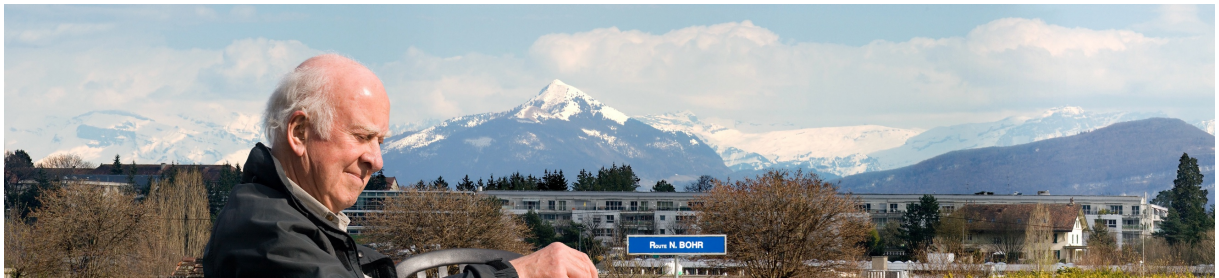


A tribute to Peter Higgs: “Travels with Peter”

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This chapter offers a personal tribute to Peter Higgs, tracing his life, career, and the remarkable journey surrounding the discovery of the Higgs boson. From his early academic work in Edinburgh to the media frenzy of “Higgsteria,” the narrative blends historical milestones with humorous and poignant anecdotes. It recounts Higgs’ modest character, his aversion to publicity and technology, and his transformation into a reluctant icon of particle physics. Particular focus is given to his visits to CERN, culminating in the landmark seminar of 4 July 2012, and the events leading to his Nobel Prize in 2013. The account provides a personal perspective on Higgs’ role in one of the defining chapters of modern particle physics.



Introduction

I first met Peter in 1969 at my interview for a lectureship at the Tait Institute for Mathematical Physics in Edinburgh. Peter was on the interview panel, and I was appointed. I guess I got lucky!

Early life: Paternal family

Peter Ware Higgs was born Peter Ware Higgs in a nursing home in Elswick, Newcastle upon Tyne on 29 May 1929. His paternal family came from Bristol. His father, Thomas Ware Higgs, moved there from Bristol to set up local radio for the BBC. His grandfather, Albert Ware Higgs, was a dispensing chemist in Bristol. His great-grandfather, Richard Higgs, was a wealthy maltster who married Ann Ware. John Higgs, his great-great-grandfather was a publican at the Waggon & Horses in Stapleton Road, Bristol.

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Early life: Maternal family

Peter's mother, Gertrude Maud Coghill came from Hopesay in Shropshire. His grandfather, John Davidson Mackay Coghill, was a physician from Edinburgh. His great-grandfather, John Coghill, was born in Thurso Caithness and joined the Lifeguards, protecting the monarch at Windsor Castle. John Coghill retired to Edinburgh and became a spirit dealer on Bank Street.

Early school life

Thomas Ware Higgs was moved by the BBC to Birmingham in 1930. Peter went to a variety of private primary schools and to Halesowen Grammar School in 1939. Impressions of his early childhood are shown in Fig. 1.



Fig. 1: Portraits of Peter Higgs during his early childhood. Courtesy of Christopher and Jonathan Higgs.

Thomas was moved to Bedford, but Peter went with his mother to stay in Bristol for “safety” as World War II began. In fact, the centre of Bristol was “blitzed” the day before they arrived. Peter told me that he fell and broke his arm in a bomb crater on his school playground. On a walk with his mother along the River Avon they were close to an army lorry attacked from the air, but fortunately they were unscathed. At Cotham School, Peter was fascinated by Dirac’s name, that appeared several times on the honour boards. He found himself a hopeless experimenter, so decided to pursue mathematics. Peter moved to London in 1946 to study mathematics at the City of London School.

Early academic career

Peter enrolled in 1947 as an undergraduate at King’s College London. He graduated with a BSc in 1950; an MSc in 1951, and a PhD in 1954 (Fig. 2). He was awarded a Royal Commission of the Exhibition of 1851 Senior Studentship and spent that in 1953–54 at Kings College and 1954–55 at Edinburgh. He held a senior research fellowship at Edinburgh in 1955–56. He returned to London and was an ICI Research Fellow at University College London (UCL) in 1956–57 and at Imperial College in 1957–58. He held a temporary lectureship at UCL 1958–60.

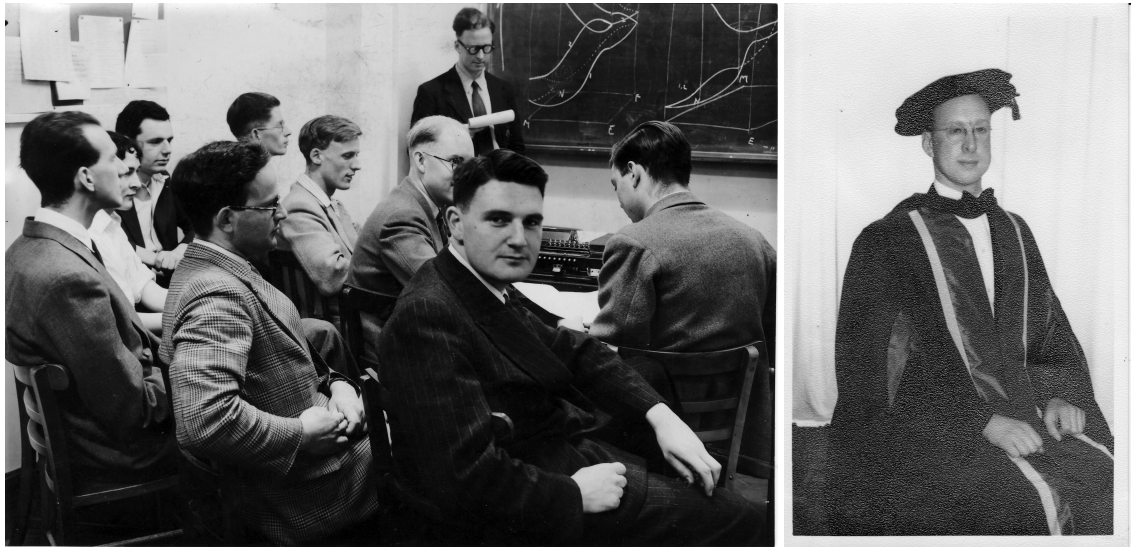


Fig. 2: Peter Higgs in academic robes during his early career. Courtesy of Christopher and Jonathan Higgs.

Edinburgh and the “Gang of Four”

Peter came to Edinburgh in 1960 as a young lecturer, but was invited by Nick Kemmer¹ to arrive early so that he could take part in the first Scottish Universities Summer School in Physics at Newbattle Abbey in Dalkeith. A lecturer from the United States had had his fare paid by the National Science Foundation. The spare money was spent on wine for dinner and Peter was put in charge of it. Unknown to him, four students took wine from the table and hid it in the grandfather clock in the crypt.

The “Gang of Four” (Fig. 3) were Sheldon Glashow² and Martinus Veltman³ (both future Nobel laureates), Nicola Cabibbo⁴ (who perhaps should have been one) and Derek Robinson⁵ (an axiomatic field theorist who later went to Australia).

Evading the Goldstone theorem

In 1960 Peter became interested in the work of Yoichiro Nambu that ran into a serious problem known as the Goldstone theorem. Peter’s 1964 papers showed how to avoid that problem and introduced what was the precursor of the Higgs boson [1, 2]. In 1965 on sabbatical at the University of North Carolina he wrote a third paper, outlining the properties of this scalar boson, that was published in 1966 [3].

¹Nicholas Kemmer (1911–1998) was a Russian-born British physicist. In 1953 he became the third Tait Professor of Mathematical Physics at the University of Edinburgh.

²Sheldon Lee Glashow is an American theoretical physicist. He shared the 1979 Nobel Prize in Physics with Abdus Salam and Steven Weinberg.

³Martinus Justinus Godefriedus “Tini” Veltman (1931–2021) was a Dutch theoretical physicist. He shared the 1999 Nobel Prize in Physics with Gerardus ’t Hooft.

⁴Nicola Cabibbo (1935–2010) was an Italian physicist best known for his work on the weak interaction, particularly his introduction of the Cabibbo angle.

⁵Derek William Robinson (1935–2021) was a British-Australian theoretical mathematician and physicist. He was a researcher at the Australian National University.



Fig. 3: The ‘Gang of Four’ (left to right): Sheldon Glashow, Martinus Veltman, Nicola Cabibbo, and Derek Robinson.

Peter is “famous”

All was quiet until Ben W Lee gave a summary paper at the 1972 International Conference on High Energy Physics [4]. Our colleague, Ken Peach, returning from the conference said that Ben had “put the name Higgs on everything” and told Peter in the University of Edinburgh Staff Club “You are famous”.

Peter and IT

Peter never used a computer, or a smartphone, and his allocated email address was monitored by departmental secretary Alvis Ingram, both before and after 1996 when he retired. When Alvis herself retired, I took over this task and as the search for the Higgs boson intensified, so did the corresponding email traffic.

The God particle name arrives

There were often amusing, and sometimes bizarre messages and stories. When Leon Lederman in 1993 coined the term “God particle” (Fig. 4), it led to yet another strand in the growing email traffic.

We were told in separate messages that the particle had been predicted much earlier by all the Holy Books, as well as more recently by Homer Simpson. Despite Peter despairing of this moniker, it has stuck around, particularly among journalist wishing to make headlines. We received a letter in Chinese addressed to Peter and I asked a colleague, Crystal Lei, to translate it. Crystal told me that it was about the Higgs boson. I pressed her further and she told me that the two Chinese characters for Higgs boson were literally ‘God’ and ‘Particle’.

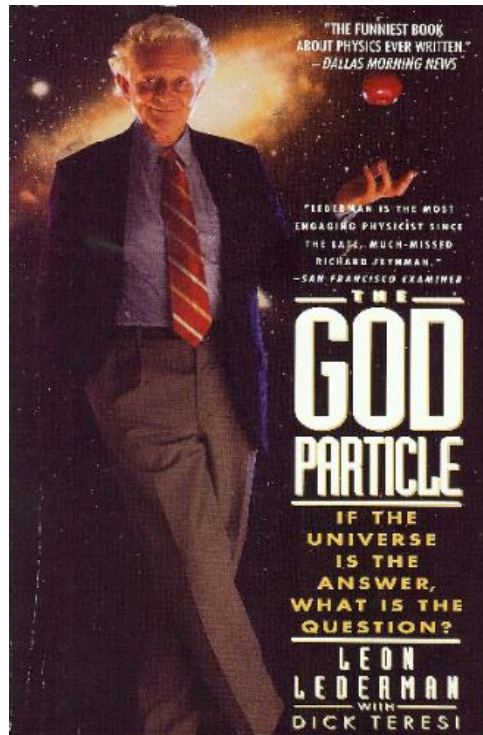


Fig. 4: Cover of Leon Lederman’s book *The God particle* [5].

Higgsteria

The New Scientist coined the phrase “Higgsteria” to describe not only the search for the boson, but the media attention around it [6]. I set up an automatic Google News search for items including the phrase “Higgs boson” and got many hits every day and this persists even at the time of writing. I get hits from India of results for a racehorse and financial reports for a medical company, both with that name. A newspaper cartoon appeared showing three wise men on camels arriving at the CERN gate, demanding to see the “God particle”. A farmer in Aberdeenshire had a herd of bison, one of which was called Higgs Bison. Headlines were often misspelled and called it the “Higgs bosun”. Its discovery will be mentioned later! There was another more unfortunate misspelling. We received an email from a lady fresh out of her Tai-Chi class claiming, “I felt the fifth force” and then wished Peter well in his search for the “Higgs bosom”. Help on that was on hand as we were sent a copy of the Camden Review News Extra, reporting that “John Ellis⁶, a Higgs bosom expert, is a Highgate (School) old boy”. Several “Higgs boson” ales were brewed—more on those later—and fine red wines produced in both California and France were also named “Higgs boson”. Its name made it to the Guardian crossword no. 24983 as the answer to the clue 17 across: “Gosh big’s no way to describe it, though it is important in theory (5,5)”.

⁶John Ellis is a British-Swiss theoretical physicist. Ellis proposed in 1976, together with Dimitri Nanopoulos and Mary Gaillard, the so-called “Higgs-strahlung” process in which a Higgs boson is radiated from a Z-boson (this proved to be the best way to search for the Higgs boson at the Large Electron–Positron Collider) and calculated Higgs decay into Z photons, which was its most distinctive signature at the LHC.

CERN Open Days April 2008

On the weekend of 5–6 April 2008, CERN planned an Open Day, ahead of switching on the Large Hadron Collider. In advance of that I tried to call Peter without success and then called his estranged wife Jody. I explained that I hoped Peter was up for the trip to CERN in April. Jody told me “Peter doesn’t like big machines, but I will ask him”. Jody then quietly told me “My cancer is back”. Peter called soon after and agreed to go, but sadly Jody passed away shortly afterwards. I waited for some weeks to pass until Peter called to ask, “Are we still going?”. He wanted it to be a “private” visit, so I made all the arrangements directly with the spokespersons of the four large LHC collaborations. However, when we asked for CERN visitor permits, the office issuing them leaked the news that Peter Higgs was coming to CERN. This, of course really impacted the nature of the visit. The April trip to CERN included several colleagues from the University of Edinburgh. We flew out to Geneva on the Friday, and, with our hired minibus, we first visited CMS as it was the furthest from the airport. Tejinder Virdee⁷ kindly showed us around and Peter passed a whiteboard where someone had written “*There is no Higgs*” (Fig. 5).

When we were in the car park preparing to leave, a group of students working on CMS came running towards us shouting “You can’t leave yet!”. As they got closer, they held out their hard hats for Peter to sign! We eventually left and booked into our hotel.



Fig. 5: The whiteboard at CMS jokingly reading “*There is no Higgs*”. Tejinder “Jim” Virdee is standing in the background to the left. © Peter Reid, University of Edinburgh.

⁷Sir Tejinder Singh Virdee is a British experimental particle physicist and Professor of Physics at Imperial College London. In 2013 he was awarded the Special Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics for “leadership in the scientific endeavour that led to the discovery of the new Higgs-like particle by the ATLAS and CMS collaborations at CERN’s Large Hadron Collider”.

Higgs at ATLAS

After checking in, we travelled to the ATLAS experiments where we were kindly shown around by Peter Jenni⁸. Later in the ATLAS control room (Fig. 6), Peter Jenni remarked that he hoped that they would see the Higgs boson at ATLAS first. I apologised to him and said, “I am afraid the Higgs has already been seen at CMS!”



Fig. 6: Peter Higgs, guided by Peter Jenni, at the ATLAS Control Room. © Peter Reid, University of Edinburgh.

Higgs at ALICE

We visited the ALICE experiment on the following Saturday, which was the CERN Open Day for family and friends. I managed to take a photograph of Peter in the straight section of the tunnel next to the experiment, wearing the green ALICE hard hat (Fig. 7). We were invited afterwards for a beer at CERN Restaurant 1, as a journalist wished to have a short interview with Peter. After two rounds of beers, it became clear we had been stationary for too long. Suddenly, a group of US students arrived with a camera and microphone which was thrust at Peter, with the cry “Say hello to America!”. They had been at the Preveessin site, so news of Peter Higgs’ whereabouts was travelling fast. As we retreated and Richard Kenway remarked “Now I know what it feels like when the paparazzi chase you!”. We had learned our lesson!

The following Sunday was CERN’s Open Day for the public, so we kept a lower profile and after brief return to ATLAS we went downtown.

⁸ [Peter Jenni](#) is a Swiss experimental particle physicist. In 2013 he was awarded the Special Breakthrough Prize in Fundamental Physics for “leadership in the scientific endeavour that led to the discovery of the new Higgs-like particle by the ATLAS and CMS collaborations at CERN’s Large Hadron Collider”.



Fig. 7: Peter Higgs in the LHC tunnel near the ALICE experiment. © Alan Walker, University of Edinburgh.

On the following Monday morning we visited LHCb and the Edinburgh group working there showed us around. By now the Director-General Robert Aymar had learnt that Peter Higgs was visiting CERN, and he invited our group to lunch in the Restaurant 1 “Glassbox” where Peter signed the “Golden Book” (Fig. 8). Clearly, trying to keep Peter Higgs’ visit private was never really going to be possible!



Fig. 8: Peter Higgs signing the Golden Book at CERN with Director-General Robert Aymar standing at the right. © CERN, photo CERN-HI-0804052-03.

On the Monday afternoon a University of Edinburgh press conference was held off campus. A French reporter asked if there was a picture of Peter in the LHC tunnel. I obliged, asking him to use it only for his story. He later complained, “They were treating him like a rock star”. Well yes, by that time Peter really was the “rock star of physics”.

Travels with Peter

From 2008, I was asked to help Peter with his travel to the many award ceremonies he attended, such as the Freedom of the Cities of Newcastle, his birthplace, and the City of Bristol where he grew up. Peter remarked that the sole benefit from Bristol was that he could now graze his herd of sheep on Bristol common land. In Newcastle he opened a science park on the site of the former Federation Brewery, itself on the site of an old coal mine. This was in Elswick where Peter was born in a maternity home that we still have to identify.

Honorary degrees

He had many honorary degrees awarded. One was awarded at the University of Manchester where he told me he sat chatting to the person next to him called Bobby Charlton⁹, then said “I had no idea who he was”. Peter was never interested in football or any other sport!

Erice July 2012

Antonino “Nino” Zichichi¹⁰, the Sicilian physicist, had invited Peter several times to go to conferences in Erice, near Palermo, but Peter sometimes did not turn up. Nino then invited Peter and me which seemed to fix that problem. Peter and I were there together in June 2012 and by then LHC had been running for several years and the data taken on the possible Higgs boson candidate events was growing. Before we left Edinburgh, I had asked James Gillies of the CERN Press Office if we should travel to CERN afterwards and was told that there would be no news in the summer, more likely in the winter. As a result, we booked to return from Palermo to Edinburgh via London Stansted. When we were in Erice we began to hear rumours. A former LHC experiment spokesperson had left early, and another had cancelled their visit. Jonathan Leake, a Sunday Times journalist, emailed me to ask if Peter was going to CERN. Then we heard that Gerry Guralnik¹¹ and Carl Hagen¹² had already arrived at CERN. Finally, Jan van den Berg, of the Ad Hoc Theatre Group in Amsterdam, phoned to say he had been filming in CERN and was coming to film Peter on the Saturday in Erice. With all this activity I sent an email enquiry to James Gillies to find out what was happening. Peter and I and the film crew adjourned to lunch to Ristorante Venus which had no Wi-Fi. During lunch my mobile phone rang, and I left the table and moved to the large window to take the call. I turned round to find that the film crew filming me taking the call. It was in fact John Ellis, phoning me from Switzerland. John very strongly suggested that Peter should come to CERN. Peter was also filmed saying “If John Ellis says that, then we must go!”. Later, back at the conference centre I picked up an email from James Gillies of the CERN Press Office which included the message “I can’t give you details of what will be said on Wednesday, though I do suspect that Peter will regret it if he is not there.”

⁹Sir Robert Charlton (1937–2023) was an English footballer who played as an attacking midfielder, left winger or centre-forward. He was widely considered one of the greatest players of all time.

¹⁰Antonino Zichichi (1929–2026) was an Italian physicist. In 1963, he founded the Centro Ettore Majorana of Erice, dedicated to scientific culture. Zichichi has served a President of European Physical Society, his connections are unusually broad and influential, extending well beyond standard academic collaboration.

¹¹Gerald Stanford “Gerry” Guralnik (1936–2014) was an American theoretical physicist. He is noted for his work in the development of theories about the Higgs boson.

¹²Carl Richard Hagen is an American theoretical physicist. He is noted for his work in the development of theories about the Higgs boson.

Arrival in CERN 2 July 2012

We discarded our return travel booking and I organised for the two of us to fly from Palermo to Geneva via Rome on Monday 2 July 2012. As we were extending our trip, Peter could not get through to extend his single-trip insurance, so he travelled without cover. We were picked up at Geneva Airport by the Director-General's car and taken to the CERN hostel where we booked into separate buildings. Making our way to our rooms, a young postgraduate kindly offered to carry Peter's bag. She asked Peter "Which experiment do you work on?" He was much amused, so I introduced her to Peter Higgs and there were smiles all round. Peter and I met for a late dinner in CERN Restaurant 1 and the same young student smiled at us from her table. When we had almost finished our meal and we were drinking coffee, the same student came over and asked Peter to sign her laboratory notebook. Almost immediately a queue of about 50–60 formed at our table, all waiting for selfies and autographs. Peter kindly obliged most but was clearly very tired and I eventually had to interrupt and take him away.

CERN 3 July 2012

The next day, Tuesday 3 July, we were protected by Jane Mackenzie, UK Liaison Officer at CERN. We had breakfast in the UK Liaison Office and Jane booked a lunch off campus. On the way, Peter was invited to meet international school pupils who were meeting at CERN. On our way to meet them, James Gillis intercepted us and gave Peter the press release that would be released the next day after the seminar. Peter and I had lunch with a large group of University of Edinburgh colleagues. In the afternoon, Peter Higgs was taken for a filmed interview that would also be released after the seminar. As he sat down, he was asked "Have you read the press release?" Unfortunately, Peter had had no time to read it and so it was only then that he was made aware of what was to come the following day! On that Tuesday evening, we were kindly invited for dinner by John Ellis at his home, along with former CERN Director-General Chris Llewellyn-Smith of the University of Oxford. We all shared a bottle of champagne, and the bottle is now held by the Science Museum in London.

The CERN seminar 4 July 2012

The day of the CERN special seminar, Wednesday 4 July 2012, was an incredible event for all, with students and others queueing overnight for a place. Apparently, a fire alarm was set off, but the queue refused to leave and the attending pompiers eventually gave up and let them stay. Jane Mackenzie took great care of us, and we had the use of a private room close to the auditorium. Security guards were outside to keep order, whilst Peter Higgs and I sat together, under the care of Jane Mackenzie.

The announcements of the results, by Fabiola Gianotti for ATLAS and Joe Incandela for CMS, were each met with standing ovations accompanied by whoops of delight the likes of which had never been seen before (Fig. 9). As the seminar ended, Peter was asked by the Director-General, Rolf Dieter Heuer, if he had expected this discovery, Peter replied, "Well it had to be there, but I did not expect it to be found in my lifetime!". It was, after all, 48 years since his 1964 papers [1, 2].



Fig. 9: Peter Higgs at the CERN seminar on 4 July 2012. © CERN

Peter had to be escorted as we moved from the auditorium to the following press conference room, as the media crowd filled the corridor, walking backwards as we advanced towards them. The camera and microphone operators filled the doorway. We were diverted and escorted in through a side door. At the end of the press conference, Peter was asked to comment, but he replied “It is not for me to comment. This is the day for the experimentalists and what they have so magnificently achieved”. That was a mark of Peter’s respect for what many thousands had so successfully undertaken.

Back to Edinburgh

We had lunch afterwards in our private room near the auditorium where we talked to CMS colleagues, Joe Incandela and Ian Shipsey. Ian was a former Edinburgh postgraduate working on the NA31 experiment¹³. Ian became Head of Physics at Oxford University but sadly died far too young in September 2024. Later that afternoon, Jane Mackenzie led us to our car as we left for our EasyJet flight to Edinburgh. Jane suggested that we should celebrate with prosecco on our flight back. Peter turned down prosecco in favour of a beer and choose a can of Fuller’s London Pride. The empty can was collected and is lost for good. I shared a half-bottle of prosecco with a young female postgraduate from the University of Glasgow returning from CERN.

Edinburgh press conference 6 July 2012

On Friday 6 July a press conference was held back in Edinburgh when it was announced that a Higgs Centre for Theoretical Physics was to be established. When Peter was asked if he had celebrated with champagne after the seminar, he pointed out that he had chosen a beer. At that point I passed him a Fuller’s London Pride which I had brought with me! We did all share champagne at the lunch afterwards!

¹³[Wikipedia article about the NA31 experiment.](#)

The Royal Society of Edinburgh exhibition “From Maxwell to Higgs”

The Royal Society of Edinburgh (RSE) was concerned that Peter might be awarded a Nobel prize in 2012 and commissioned myself and David Saxon of the University of Glasgow to write and design a 13-panel exhibition for the Upper Gallery in their headquarters in George Street, Edinburgh. The resultant “From Maxwell to Higgs” was officially opened by RSE Patron, the Duke of Edinburgh, on 26 September 2012. He was shown round the exhibition and, despite his equerry urging him to leave, persisted in seeing all the panels. A copy of the exhibition is in the James Clerk Maxwell Buildings at the University of Edinburgh.

The first “Audience with Peter Higgs”

Peter was now in great demand for interviews and comments. A student society, the Edinburgh University Young Student Researchers Association (EUYSRA), asked if Peter would give a lecture, and this resulted in an “Audience with Peter Higgs”. This turned into a talk shared by Peter Higgs and me, along with Victoria Martin and Francesca Garay Walls. Peter had been involved in my appointment; we had both lectured to Victoria as an undergraduate and Victoria had mentored Francesca who was from Chile, on the ATLAS experiment. As a result, the subtitle of the lecture was “Four generations of particle physicists”. The EUYSRA event, held on 30 October 2012, was so overwhelmed that it had to be moved from a lecture theatre holding 150 to one that held 350! This was the beginning of a series of such events.

Cosmo Caixa, Barcelona 6 November 2012

In Barcelona on 6 November 2012, we held a repeat “Audience with Peter Higgs” in the Cosmo Caixa science centre, which held 300. The event was streamed in English, Spanish and Catalan to a virtual audience of 5000. At the end of the lecture Xavier Serra, of the Guineu craft brewery, appeared clinking newly bottled and labelled Higgs Boson Ale (Fig. 10).

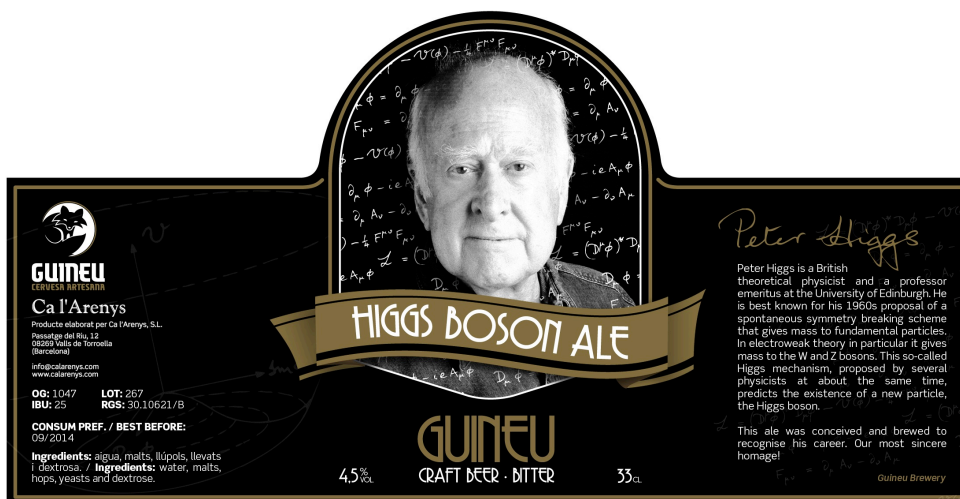


Fig. 10: The label of the “Higgs Boson Ale” produced by the Guineu craft brewery.

The next day we were hosted for lunch at a tapas and craft beer bar. The people involved became good friends and they later joined Peter in Oviedo in Spain and travelled to Plockton in Scotland.

New Years Honours list 2012

On 26 December 2012, in the British New Years Honours list, Peter Higgs was made a Companion of Honour, and I was awarded Member of the Order of the British Empire (MBE). Peter delayed his investiture at the Palace of Holyroodhouse in Edinburgh until July 2014, as he had promised Nino Zichichi that he would travel to Erice in July 2013.

Nonino Prize “To a master of our time” 2013

There were memorable trips with Peter to Nobel-like prize ceremonies, one of them in northern Italy. On 26 January 2013, the Nonino Prize ceremony was held in the Nonino family’s grappa factory in Ronchi di Percoto, where Peter was given the Nonino award “*Maestro del nostro tempo*”—“To a master of our time”. The Nonino family certainly know how to host a party in a distillery! The family kept in touch with Peter and sent annual presents of their exclusive grappas.

More “Audiences with Peter Higgs”

Between 2 May and 7 May 2013, the “Audience with Peter Higgs” went on an extended trip to Ireland, presenting to about 80 at the Royal Irish Academy in Dublin: to 200 at Maynooth University and to about 150 at Queen’s University Belfast. On 20 June 2013 the largest “Audience with Peter Higgs” was presented by the original speakers at the McEwan Hall, Edinburgh, full to its capacity of 900.

Erice June 2013

On 28 June 2013, Peter and I set off for Erice, flying from Edinburgh to Palermo via Paris and Rome. On arrival at Rome, as we disembarked, we were surprised to be met by a limousine and were given VIP treatment. Our passports were collected, for our onward travel to Palermo to be taken care of. We entered the airport via a side door and were deposited in an Alitalia VIP lounge where we were taken care of. As time passed, we became somewhat concerned and our minder returned with our passports in hand, ushering us quickly back to the door we had entered. Unfortunately, things then began to get chaotic. There was a carabinieri at the door, who refused to allow us to leave through it. Our minder became agitated and wandered around the room waving the passports in the air and speaking on his mobile phone. He ignored our pleas to give us our passports and take us to our gate. After a considerable time, he told us we had to do just that. He dropped us off at the gate and promptly disappeared. It became clear that the passengers boarding in front of us had taken our seats and we had missed our flight. Worse was to follow as the next two flights were full, and we ended up being allocated seats on the last flight to Palermo. The VIP lounge closed shortly afterwards, and we were asked to leave. We did eventually get to Palermo that evening, but not thanks to the VIP treatment. No-one admitted blame for arranging this chaos!

Prince of Asturias Awards, Oviedo October 2013

In Oviedo in October 2013, for the Prince of Asturias Awards, Peter's guests included Jane Mackenzie, friends from Cosmo Caixa and friends from the Guineu craft brewery. This group became known as 'Team Higgs Oviedo'. We stayed in the same hotel as Prince Felipe and his wife Letizia. They were extremely warm and friendly, and we shared several jokes. On Peter's death in April 2024, as the King and Queen of Spain, they sent a very generous memorial tribute to Peter's family.

Nobel announcement 8 October 2013: Where's Peter?

Peter had not expected a Nobel award in 2012 as he thought that would already have been decided. However, he expected that it might be made on 8 October 2013, and he decided he did not wish the media attention that would follow. He planned to be on his favoured West Coast of Scotland at a place he would not divulge. A team of colleagues in the School of Physics and Astronomy at Edinburgh were tasked to staff several phones. Many of us gathered in the Higgs Centre for Theoretical Physics to watch the announcement and this was much delayed. Immediately, when it was announced that Peter was sharing the Nobel Prize in Physics 2013 with François Englert, we left to staff the phones. The team took many enquiries and gave phone interviews. Some of us had to break off and filmed interviews for television news channels. By 5:00 pm we had to call it a day and adjourned to celebrate at a local inn. I was collected by my brother John, who was visiting, and I arrived back home to celebrate with my wife Catherine and sister-in-law Betty, who were already celebrating. Catherine later answered the phone and exclaimed "Peter, where are you?". Peter apparently replied, "I am at home of course". It transpired that Peter had been unable to drive as his car, which had lain unused for six months, would not start. He thought of travelling away by train, but that was not going to work out. Instead, Peter had left home, before the announcement had been expected, to a newish restaurant/bar, The Vintage, that served nice seafood and craft ales in Leith. He returned home on foot, taking in an exhibition at a local art gallery. He was nearing home on Heriot Row when a car squealed to a sudden halt and an ex-neighbour got out and shouted "Peter, my daughter called me from London. Congratulations on your award!". Peter told me that his reply was "What award". The Higgs was once again found!

Preparing for Stockholm

The Nobel announcement, on 8 October 2013, set in motion the arrangements for Stockholm later in the year. I was contacted by Peter's Nobel attendant, Ola Pihil, and he and I made most of the arrangements, including such detail as his measurements for his Nobel attire and the menu for his Nobel guests' lunch in the Grand Hotel Stockholm. Peter kindly invited as one of his guests, Kathleen Graham, Robert Brout's widow.

A “massive” mistake

Ahead of travelling to Stockholm I read the paper on the Nobel website “Scientific background on the Nobel Prize in Physics 2013” which showed the equation of motion of the leftover scalar boson. This first release described this as that of a ‘massless scalar’ which it clearly was not. Lars Brink replied that this had been proof-read many times and had not been picked up. In the final release this “massive” mistake disappeared (Fig. 11).

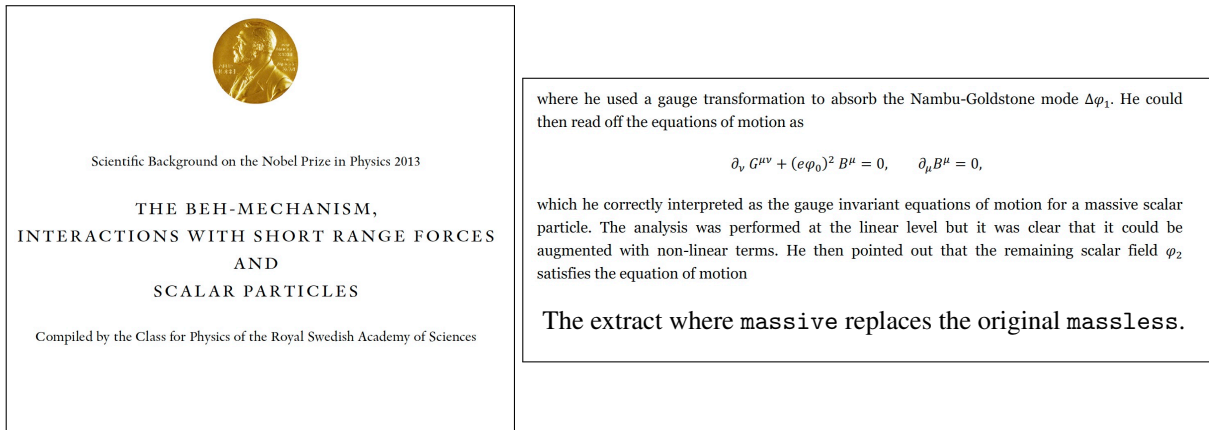


Fig. 11: Correction of the typo in the Nobel scientific background paper.

Collider exhibition 12 November 2013

On 12 November 2013, Peter and I were guests at the opening of the London Science Museum’s particle physics exhibition “Collider”. We discovered that Fuller’s of Chiswick had picked up on earlier news and donated a large batch of their London Pride ale labelled ‘Professor Peter Higgs, Nobel Prize winner 2013’.

Awards for a “Gang of Three”

On 28 November 2013, there was an extraordinary University graduation ceremony. The Royal Society of Edinburgh presented Tom Kibble¹⁴ with its Royal Medal; François Englert¹⁵ was awarded a University of Edinburgh honorary degree and Peter Higgs was awarded an honorary degree from the Free University of Brussels.

¹⁴[Sir Thomas Walter Bannerman Kibble](#) (1932–2016) was a British theoretical physicist. He is noted for his work in the development of theories about the Higgs boson.

¹⁵[François Englert](#) is a Belgian theoretical physicist. He shared the 2013 Nobel Physics Prize with Peter Higgs.

The journey to Stockholm

The journey to Stockholm proved to be hectic. Peter turned down an invitation to visit 10 Downing Street, as his schedule was already full. Peter and I had to travel first to London on 4 December 2013, to attend a special lunch for British Nobel laureates at the Swedish Ambassador's residence. From there we took a taxi to our hotel where Peter was immediately upgraded to a VIP suite, so we became separated in the hotel. Peter was interviewed that afternoon by a national newspaper. As the journalist and crew had avoided travelling to Edinburgh, we cut a deal that they would take us to dinner. That turned out to be a continuation of the interview as the dinner conversation was recorded!! The following morning, we were to travel to the BBC studios for Peter to be interviewed by Jim Al-Khalili for his programme "The Life Scientific". I could not find Peter at breakfast. When I went to the reception, a taxi driver appeared saying he was to take just myself to go to the BBC. When I finally arrived at the BBC, I was asked where Peter was. It turned out that Peter had been taken to the VIP breakfast room which I was not allowed into. This was not to be the only time that VIP treatment was to cause chaos and upset carefully prepared plans. A taxi had to be sent to retrieve Peter. During his interview, Jim asked Peter "Can you explain the Higgs boson in one sentence?". Peter looked aghast and simply said "No". I think this is why Jim, when asked later what his worst interview was, he said it was with Peter Higgs. Much later Jim, when asked what his best interview was, gave the exact same response! We rushed to our taxi and took the Heathrow Express to catch our direct flight to Stockholm. This would be the start of a very busy Nobel week.

Peter Higgs' Nobel lecture 8 December 2013

Peter's Nobel lecture on 8 December "Evading the Goldstone theorem" included the 1960 tale of grandfather clock. In the audience was the British Ambassador to Sweden and his wife. The following day we were lunch guests at the Ambassador's residence in Stockholm. At the end of lunch, Peter was invited to take part in a small ceremony and was taken into the hallway. Behind him was a grandfather clock and he was asked to open it and reach in. So, 53 years later, a re-enactment took place (Fig. 12)!

The Nobel ceremony 10 December 2013

For the Nobel awards ceremony on 10 December, Peter and his male guests were all fitted with the official Nobel formal attire. It was probably best described as "Downton Abbey dinner attire". The Nobel laureates were provided with patent leather shoes which proved uncomfortable. Peter joined with François Englert in breaking the Nobel rules, but they got away with it. My brother John watching television texted me to say he could see my wife Catherine sitting next to her butler! At the Nobel banquet that evening I was sitting next to Tejinder and Vatsala Virdee. Vatsala asked me in conversation "Do you watch Downton Abbey?". I looked down at my formal attire and smilingly said "Quite frankly my dear, I think I am in it".



Fig. 12: The re-enactment of the grandfather clock incident. Copyright © Nobel Prize Outreach 2013. Photo: Alex Ljungdahl.

A song for Peter

After the Nobel banquet Peter retired to the Grand Hotel, whilst some of us took up the invitation for the traditional party at the Karolinska Institute. Jane Mackenzie and I had previously written new lyrics to the Beatles song ‘When I’m 64’ (Fig. 13). Ola had arranged for a local acapella group to sing this. Sadly, Peter missed this.

Nobel week remembered

The Nobel week was full of lunches, dinners, concerts, meetings and receptions (Fig. 14). There was a gathering at the Nordic Museum, full of Nobel guests and school children. A crowd gathered around Peter, with one student asking the often-asked question “How do you get a Nobel Prize”. Peter’s answer was always inspiring but always ended with the same phrase. By then I knew what was coming and told those at the rear of the group that he would say “but then you need to get lucky”. When he did, they all turned to me and laughed and then applauded Peter.

Will you still read me when I am 94?

When I get older losing my hair,
49 years from now,
Will you be sending me a Nobel cheer
Congratulations, bottle of beer?

As I'm still going at ninety-three
Will you reward me more,
Will you still heed me, will you still read me,
After 19 sixty-four?

oo oo oo oo oo oo oo ooooo
You'll be wiser too, (ah ah ah ah ah)
And if the Nobel calls,
I'll share the fun with you.

I would be happy signing a card,
for your friends at home.
They could read my paper by the fireside,
While far away those particles collide

Walking and concerts, looking at art,
Who could ask for more?
Will you still heed me, will you still read me,
After 19 sixty-four?

Every Easter we can rent a cottage
On the Isle of Skye, if it's not too dear
We shall scrimp and save
Grandchildren on your knee
Jo Coltrane, Bonnie Kemplay

Send me a preprint, drop me a mail,
Stating point of view.
Indicate precisely what you meant to say
Yours sincerely, waiting away.

Give me a medal, and a banquet
Smiles for evermore
Will you still heed me, will you still read me,
After 19 sixty-four?

Lyrics by Alan Walker & Jane MacKenzie

Whoo!

Fig. 13: Lyrics adapted for Peter: ‘Will you still read me when I am 94?’. © Alan Walker & Jane Mackenzie with thanks to the Beatles/ Sony Music Publishing



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Fig. 14: Peter Higgs and guests during the Nobel Week festivities.

The Plockton gathering 18–22 April 2014

At the Easter weekend of 18–22 April 2014, the last of the talks “An Audience with Peter Higgs” took place on Plockton in Scotland, near the Isle of Skye. It was given to a general audience on Easter Sunday and then on Easter Monday to Plockton High School with senior pupils traveling from Portree, Wick and Inverness. We were house guests of Jane Mackenzie who was by now a great friend. We were joined by our Spanish friends from Barcelona, so Team Higgs Oviedo became “Team Higgs Plockton”. They brought with them another batch of Higgs Boson Ale with the label jokingly announcing that it was from the Higgs & Walker Brewing Company. The local Plockton pub had on tap a special “Partic Ale” celebrating that Peter Higgs was in town. Peter had already been out in a local fishing boat, where a photograph captured him at its wheel (Fig. 15). The “Higgs Bosun” was found that weekend in Plockton.



Fig. 15: The “Team Higgs Plockton” gathering (top) and Peter at the helm of a fishing boat (bottom).
Courtesy of Jane Mackenzie, Plockton.

Honorary degree from University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the Higgs blue plaque

In Edinburgh on 3 March 2015 Peter was awarded an Honorary Degree by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill where he had written his longer paper on the properties scalar boson that was published in 1966 [3]. Afterwards an Institute of Physics blue plaque was unveiled outside the building in which he had written his two 1964 papers [1,2], see Fig. 16.



Fig. 16: Unveiling the Institute of Physics blue plaque in Edinburgh. © The University of Edinburgh

The story of Conor Ransome

Over the years, we were used to large numbers of mail and email requests for Peter's signature and signed photographs. There was one such request which stands out. So, I would like to share a story that could only have happened through my association with Peter and the opportunities that flowed from that.

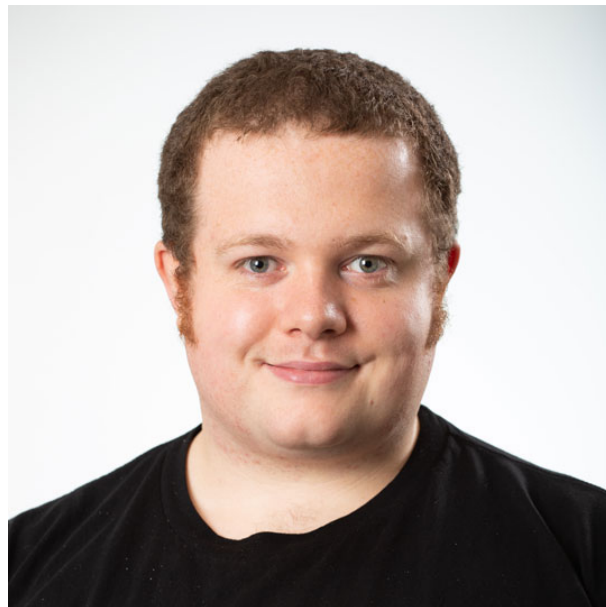


Fig. 17: Conor Ransome. © Conor Ransome

One evening, at home in Edinburgh, I received, on behalf of Peter, a text from Deborah Ransome in Doncaster, which is close to my own birthplace in South Yorkshire. Debbie's iPad message asked Peter if he would sign a 21st birthday card for her son Conor who was an undergraduate at the University of Durham, taking a degree in physics and astronomy (Fig. 17). What was extraordinary about this

message was that Debbie went on to say that “Conor was not expected to live beyond the age of 12 months as he had a very rare genetic disorder”. I was told later that this was chondrodysplasia punctata. My late wife Catherine immediately volunteered to buy a card and Peter agreed to sign it.

However, this request came just before my trip with Peter to Oviedo, where François Englert would be present. I emailed Rolf Dieter Heuer and asked if he could arrange a VIP CERN visit for Conor and family. The card was duly signed by Peter, François and Rolf ahead of Conor’s birthday on 3 November 2013. Peter had been invited to share the University of Durham annual Collingwood lecture on 5 November 2013. Professors Nigel Glover and Anne Taormina who were organising this event, agreed to invite Conor to the lecture. Meanwhile, I suggested to Debbie and her husband Sheldon that they should also attend. Reserved places were set up so they could sit together. Conor, who knew nothing of these arrangements, was surprised to meet his parents in the queue! At the end of the lecture Carlos Frenk, who was chairing the lecture, announced that Peter had a card for someone who had had a recent birthday and Peter duly presented the card to Conor. At the same time, I placed on the document projector the letter, signed by Rolf Heuer, inviting Conor and his family for their VIP visit to CERN. Conor’s surprise went down very well with the audience.

After the lecture, I met again Debbie and Sheldon and then met Conor for the first time. It was only then that I fully understood the extent of his disabilities and the operations that he had survived in his childhood. Debbie, Conor and his younger brother Finn did indeed have their VIP visit to CERN, whilst Sheldon stayed at home to care for daughter Niamh. Due to illness, I could not join them, but I have stayed in touch with the family ever since. In 2022 Conor completed a PhD in astrophysics at Liverpool John Moores University, spending time at the Isaac Newton telescope in the Canary Islands. He was a postdoctoral scholar at Pennsylvania State University and since August 2023 he has been a postdoctoral fellow at the Harvard–Smithsonian Center for Astrophysics. I have enormous admiration for both Conor and his wonderful family. It was my extremely good fortune to have known Peter Higgs, and it is that association that made created this wonderful opportunity and the resultant friendship.

Remembering Peter

During our many years of travels together, I got to know Peter very well. He had fantastic recall and great depth of knowledge on many subjects. He was always modest and very kind to all, especially younger people. His passing was very sad, but we should all remember him for the person he was. He will be missed by many. I remain good friends with his family, and it was both an extraordinary privilege and pleasure to know him. It would seem to me that I did indeed get exceedingly lucky!

Dr Alan Walker MBE D. hc FInstP, Edinburgh, 20 April 2025

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