

Professor John Allen

Mr Chancellor

Let me begin my presentation of our honorary graduand with a personal reminiscence. Late one summer in the early 1980s a visitor, casually dressed in shorts and sandals, appeared unannounced at my office door. After introducing himself as, simply, John Allen, he presented me with what looked like a very scruffy and unremarkable collection of pottery sherds which he had recovered from the Severn Estuary in south-east Wales. A fairly instant commentary was required and, yes, the material was Roman. An invitation was instantly offered to show me the site where the material had been found. Fascinating though the context was, indicating Roman settlement and exploitation of a marginal, coastal environment, yet more significant was not so much the archaeology, but what the latter could contribute to our understanding of the development of the saltmarshes, which had formed along the margins of the Severn Estuary. Here was archaeological data contributing to a much larger story of the evolution of a great, estuarine landscape extending from the city of Gloucester to the Bristol Channel, of the interface between land and sea. That first encounter began a collaboration which has continued to this day. Only later did I realise that my casual visitor was not just any researcher, but a Professor (of Geology), unassuming, very persuasive, precise, and of extraordinary distinction: a Fellow of the most distinguished learned society in the world, The Royal Society, established by the English monarch, Charles II in 1660. I also realised that shorts were 'de rigueur' for geologists, even in the depths of winter, though perhaps not today!

John Allen's career is, indeed, a most remarkable one. He took a 1st class degree in Geology at the University of Sheffield in 1955 and then proceeded to research for a PhD. However, notwithstanding declining to submit his thesis for examination, his outstanding qualities were recognised by the Professor of Geology here at Reading, another, but unrelated Professor Allen, with the award of the Martin Lees Research Fellowship in 1958. So began a career at the University of Reading which has continued to this day: appointment as lecturer in Geology in 1961 was followed by promotion to Reader in 1967 and to a Personal Professorship of Geology in 1972 at the age of 39. In 1988 he was appointed Director of the newly formed Postgraduate Research Institute in Sedimentology, a Reading specialisation which very much reflected his own extraordinary research achievements. The flagship MSc trained many outstanding students, among whom are leading figures of the world's oil industry. Emeritus Professor since 2001, John is now in his sixth decade of teaching and researching at, and for, this University.

Over this period of more than 50 years his career has embraced two very different, but not altogether unrelated, academic fields: geology and archaeology. Indeed his contribution has been to

show just how closely related they are. The geological career has seen fundamental research on the processes of rivers and their sedimentary and geomorphological products, combining the empirical through, for example, the study of the Old Red Sandstone formations of Devonian age, with theoretical modelling of sedimentary processes and laboratory experimentation using elaborate and space-hungry equipment designed to his own specification. From the early 1980s research shifted to the sedimentology and geological history of relatively recent geological contexts - approximately the last 10,000 years - of the estuaries and tidal embayments of western Britain and France, particularly the Severn Estuary of south-west Britain. With his research on the created landscapes of estuarine coasts new understanding has been gained of the interaction between human and natural forces in shaping these landscapes and predictive models have been developed.

While there is a tendency to assume that this sometimes very abstract, 'blue sky' research has no relevance to the modern world, this is certainly not the case with Professor Allen's work. From that first appointment at Reading, which involved researching the geological history of the Niger basin to inform the development of the Nigerian oil industry, John Allen's fundamental work has been crucial to our understanding of the planet and our ability to manage its resources, and the natural forces associated with its evolution, to the benefit of mankind. To take two, recent, headline-catching, major catastrophic events, the flooding of the Indus valley in Pakistan and the release of contaminated, industrial waste into a tributary of the Danube in Hungary, our understanding of how those rivers and their sediments behave, and will behave in the future, owes much to John Allen's research. Nearer to home, in Britain, the planning and decision-making around the proposed, but presently abandoned, Severn Barrage and other major developments such as the second Severn bridge have also benefited significantly from our honorary graduand's research.

The world-wide importance of John Allen's work has been recognised by many prestigious, international awards such as the election to the Fellowship of the Royal Society in 1979, the Lyell Medal in 1980, the Twenhofel Medal of the Society of Economic Palaeontologists and Mineralogists in 1987, the G K Warren Prize of the American Academy of Sciences in 1990, and the Penrose Medal of the Geological Society of America in 1996.

To conclude this presentation, I want to draw particular attention to the key role he continues to play in developing the field of geoarchaeology and to his continuing contribution to the first ever Masters programme in that subject at Reading; he is still teaching; he is still leading field classes. And then there are his publications. John distinguishes his work from those of others with the name of Allen by using all three of his initials: J. R. L. Such has been his productivity that some believe that there are three Allens: Allen, J; Allen, R; and Allen, L. Although nudging towards his ninth decade,

the last five years have seen continued, extraordinary productivity with four, path-breaking monographs on 18th to 20th century church architecture and building histories, locally in Berkshire and Hampshire, together with an average of a mere 6 research papers a year - a productivity which is the envy of the vast majority of academics at the height of their careers!

Mr Chancellor, it is with great pleasure that I present to you, Emeritus Professor John Robert Lawrence Allen, for the honorary degree of Doctor of Science of this University.