

Scientist and community man

Research scientist Norman Roberts started and then managed three organisations in succession. First was an electronic instrument factory during World War II, in Sydney. Then came a government research laboratory for the measurement of wool characteristics, also in Sydney. Finally Roberts was the founding director of New Zealand's Wool Research Organisation (WRONZ), at Lincoln.

Living in Christchurch since 1962, he and his wife, Betty, were deeply involved in community affairs. They were instrumental in saving and restoring the Old Stone House at Cashmere. Betty died in 2008.

In his latter years, Roberts suffered debilitating back pain. He died last month, aged 95.

A later director of WRONZ, Dr Garth Carnaby, said in a eulogy that Roberts "established a world-class team of research scientists" at WRONZ, where his "personal qualities of thoughtfulness, decency and a desire to make work an enjoyable aspect of life found their true expression".

He had "a significant career in physics in Australia before he came to New Zealand", Carnaby said. His humanity and achievements in science then became "the inspiration for the creation of a truly great wool research institute" in New Zealand.

Roberts was born in Manly, Sydney, the son of a school teacher. His early life was spent in country areas of New South Wales. At 15 he was dux of Dubbo High School and at 19 he completed his BSc degree, with first-class honours in physics and second-class honours in mathematics, at Sydney University.

He was then, and remained, a good tennis player and a keen cricketer. He won university blues in cricket and baseball.

Roberts taught in the university's physics department while doing post-graduate studies. He was awarded his masters degree in 1939 for experimental and theoretical work in nuclear physics.

The outbreak of war that year posed a dilemma. He opposed fighting but believed Hitler's aggression must be stopped. He was, by then, working for Australian Wireless in radio physics and electronics. He was drafted to start a factory making radio transceivers and did his war service running the factory with 90 workers.

Roberts met Sydney University arts student Betty Bland through



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membership of the Student Christian Movement, of which she was woman president. They married in 1941 and had four daughters.

He later said he regretted not doing a doctorate after the war. He had felt his family could not afford it. He had been unaware an aunt was keen to pay for his advanced studies.

Roberts began work for the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) in 1946. As a textile fabrics physicist, he helped launch a new division dealing with the production and use of wool. The position entailed much travel, examining uses of wool in other countries.

When the New Zealand government announced it would form WRONZ, Roberts leapt at the opportunity. He believed in the New Zealand principle of partnership between the research institute and industry, rather than pure research as at CSIRO.

Moving was a wrench, as the two older daughters remained at university in Australia. However, he never regretted the shift.

He was appointed in late-1961 but was given time to finish projects in Australia that were near completion. He arrived at a bare site opposite Lincoln College, with no staff, in 1962. Five years later, the buildings, which Roberts designed himself, were officially opened.

The success of WRONZ under Roberts' leadership prompted Carnaby to comment: "The inclusive and non-hierarchical culture he created spawned a multitude of science leaders and

formed the platform from which, over the next 30 years, WRONZ grew into arguably the world's best wool research institute".

Declining health led Roberts to retire as director in 1978, though he continued to do research until 1980. His time at WRONZ brought development of many commercial technologies, the training and mentoring of staff and the publication of scientific papers.

The Robertses were involved with the Old Stone House from the 1960s. They played leading roles in saving and administering the building, through establishment of a trust for its restoration. Even after it was gutted by fire, in 1971, they continued their efforts to preserve the building which pioneer Sir John Cracroft-Wilson had built for his servants in 1870.

They were active in other fields, including Cracroft Community Centre, Family Life Education, City Mission, Gwynfa Avenue Community Group, the peace movement and friendship organisations with other countries.

Daughter Lin says her father was, above all, a man of honesty and commitment. He thought deeply about what action to take in any situation, then made sure he did it.

Mike Crean

■ Norman Frederick Roberts, born Manly, February 15, 1915; died Christchurch, November 16, 2010. Pre-deceased by wife Betty; survived by daughters Robin, Kerry, Cynthia and Lin, seven grandchildren and six great-grandchildren.