

The Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom from 1884 to 2024: early struggles, glory years, renaissance and re-invention

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The Marine Biological Association of the United Kingdom (MBA) is an independent charitable (not-for-profit) learned society and research organisation. It was founded in the rooms of the Linnean Society London in 1884, with the overall aim of building one or more Marine Stations on the model of those established in the previous decades in France and Naples. Research commenced in 1887 ahead of completion of The Laboratory in Plymouth on Citadel Hill in 1888. Research was to be done by a mix of permanently based professional staff, visitors from universities plus amateur but none-the-less highly skilled scientists. The MBA also ran fisheries-oriented laboratories in the North Sea in the first decade of the 20th century. In 1902, the MBA opened a laboratory at Lowestoft (the ancestor of the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science following nationalisation in 1909) as its platform for its role in the International Investigations in the North Sea.

Four phases in the history of the MBA will be described: its establishment and survival during the early precarious years until WWI; consolidation and growth to become the leading UK laboratory doing curiosity-driven and strategic marine research (1919-1987); its re-emergence following formation of Plymouth Marine Laboratory in 1987 (by merger of the Institute of Marine Environmental Research with much of the MBA), as the host of an independent curiosity-driven research fellowship programme with in-parallel contract research, knowledge-exchange activities and advanced training (1988-2008); and its current status following merger in 2018 with the Sir Alister Hardy Foundation for Ocean Science, with whom it shared Citadel Hill. The MBA has been buffeted over its history by re-organizations of UK Marine science and subsequent funding crises, and to a lesser extent World Wars.

Major achievements will be highlighted in its twin strands of marine research underpinning sustainable stewardship of the oceans including sustained observing, intertwined with pure curiosity-driven science using marine ecosystems and organisms as tractable models for general understanding. The phylogeny of the MBA and the institutions of which it has been an ancestor, via nationalisation, hybridisation, facilitation, spin-off and ultimately merger is given. The activities of the Learned Society, which received a Royal Charter in 2013, are briefly outlined including JMBA - one of the oldest Journals devoted to marine science published since 1887.