John Gunn
1916 – 2002

John Gunn died on 26 July, aged 85. For many years he was a significant influence on British particle and nuclear physics, and its involvement in CERN.

From the age of 32, in 1949, Gunn held a professorial chair in theoretical physics at Glasgow University. During the early 1950s, three British universities were constructing particle accelerators in emulation of developments in the US; one of these was an electron synchrotron in Glasgow. Late on the scene, these machines never quite fulfilled the hopes of their proponents. However, they led to the more timely construction in the early 1960s of higher-energy accelerators – a proton machine at the Rutherford Appleton Laboratory, and an electron synchrotron at Daresbury in the north of England. Gunn took a notable part in the countrywide planning that led to these developments, and most significantly in that of the electron synchrotron. The synchrotron radiation from it later proved to have important applications in many other areas of science.

It was perhaps a second best for Gunn that the electron accelerator was sited in the north of England rather than in Scotland, but he and his experimental colleague Philip Dee (the initiator of the 1950s Glasgow synchrotron) were successful in getting finance to build a linear electron accelerator for nuclear physics research sited near Glasgow. Initially led by George Bishop, this had a long and successful research life.

Gunn’s influence continued with his appointment to the UK Science Research Council (SRC) from 1968 to 1972. At that time the question of building a much higher-energy European proton accelerator at CERN had arisen. The SRC Nuclear Physics Board oversaw both nuclear and particle physics in the UK, and advice to the government on CERN came largely from the chairman of that board and the SRC. Gunn was the chairman at the time the UK government decided that Britain should join the new CERN project.

From 1973 to 1981 Gunn was a member of the University Grants Committee (UGC), the main financier of UK universities. Here he was a forceful advocate of the so-called “dual support system”, which meant that both the UGC and the SRC should directly support scientific research in the universities. Here he and others were responsible for beneficial reformation in scientific (and other) research grants from the UGC.

In the 1960s, no longer very active in hands-on physics research himself, Gunn was able to use his administrative position at Glasgow University to found three theoretical physics research groups – particle, nuclear and plasma – in the physics department. Humorously communicative, and helpful through his wide experience, his company was much appreciated by his friends and acquaintances in many institutions.

Gordon Moorehouse.