when it moved to where it presently is in the Sally Baldwin buildings. This upheaval was characteristic of a young University that was expanding quicker than it could build new premises. Despite these movements, the department was an engaged and active one. It participated in open courses put on by the University and saw many famous names in philosophy give lectures: A.C. Macintyre, Frank Sibley and A.J. Ayer (twice!) to name just a few. In May of 1969, Bernard Williams (by then Knightsbridge Professor at Cambridge) gave a term’s worth of open lectures on natural religion.

The engagement of the department also saw members of staff speak at various Universities around the country, and it was partly this that helped York philosophy flourish and attract more academics within the first few years. John Heawood, Martin Scott-Taggart and Juliet Stowers all joined soon after the University’s inception and John Heawood was an institution for philosophy students at York for the next thirty years. In 1967, J.L. Mackie fulfilled his wish to return to Oxford and was appointed a praelector and later awarded his own Oxford readership at University College. As his replacement, the respected philosopher Professor Ron Atkinson was hired from Keele and at the same time Roland Hall joined York as a Reader, where he stayed until 1994.
It was very soon after this, in 1968, that the single-subject degree was introduced. The department found that it would not hold the same clout as other disciplines that did have a single-subject course and this was undesirable for a department that was, in reality, big enough to teach highly specialised students. The single-subject was ratified quickly by the General Academic Board and students were attracted to the growing reputation of the department. The department had also established itself as a respected postgraduate institution: the D.Phil and the M.Phil had been introduced earlier in the decade and a B.Phil was being trialled, though never gained the success of the Oxford graduate degree of the same name. These philosophy-specific postgraduate degrees were introduced and added weight to developing an undergraduate degree that was similarly subject-specific.

A whole raft of academics joined in 1969, influential philosophers such as Nicholas Dent (Rousseau) and Martin Bell (Hume, European philosophy) joined the department, adding to the diversity of interests and modules on offer. Also in 1969, Christopher Robbins joined the ranks, though he was very soon to leave the department for the diplomatic service, where he ended his career as Ambassador to Lithuania. Roger Woolhouse (Locke, Leibniz) bolstered the staff list at this time too. He stayed at York until the end of his career and is undoubtedly one of the most prestigious academics to have been in the department.

1970-1979: A Growing Reputation in Research

These years were a time of flourishing for the department. The seventies started with Andrew Ward (Kant, Aesthetics), Hilary Staniland (Logic) and Anthony Price (ancient philosophy) joining the University. These appointments, coupled with those of the late sixties, made for a very strong department in terms of research and reputation and saw a series of publications, including Staniland’s *Universals* (1972, Anchor Books), which was a part of a series of ‘Problems in Philosophy’ and very well received at the same as a guide to a fraught area.

The *Locke Newsletter* that had been set up by Roland Hall in the late 1960s has always had its home at the University of York. Roland Hall still edits the journal today (now *Locke Studies*) and it has helped establish York’s specialism in the history of philosophy. This was reinforced by research that was being produced on Kant, Nietzsche and Schopenhauer, Locke, Hume and the ancients.

The department continued to grow during the seventies, despite some departures, and in the middle of the decade two young philosophers joined the University that were to become truly eminent. Tom Baldwin (political philosophy, European philosophy) and Susan Mendus (political philosophy, toleration) joined in 1974 and 1975, respectively. In 1977 as the junior members of staff, they were put in charge of organising the first Joint Session to be held at York*. These two philosophers were to have a big impact on the University as well as further afield. Shortly after this, Marie McGinn (Wittgenstein, McDowell) joined the department and her publications were to make York a known centre for Wittgenstein research.

The dialogue occurring at York in these years was varied and deep. Ron Atkinson had made an effort to promote research into European philosophy, and saw this as a way to keep philosophy at York original and fresh. The decision to host a Joint Session at York was indicative of the reputation and esteem that York was held in during these years. Influential speakers continued to visit York,
including Peter Geach and Elizabeth Anscombe, and the research was in general prolific and of a high quality.

In 1979, Ron Atkinson left the department for Exeter. The department was without a chair now, and Roland Hall was appointed as acting head of department. The appointment was supposedly temporary, but events taking place in London meant that this was to prove a permanent shift.

1980-1994: Years without a Professor

The departure of Ron Atkinson from York was a blow in of itself. As a respected philosopher and a capable Professorial head, he was an asset to any department. However, it was even more unfortunate given the wave of spending cuts that were about to hit Universities at large, across the country. In 1980, the bearer of bad news, Vice-Chancellor Berrick Saul, made it known that the philosophy chair would be ‘frozen’ for the foreseeable future as part of efficiency savings that had to be made across the departments. This unfortunate decision was coupled with Nick Dent’s position not being filled upon his departure and was a great morale blow for the department. Not having a Professor can diminish respect for a department, and in those days, when there was typically only one Professor in a department, it is a sign that the department does not hold as many bargaining chips as the other sections of the University.

This situation was maintained for some years and only made it worse. The continual decisions of the University Grants Committee (UGC) and Berrick Saul to turn down requests for a chair in philosophy put pressure on the members of staff that feared the department may close. During the worst years of the cuts, in the mid-eighties, it was feared that any vacated positions would remain vacant, and eventually the department would be forced to close. It was made quite clear that there were to be certain subjects that would receive more attention than others, and philosophy across the country suffered some years of endangerment. At York, the opinion of the Vice-Chancellor was that the University would need to focus on science undergraduates’, and it was quite clear that philosophy was not going to be allocated the same resources as other departments. This is not to say that philosophy was regarded as a lame duck. In the Swinnerton-Dyer questionnaire, virtually all departments in the University said it was important that the philosophy department receive a new chair.

The eighties were, thus, a period of stagnation for the philosophy department. Not having a chair constrained growth and lowered morale. An early incarnation of the philosophy society formed a group called ‘Plato’s People’. The students attempted to raise the money for a new Professorial head with various ingenious fund-raising schemes, such as delivering fresh produce to staff pigeon-holes. Despite the valiant activism by Plato’s People, their attempts were unsuccessful. This was just one example of student solidarity with the lecturers and in the late 1980s a young James Ladyman, an undergraduate at York, was spokesman for students that wished to show their support for the Association of University Teachers (AUT) strikes.

Despite the gloomy atmosphere, philosophy was able to remain somewhat buoyant. There were departures in these years, but applications for work still came flooding in. Tom Baldwin left for Cambridge in 1984, and Susan Mendus moved to the Morrell Centre for Toleration and became a
fundamental part of the politics department at York. The appointments during these years were primarily temporary as the department could not spare funds for permanent positions; these included Joanna Hodge (European Philosophy, Heidegger), Richard Francks (Descartes), Chris Megone (Applied Philosophy) and Fiona Hughes (Kant, Aesthetics).

In spite of the cloud that hung over the department, there were significant advances in the teaching quality and courses offered. Indeed, it was these advances that marked a turning point for the department and these successes that ensured that there was some sustained funding coming to philosophy. The first of these advances was the Philosophy and English equal degree, which had existed since the early years, but was now being developed into a fully integrated degree. Many equal-honours degrees at the time would just involve taking modules in one department, and unrelated modules in another, with no dialogue between the two. However, Jacques Berthoud (from the English department) and Andrew Ward decided that work could be made towards a more cross-discipline degree, where modules would be offered that contained aspects of both subjects. This move made the Philosophy and English degree very popular as students came to study jointly taught modules such as ‘Aesthetics and Literary Theory’. These degrees attracted a high quality of student that could be held up as a success of the humanities subjects, as well as bringing more money into the department through student funding.

A similar development occurred with the introduction of the Philosophy, Politics and Economics degree that was introduced in the mid-eighties. Chris Megone was instrumental in making this happen from the Philosophy department and it has turned into a runaway success. The strength of the PEP school was very soon apparent and acknowledged by the highest offices of the University. It drew in very intelligent students and bolstered the numbers of students coming into the Philosophy department. PPE still brings in a large amount of students every year and is a highly respected degree, and was something the department could be very proud of in a time of diminishing confidence. The cultivation of it was seen as a priority for the University and was a source of funding for Philosophy that was allowed its first permanent appointment in ten years as money was put aside for a PEP school post in the department.

After the PEP school became established, some hope began to flicker in the UGC’s correspondence. Though it was clear that philosophy was only attracting funding as long as PEP continued to bring in extra amounts of students, the clamour for a new chair was becoming louder. A report published in 1989 on the state of philosophy in the UK underlined the importance of the discipline and recommended chairs in all those that lacked them. It also stressed that York was the biggest department in the UK without a chair (barring St Andrews, which has two philosophy departments; larger than York was when combined). In very rapid succession changes occurred in York that would allow for a turning point. In 1993 Ron Cooke was made Vice-Chancellor and in 1994 John Heawood and Roland Hall retired from service. It was in 1995 that a new Professor was appointed, and the cloud over the department began to dissipate.

1995-2002: Renewed Vitality

The appointment of a Professorial head freed the department of a burden it had carried for 15 years and it was a pivotal appointment in the Philosophy department’s development. Tom Baldwin had
left the department ten years prior to have a successful career at his alma mater, Cambridge. When it became clear that the University of York would be hiring for a chair, Professor Baldwin decided that it was an opportunity he couldn’t miss and opted to leave Cambridge in order to head up the York department. The decision turned out to be a brilliant one, and the department immediately began to flourish again with several successful appointments within two years of Professor Baldwin taking the reins. Anthony Hatzimoysis, Joseph Melia and Panos Dimas were all hired and stayed for a few years, immediately raising the research reputation of the department. Also at the time Gordon Finlayson (European Philosophy) was hired and became the first long-standing appointment in years, and organised a new M.A. on Analytic and Continental Aesthetics with Andrew Ward that built on the success of the Philosophy and English undergraduate degree.

The success of these first years was crucial to how the department would develop, and in 1996 the research reputation took a severe hit as the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) returned a ‘3’ivi, an altogether unsatisfactory grade for an established department. Fortunately, this was remedied and the RAE in 2001 gave York an excellent score of ‘5’, showing the development in the years following the appointment of a Professor. The department began to increase at an exponential rate, seeing such distinguished philosophers as Samir Okasha and Havi Carel (now husband and wife, having met at York), and many of the staff members that still work in the department joined during these years, including Peter Lamarque (Aesthetics) and Tom Stoneham (History of Idealism).

The department became, again, a producer of high quality research, and continued to attract students with a multitude of different undergraduate and postgraduate degrees. In 2001, York held the Joint Session for a second time. Discussion and dialogue prospered in the department, and it began to be seen again as a destination for career-hungry academics. By the time Tom Baldwin stepped down as Head of Department in 2002, the department had nearly doubled in size from the 1994 figure. There were, however, some regrettable departures, including Martin Bell who went to Manchester Metropolitan after 26 years of dedication to York, and Roger Woolhouse, who finally retired in 2001 after many years of developing York’s reputation as a centre for History of Philosophy research.

2002-Present: The Modern Day

In 2002, Peter Lamarque took over as Head of Department, and in 2006 Tom Stoneham took over from him. The department has continued to grow and now houses around 30 academics, with an excellent reputation for research. Where previously, the department had not had a Professor, there are now five full-time Professors, and several emeritus Professors. There is movement in the department, with people leaving and arriving every year. Marie McGinn, now Professor Emerita, left the department in 2007. In 2011, the department said goodbye to its longest serving member, Andrew Ward, who had been a substantial figure in philosophy at York for 40 years.

The department’s key interest in history of philosophy has been maintained and strengthened, but with such a diverse department, other research areas such as aesthetics and ethics have emerged. In 2009, ChiPhi was established to improve dialogue between Universities in the North (Sheffield, Leeds and York) that have an established presence in the history of philosophy. This has led to many
conferences and speakers. In addition to this, Mike Beaney has brought the editorship of the *British Journal for the History of Philosophy* to York.

Professor Baldwin received the prestigious position as Editor of *Mind* in 2005, a position he holds until 2015. David Efird and Tom Stoneham act as Associate Editors of the journal, Paul Noordhof is Reviews Editor and Barry Lee is the Editorial Administrator. All in all, *Mind* currently has its home at York and this has been a beneficial development, strengthening research at the University, and raising awareness of York as an institution for philosophical learning. Further to this, members of department have published many books including *Reading Merleau-Ponty*, *Work and Object* and *Kant: The Three Critiques* to name a small selection that illustrates the range and depth of recent research at York.

As well as research, the quality of the students and their presence at York is impressive. Following in engagement of their predecessors, the newest incarnation of the Philosophy Society was founded in 2005, and still exists today, it first released its student publication *Dialectic* in 2007. The postgraduate community is growing, and this has been supported with the introduction of a new study building specifically for humanities postgraduates.

The outreach of the department has also been expanded with more and more philosophers using their skills to engage with communities and raise the profile of philosophy. Professor Mike Beaney was invited to Peking University just last year to give talks there, and the department has been running open courses for anyone with an interest in philosophy to go along to. In 2011/2012, these were on the topic of ‘Know Thyself’ and many members of the department contributed to these free lectures. In another accolade, Professor Baldwin is heading up an inquiry into brain technologies by the Nuffield Council of Bioethics demonstrating how philosophical thought can be useful in public spheres.

If one were to look at the department today, it would not be obvious that it was the same department that looked in danger of slipping into obscurity, or even closing, in the mid-eighties. The department shares more similarities with the growing department of the early seventies. It continues to expand, and offers a diverse range of interests that has just developed since the early expertise in the history of philosophy. This has been achieved through being adaptable and developing original courses to attract strong philosophy candidates, as well as having a breadth of research interests. Philosophy at York has seen off threats and made the most of its opportunities and like philosophy itself, it is surprisingly resilient.

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5. *Various University Newsheets 1979-1988*, Borthwick Institute Archives
6. *RAE Results* (http://www.rae.ac.uk/aboutus/previous/, accessed 31/08/2012)
vii Mind Editorial Board, Mind Association
(www.oxfordjournals.org/our_journals/mind/editorial_board.html accessed 31/08/2012)
xi www.yorkphilosophy.co.uk
xii www.dialecticonline.wordpress.com