

Graduation 2011

Oration for Honorary Graduand Sir John Ashworth

Orator: Professor Jules Pretty

Chancellor, The Senate has resolved that the Degree of Doctor of the University be conferred upon Sir John Ashworth.

For all of you here today, graduation is a great celebration. You have distinguished yourselves and made your families proud. In all, there are now more than 11,000 students and 2000 staff at the University of Essex, and it is a mature institution approaching its 50th anniversary. All organisations start small, and require leaders to help them grow. John Ashworth is one of those early leaders, having been appointed as the founding Professor of Biology in 1974.

In those days, the department was located in the stables behind Wivenhoe House Hotel, which of course has its own distinguished history - it was painted by Constable and was the headquarters for the SAS in the Second World War. Today, it is being transformed into a new Hotel School. John, though, helped build a new department, appointing academics some of whom are still in a Biological Sciences department that now has 890 students and turns over £11.5 million. One current member of staff remembers being interviewed on a chilly, grey day in April 1975 in those stables, and then notes how John was an extraordinarily supportive mentor and leader.

John's scientific expertise at the time was developmental biology, cell differentiation and particularly slime moulds. We all have our specialisms - some stranger than others. But *Dictyostelium*, or the slime moulds, are found all over the world - in lawns, on forest floors, on logs, and especially in classrooms and laboratories. They are strange collective bags of amoebae encased in a skin - but they seem to exhibit intelligence. If you pull them apart, they reform. Others differentiate to take on complementary jobs. A bit like a university really. John Bonner at Princeton studied them for 70 years, and says there is still much to learn. I suppose that is a good lesson for us all. John published two books on the slime moulds in the 1970s.

In 1976, John took his career in science and university leadership to the Cabinet Office, where he worked on secondment as the Chief Scientific Adviser until 1981. A member of our staff who has retired this summer recalls a possibly apocryphal story about his recruitment. John has always been a keen sailor, and while at Essex he did not own a car, preferring to walk between Wivenhoe and here. But when he was being considered for the Cabinet Office post, a secret service man came to interview one of his post-docs about why the departmental head had no car. There had to be a secret reason, supposed the spy; surely not because he enjoyed walking! Even then, perhaps, walking was considered odd behaviour.

In 1981, John was appointed Vice-Chancellor at the University of Salford. This was a leap into a very challenging position. At the time, the Prime Minister of the day, a certain Margaret Thatcher, had decided to change university funding (does this sound familiar?). She resolved to cut funding to universities as a whole by 15%, but critically these cuts were not to be spread evenly - Aston, Bradford and Salford were fingered, and Salford fared the worst with a 44% cut.

John remembers the dreadful atmosphere at the time he arrived. "I was told that there were some members of staff who just sat weeping in their offices, refusing to come out." Of course, what he didn't say is that this is what happens in universities at the best of times! Under Sir John's ten year leadership, Salford became stronger, diversified, learning to work closely with industry, and providing an excellent experience for students.

John then took on the post of Director at the LSE to the mid-1990s, and then went on to have a distinguished later career in steering the health service. He has been Chair of Barts and London NHS Trust, Deputy Chair of the Institute of Cancer Research, and now is on the board of Colchester's Hospital University Foundation Trust. He has also been a Director of Granada TV and the Granada Group, chair of the British Library Board for five years, and since 2002 President of the Council for Assisting Refugee Academics (CARA), which has been providing a vital service for refugee academics since the 1930s.

Back in Wivenhoe, John is an active member of the local community, including as a member of the management committees of the Nottage Maritime Institute and the Wivenhoe Sailing Club. Though he was born and schooled in Devon, studied at Oxford and Leicester, John is very much now one of Wivenhoe's famous sons. His favourite recreation of sailing seems to me to be entirely appropriate for a town that has itself produced so many famous sailors as well as crews for the America's Cup.

In 2008, John received a knighthood in the Queen's New Year Honours - an extremely well-deserved recognition of a long career in public service.

Today, as you know, 5700 students are graduating. This is a measure of the success of the university, of its growth, and its trajectory. But all institutions need to start somewhere, and it is a great pleasure to honour someone who did so much to help nurture those early shoots of success.

We are delighted that Sir John has accepted our offer of an honorary degree.

Chancellor, I present to you Sir John Ashworth.