Indian Institute of Science

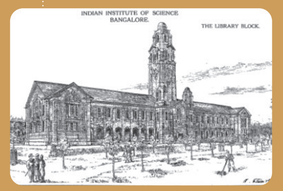
THE MAIN BUILDING AND MORRIS TRAVERS

The Main Building is symbolic of IISc even today

Once the decision to set up the Institute was made, the first task was to construct the Main Building, and this began even before the Institute was officially created in 1909.

The story of the Main Building is closely intertwined with the fortunes of Morris Travers, IISc's first Director, who arrived in India in late 1906. A chemist by training (he had worked with William Ramsay on the discovery of noble gases), he was merely 34 years old when he became the head of the Institute that was yet to be formally established.

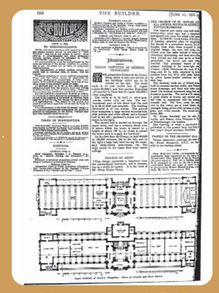
IISc's first Director Morris Travers



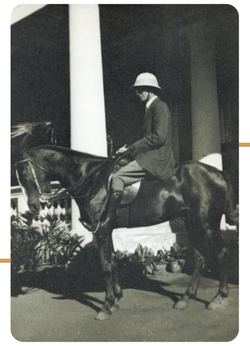
An artist's visualisation of Stevens' plan

Travers got to work right away, asking CF Stevens, an architect from Bombay, to prepare estimates and draw up a plan for the Main Building, also called the Library Block. It was estimated to cost Rs 13 lakh, well above what IISc could afford, but Travers convinced the Provisional Committee that he could make up the deficit with savings on income.

According to Stevens' plan, the Main Building was to be crowned by an imposing 150-foot tower and was to be a silver-grey granite structure roofed with red tiles built in classical style using dressed stone (unlike cut stones, dressed stones are shaped and made to fit into the wall). Most of the first floor was to be taken up by a large library; the east wing would have the chemistry labs and west wing would have the electrical lab, along with a workshop.



Main Building plan published in The Builder



Morris Travers on horseback

A bid by TCW Skipp for the construction of the foundation and the plinths of the Main Building was accepted by the Provisional Committee on 23 April 1908, and construction, supervised by Travers himself, began in May. Travers would ride his horse *Peter Pan* to the construction site from his house on Avenue Road, along with his stable assistant who rode a donkey.

Once the early stages of construction were completed, Travers asked Skipp to proceed with building the superstructures without the approval of the Provisional Committee, a decision that did not go well with Padshah. Padshah was also upset with Travers for having taken a personal loan of Rs 2 lakh to pay the contractor.

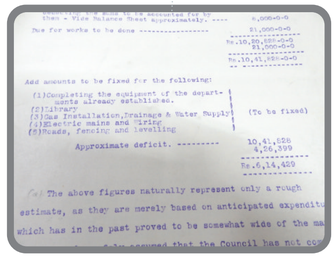
Early stages of construction of the Main Building

Chemistry lab under construction

Electrical lab under construction

In spite of the tension between Travers and Padshah, who was now part of the Council that replaced the Provisional Committee, construction proceeded.

In 1912, when Travers was vacationing in England, a new Council, even more hostile than the previous one, made several decisions to cripple Travers. In August, an Auditor's report showing a deficit of several lakhs of rupees was placed before the members.



Add amounts to be fixed for the following:

(1) Completing the equipment of the departments already established.
(2) Library
(3) Gas Installation, Drainage & Water Supply
(4) Electric mains and "Lyric"
(5) Roads, fencing and levelling — (To be fixed)

Approximate deficit. --------- 10,41,526 / 4,26,399 / Rs.6,14,489

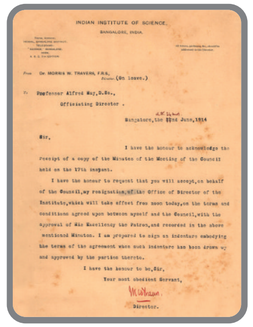
(a) The above figures naturally represent only a rough estimate, as they are merely based on anticipated expendit

Auditor's Report showing deficit

Lord Hardinge of Penshurst, India's Viceroy, instituted on enquiry committee

Based on complaints made by the members of the Council against Travers, in 1913, the Viceroy of India intervened and set up an enquiry committee to look into the affairs of the Institute, and the conduct of Travers. It held several hearings and interviewed a number of people, including Travers, who believed that he had rebutted all the allegations made by the Council against him successfully.

Based on the report of the enquiry committee, the Viceroy decided that though Travers had not indulged in any financial misappropriation, his continuation was inimical to the Institute. Travers finally resigned in June 1914 and left for England three months later.

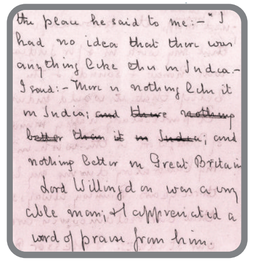


Travers' letter of resignation

The completed Main Building

Travers' departure did not hasten the construction of the Main Building in any way; if anything it became slower. After several delays it was finally completed in 1919.

Much later, in 1959, Travers wrote to the Director, S Bhagavantam, on the occasion of the Institute's Golden Jubilee, expressing his inability to attend the celebrations due to his old age. In the letter, he also recounted the reaction of Lord Willingdon when he visited the Institute. Willingdon was the Governor of Bombay, and went on to become India's Viceroy; he was the last visitor Travers entertained as the Institute's Director.



Travers' letter to the Director S Bhagavantam in 1959