Nick Hitchon Is Better Known for Being in the "Up" Movies than for His Physics

It can be humiliating to have your life publicly chronicled, says Nick Hitchon, a physicist at the University of Wisconsin—Madison. He should know. Hitchon is one of the participants in a documentary film series that explores class structure in the UK by following the lives of people from different classes. The series began with *Seven Up* in 1964, when Hitchon and 13 other seven-year-olds were first interviewed on such topics as what they wanted to be when they grew up, whether they had a girl- or boyfriend, and what they thought about "the poor" and "the rich." Every seven years since then, director Michael Apted has been back to ask similar questions. The latest film in the series, *42 Up,* is playing in movie theaters around the US now, and the video is scheduled for release in December.

"When I grow up, I want to learn about the Moon and all that," the seven-year-old Hitchon said in 1964. Looking back, he now says, "I think what got me going about the Moon was Yuri Gagarin going into orbit," referring to the Soviet cosmonaut who in 1961 became the first human in space. "He was my hero at the time."

Hitchon was selected to be in the documentary because he was from the rural working class and was willing to talk to the camera. He grew up on a small farm in the Yorkshire Dales, and crossed class lines by going to what other local kids called a "snob school," and later by studying at the University of Oxford, where he earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in physics, and was awarded a PhD for theoretical calculations for a fusion reactor design. Then he "got scared off by the staggering problems" facing fusion energy production, and switched to computational plasma physics. He's been on the Madison faculty since 1981, and his work these days involves calculations of confined plasmas for such things as spacecraft propulsion and modification of semiconductor surfaces. Despite having three books and nearly 70 papers to his credit, Hitchon says that "it's hard to imagine what I could do professionally that would be as notable as being in these films." Every now and then, he adds, "Michael [Apted] asks me what I do. When I try to explain, his eyes glaze over."

One thing the "Up" films do show, Hitchon says, "is that the working classes are proud to be the backbone of society. The films tried to show that they resent it, but they don't." What the British working classes do resent, he continues, is people getting out of their place—"my coming to America was very controversial." Hitchon moved to the US when he was 24 because it "was a bigger scientific pond." But, he says, when the move was recounted in *28 Up,* "I was portrayed as having sold out."

So how has having his life publicly documented affected him? That's hard to tell, he says: "It's like quantum mechanics—when you measure something, you alter it. But [the films] may have contributed to me doing more than I would have otherwise imagined. When people show up and make a movie about you for no apparent reason, you think strange and interesting things can happen."

TONI FEDER

"WHEN I GROW UP, I want to learn about the Moon and all that," said the seven-year-old Nick Hitchon. In *42 Up,* physicist Hitchon visits his childhood school in rural England. (Courtesy of First Run Features.)

Recovery Continues in Physics Job Market

In the US, unemployment rates six months after graduation for 1997 physics and astronomy degree recipients were the lowest in more than a decade—2% at the PhD level, and 3% at the bachelor's level—a recent survey by the American Institute of Physics has found.

About half of 1997 physics bachelor's degree recipients went directly on to graduate school. Of those entering the workforce, about 70% found jobs in industry, where they earned a median annual salary of $37 000, up 16% from the previous year. By comparison, the 34% of new physics PhD recipients who joined the industrial sector had a median salary of $62 000; the salaries earned by astronomy degree recipients were comparable.

The proportion of physics doctorates in the class of 1997 accepting permanent positions, mostly in industry, was more than double that of a low point a decade earlier, which the survey report attributes to both the strong US economy and shifts in graduates' long-term career goals.

Single copies of the *1998 Initial Employment Report: Follow-Up of 1997 Physics and Astronomy Degree Recipients* are available free of charge from AIP, Education and Employment Statistics Division, 1 Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740; e-mail stats@aip.org; Web http://www.aip.org/statistics/trends/emptrends.htm.

IN BRIEF

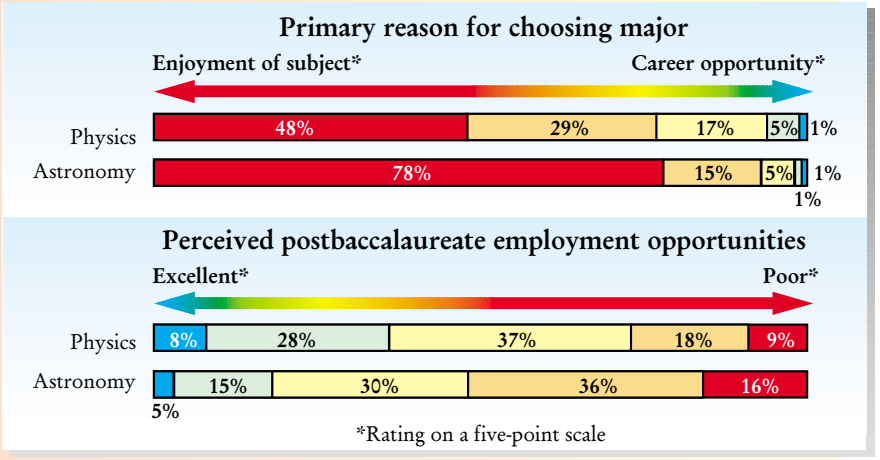
Assessing graduate programs. Are you a graduate student or recent PhD recipient? If so, the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students (NAGPS) invites you to participate in its Web-based National Doctoral Program Survey. You'll be asked to evaluate your US or Canadian graduate program in terms of, among other things, climate, curriculum, teacher training, guidance provided for both academic and nonacademic careers, and overall satisfaction. As Adam Fagen, a Harvard University graduate student in science education who chairs NAGPS's committee on faculty–student relations, points out, "It's hard to get a sense of the overall student experience. . . . And where there are problems, all too often they are not addressed as well as they should be, because no one outside the program knows about it." The aims of the survey, Fagen continues, are to

inform prospective students in all fields about individual graduate programs, and to provide feedback to departments and institutions—"and high response rates are crucial." The survey, which is funded by a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation, can be filled out from March through May on the Web at http://survey.nagps.org/, and the results will be posted on the site this fall.

Bell Labs management. On 17 January, William Brinkman was named vice president of research for Bell Laboratories, Lucent Technologies, moving up from his previous position as physical sciences research vice president. In his new role, Brinkman will oversee an annual budget of about $400 million, as well as 1200 researchers in physics, engineering, computing, software development, mathematics, and communications. He has been at Bell Labs since 1966, with a three-year hiatus in the 1980s, when he served as vice president of research at Sandia National Laboratories. Brinkman succeeds Arun Netravali, who became Bell Labs' president last October.

Condensed matter summer school. The Boulder Summer School in Condensed Matter and Materials Physics will hold its inaugural session in Boulder, Colorado, from 3 to 28 July. The summer school was created to give postdocs and advanced graduate students expert training in specific areas of condensed matter or materials science; the first session will focus on the fundamentals and applications of superconductivity. Matthew Fisher (University of California, Santa Barbara), Steve Girvin (University of Indiana), Andy Millis (Rutgers University), and Leo Radzihovsky (University of Colorado) sought funding for the summer school because they felt that condensed matter physics is such a diverse field that no single department has what they call a "critical mass" of faculty members in more than a few narrow subfields of the discipline. The school, which will run for five summers, pending a review after the first three, is designed for about 50 students and 16 lecturers, with a mix of lectures, research, and informal evening seminars. The summer school is sponsored by the National Science Foundation, with additional funding from the University of Colorado, the National Institute of Standards and Technology, and Lucent Technologies. More information is available at http://www.indiana.edu/~uscmpsc. ■

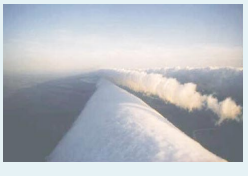
Bachelor's Degree Production Holds Steady in Physics



In 1998 the number of bachelor's degrees awarded in physics (3821) in the US leveled off after a decade of declining, and the number in astronomy (192) rose by 8%, according to a recent survey by the American Institute of Physics. Degree recipients in both fields chose their majors more for enjoyment than for any immediate career opportunities, although those in physics were more optimistic about their employment options at the bachelor's level than were those in astronomy. More than two-thirds of the respondents said they had participated in research while working toward their degrees (a new topic of inquiry on the annual survey). As in previous years, about half of 1998's physics and astronomy bachelor's degree recipients intended to immediately pursue graduate studies. Substantial proportions of those planning to continue in physics (45%) and astronomy (71%) said they hoped to become college or university professors (proportions that well exceed projections for job openings). The *Physics and Astronomy Senior Report: Class of 1998* contains these and other data and is available free of charge from AIP, Education and Employment Statistics Division, 1 Physics Ellipse, College Park, MD 20740; e-mail stats@aip.org; Web http://www.aip.org/statistics/trends/ undtrends.htm.

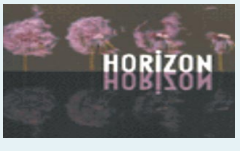
Web Watch

http://www.dropbears.com/brough/Aopa.htm



The metereological phenomenon known as the **Morning Glory** is a huge propagating roll cloud that appears in the spring over the Gulf of Carpentaria in northern Australia. Russell White's Web site contains pictures and descriptions of the cloud, as well as glider pilots' accounts of "surfing" along the cloud. The longest article on the site, "The Morning Glory of the Gulf of Carpentaria," serves as a good introduction to the topic.

http://www.bbc.co.uk/horizon/timelord.shtml



The possibility of time travel was the subject of a television program originally broadcast by the British Broadcasting Corp in December 1996. Called **The Time Lords**, the program included interviews with many leading theoretical physicists, among them Kip Thorne and John Wheeler. A transcript of the show is available on the BBC's Web site.

http://chronicle.merit.edu/jobs/99/09/99091701c.htm
http://chronicle.merit.edu/jobs/99/12/99120301c.htm

Two items on the *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s Career Network Web site are likely to interest you if you're looking for a job. In **CV Doctor**, Mary Heiberger and Julia Miller Vick annotate academic curricula vitae to demonstrate how to present your talents and qualifications effectively. In **From CV to Résumé**, Margaret Newhouse explains how to modify an academic CV when you apply for a job outside academia.

To suggest topics or sites for Web Watch, please contact ptwww@aip.org by e-mail.

Compiled by CHARLES DAY