

**MARY ROSAMUND BRIGGS &  
ELIZABETH LAWRENCE MASTEN HAMMILL**

**JOINT DCL**

Literacy, Mr Chancellor is the bedrock upon which our civilisation rests. Our own institution had its origins in the work of the monks on Lindisfarne who, with chilled fingers, transcribed the bible into their beautiful script. With apologies to our numerate colleagues in Mathematics and Statistics, it is the ability to read and write which is paramount. In my tenure as your Public Orator I have hoped to have an opportunity to celebrate an honorary graduand who embodies this fundamental truth and isn't it just the way, you wait five years and two arrive together.

Mary Briggs and Elizabeth Hammill are the chief executive and artistic and collections directors respectively of Seven Stories, an organisation they created 10 years ago to promote children's literature. They were dismayed that the writers and illustrators of children's books were largely ignored, even by the British Library. Their work has now achieved a physical embodiment; last August, Seven Stories the building opened on Newcastle's quayside, the only exhibition space in the country wholly dedicated to the work of children's writers and illustrators. Their award-

winning renovation of a grade II listed Victorian flour mill in the Ouseburn valley, and the creation of the unique world inside, cost £6.5 million and involved a host of donors and corporate sponsors, all captivated by the obvious love Elizabeth and Mary displayed for their subject.

Elizabeth came to Newcastle 35 years ago from her native New York where she worked as a primary teacher. As a naturalised Geordie “shinaa’s wot weer taak’n about” and as a mother she connected with local children, running a bookshop via their school. This led to an offer to run the children’s book section at the new Waterstone’s bookshop in the city and her career course was set.

Very few successful human endeavours are entirely the work of a single individual and so it is with Seven Stories. This has been a double act from its earliest days. Mary Briggs came from a background as a librarian to become head of the Library and Arts services for children in Gateshead and subsequently the Principal Planning and Development Officer for Newcastle Education Service. She had earned a reputation for getting things done but her organisational skills are not flawless; colleagues believe that the term disposable contact lenses should be dedicated to her ability to lose them.

Mary and Elizabeth first worked together in 1984 when they launched the Northern Children's Book Festival which has flourished ever since. In 1996 their discussions on the need for a national centre for children's literature led to them putting their money where their mouth was. A company was formed and they each put in £10. Others have made much more substantial donations but none have given more. The search for the ideal setting took many years but the wait was worth it. Any here who have not visited should make a date to do so. Adults don't have to be accompanied by children but it helps. From the Engine Room at the bottom to the atmospheric Artists Attic, the place is a delight. Visitors can explore the styles of children's story telling in spaces like the Topsy Turvy Room. Books are brought to life by frequent visits by famous authors and their donations, like the original script of *The Borrowers* which almost went out as "Under the Floor". Alan Ahlberg helped design the display of the books he wrote as a tribute to his late wife Janet whose exquisite illustrations led them to sell 17 million books, born of a love story which began on the night bus back to Sunderland in 1964. Children of all ages are captivated by the original hand written pages of Harry Potter, complete with J.K. Rowling's crossings out, doodles and coffee stains. The historic collection continues to grow and Elizabeth has switched her attention to its care while Mary ensures the thriving bookshop continues to support the venture.

Thirteen hundred years ago a nine year-old boy named Bede walked for the first time into the monastery at Jarrow, five miles east of here, and stayed the rest of his life. He is celebrated for creating the definitive historical works of the Dark Ages, when London and Edinburgh were a pair of non-descript villages and Cambridge was a field. He was inspired by the great collection of literary works assembled by his bishop Benedict Biscop. Without that library the Venerable Bede would have remained an unknown monk. Maybe as I speak, a child is picking up a book whose words and images will so inspire them that they will be launched like Bede on to a lifetime of discovery. Maybe that child will become a great writer or maybe he or she will simply become a wiser, more caring and fulfilled adult. Either way, we will owe a debt to that writer, just as we are in debt to Elizabeth Hammill and Mary Briggs for giving our city this unique structural tribute to those who help lift our children's eyes.

Mr Chancellor, I have great pleasure in commending to you Elizabeth Hammill and Mary Briggs for the award of Doctor of Civil Law *honoris causa*

**Citation by Professor John Burn**