

Graduation 2007 Honorary Graduate - Oration

Oration for Honorary Graduand James Dodds

Orator: Peter Frank

Chancellor, Senate has resolved that the degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon JAMES DODDS.

James Dodds was just fifteen when he first went to sea, in the Baltic trader Solvig. Soon after, he was apprenticed as a shipwright at Walter Cook and Son's yard at Maldon. In the four years that he was there, he not only acquired many of the skills involved in building wooden boats, he also came to appreciate the subtle, flowing lines of the craft themselves. It was while working at the yard in Maldon that he came to realise that what he really wanted to be was an artist (but without losing that special affinity with the sea and those who sailed upon it). So, in 1976, at the age of nineteen, he enrolled at the Colchester School of Art, where he was afterwards remembered by his tutor as being exceptionally hardworking and determined. Dedication paid off, and a year later he went up to London as a student at Chelsea School of Art, and, despite acute dyslexia (a condition that was then little understood), this was followed by three years at the Royal College of Art, where, in 1983, he was the recipient of the Anstruther Award.

It was while he was a student in London that James seized the opportunity to visit the great galleries of the capital, as a result of which he became an admirer of several somewhat different artists. One was the eighteenth-century painter John Cleveley the Elder, who set out as an apprentice joiner and later worked at the Royal Dockyard at Deptford. Today, many of his paintings hang in the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich, as do works by his son, also a shipwright, John Cleveley the Younger.

Another inspiration was Stanley Spencer, an official war artist, whose paintings of the Clyde shipyard workers made a deep impression upon James. But, even more, he was struck by Spencer's intimate depictions of his native village of Cookham in Berkshire. These painters both prefigured and inspired two of James Dodds' principal concerns: ships and the sea, and the community to which he belonged.

James Dodds was born in Brightlingsea, a Cinque Port that lies but a few miles downriver from Wivenhoe, and it was to his birthplace that he returned following graduation from the Royal College of Art. His early creative work was marked by a broad range of subject, much of it maritime, but one that also demonstrated knowledge of, and interest in, myth and legend.

It was in 1984 that James bought a splendid Victorian printing machine with which he set up his own Jardine Press. From about that year, too, his work began to be exhibited ever more widely. Abroad, his paintings were hung in Germany, Russia and the United States, while at home, as well as individual works at the Royal Academy summer exhibitions, there were shows in Colchester, Ipswich, King's Lynn and at the Aldeburgh festival, to mention but a few. However, it was an exhibition here at the University of Essex Gallery in 2001 that was to provide a perhaps critical impulse to his growing fame. Encouraged by a great admirer of his work, Professor Thomas Puttfarcken (who, as we have heard, sadly, died suddenly last year and who, had he lived, would surely have been delivering this oration today), the exhibition was entitled 'The Blue Boat' and was named after a superb depiction of a wooden boat, deceptively simple in its azure isolation,

yet authentic and subtle at the same time. It was the forerunner of a stream of creativity that today, six years on, continues unabated.

It was the late Edgar J. March who some forty years ago drew attention to the imminent demise of our traditional inshore craft in the face of the ubiquitous internal combustion engine. In his classic work 'Inshore Craft of Britain', March argued that a way of life and types of boat that had existed for centuries had almost disappeared: sixerns, scaffies, fifies, cobles (cobles in Yorkshire; cobels in Northumberland), bawlies and lerrets – all were on the point of being lost irretrievably. Beginning with the Blue Boat, James Dodds has recorded many of these craft, not such as a marine architect would do, but in an artistic fashion that is both precise and authentic.

Out of the Blue Boat grew the exhibition 'Shipshape', which opened at the Minories Gallery in Colchester in 2001, before going on tour, taking in public galleries that ranged geographically from Whitstable, the Isle of Wight, the National Maritime Museum in Cornwall to Thurso and Wick in the north of Scotland. The culmination was an acclaimed showing at the National Maritime Museum at Greenwich. Since then there has been a sell-out exhibition at Messum's Fine Art, in Cork Street, London.

To gain a better sense of James Dodds' work, members of the audience might wish to visit the University Gallery before they leave the campus and the Gallery is immediately facing the exit from this auditorium. There they will find a small, but representative, exhibition of his recent work (as well as examples of his woodcuts of local scenes). On hand in the Gallery is a most informative leaflet by Ian Collins and that's available and tells a great deal more about James and his art than is possible in a brief oration such as this. Also on show is a beautifully evocative video-film.

James Dodds is involved in community activity in Wivenhoe, where he now lives; in Brightlingsea, in Colchester, and beyond, and that activity is perhaps exemplified by James' role in the restoration of the historic Essex smack 'Pioneer'. He has made illustrations of Benjamin Britten's opera 'Peter Grimes' and, more recently, has collaborated with Katrina Porteous on a book of poems about the fishermen of Aldeburgh. In short, he is widely admired as a person, as a community activist, and, above all, as an artist of distinction.

Chancellor, I present to you JAMES DODDS.