

GEORGE HENRY GARDINER MITCHELL

Mr Chancellor

George Henry Gardiner Mitchell is one of a rare breed. A Newcastle University employee since 1957, he is the kind of person that forms the academic, technical and pastoral bedrock that has made, and continues to make, our University great and yet, he has managed to nurture major interests outside his professional life, to the great benefit of the North East of England.

It is befitting that his interest in engineering began whilst he was a pupil at a local Secondary Modern named after that great local engineer - Robert Stephenson. At 16 years of age, George Mitchell began his training in Wallsend Technical Institute, enrolling as an Apprentice at Newcastle University. During this time he served heavy industry in famous "institutions" of Tyneside: Swan Hunter, Vickers and Hawthorns. From the outset he used the skills he acquired in industry to advance our institution, by designing and manufacturing specialised equipment for in-house use. Not surprisingly, he rapidly became an invaluable member of staff.

After qualifying in 1962, George was awarded the Vice-Chancellor's Certificate of Proficiency for Engineering Technicians, and eventually took up an academic post within six years of starting his apprenticeship. George was hungry for knowledge, training in

Naval Architecture and Shipbuilding, and eventually becoming a corporate member of the Royal Institution of Naval Architects. Since 1977, George has been in receipt of an “exceptional grading” award, working as Senior Experimental Assistant in the Department of Marine Technology, where his work has formed the basis of a number of research programmes spanning decades. Far from being ephemeral “sound-bytes”, his published work includes several key documents that have stood the test of time, forming the basis of several British Standards.

George has produced over 40 reports and publications in his area of specialist expertise, presenting his findings around the world. Harris County in Texas USA clearly had great insight when they invested 67 million dollars in the Houston Astrodome, which was (and apologies for a marine pun), “filled to the gills” with 20,000 delegates for one of George’s presentations. Unfortunately George will be disappointed to hear that he has subsequently been up-staged by 67,925 Texans, who attended Wrestle-Mania X-seven at the same venue shortly afterwards although I am sure that George could rise to the occasion if given the opportunity in the future.

My own image of a successful Marine Engineer, is of a rather aloof, and (please forgive the pun) STERN individual more interested in the camshaft than camaraderie more focussed on propellers than people. However, when we are talking about George, nothing could be further from the truth. George is totally committed to the encouragement, direction and advancement of young people –

a view shared by staff and students alike. One close colleague stated unreservedly that “students both past and present adore him”. It is therefore no co-incidence that for the last decade, George has been the thrust and rudder behind the selection of undergraduate students in one of the largest departments in the Faculty of Engineering. His work has laid the foundations for a navy of Newcastle Marine Engineering Alumni, who have spread his enthusiasm, expertise and warmth across the seven seas.

Despite all of this, he has also ceaselessly continued on his path towards personal academic advancement. George clearly has tenacity and drive. He registered for an MPhil in 1987, and still considers his research degree to be “work in progress”. I can only imagine how much work has gone into this. It must now run into many volumes, perhaps ten or more. Paradoxically, this makes me rather grateful that George is not a member of my own Faculty of Medical Sciences. This means I cannot be his internal examiner who will undoubtedly be awestruck at the Titanic iceberg that lies beneath the surface when eventually invited to read George’s thesis!

Given the time commitment that he has given to our University, it is remarkable that George has had such a busy and effective life outside our red-brick perimeter. It is almost as if he had a parallel career but far from compromising his University role, it has brought complementary skills, and the University continues to reap the rewards. His colleagues comment that he is “a beacon of

sanity, full of common sense and balanced judgement". But this may not have always been the case

Many years ago George became convinced that he was being "stalked" by a series of men in long raincoats. He found this most unsettling. Could it be a collection of secret admirers, perhaps prospective students hoping for a place on the course? Was he being head-hunted by industrial partners that had frequently offered him jobs in the past? Were they talent scouts for Newcastle United? Or was he simply going insane? After much heartache and deliberation he asked a policeman friend to look into his predicament. It shortly became clear that George was indeed being followed as part of a formal police investigation they were "checking out" his credentials before he was invited to join the bench as a Justice of the Peace.

(Incidentally, the suggestion that he might be head-hunted by the "Toon Army" is not totally ridiculous. Few know this, but George was actually on the Newcastle United payroll for some time in his youth).

His clarity of thought and understanding of people have been tested over the years in his role as Mr Mitchell, JP, Chair of the North Tyneside Petty Division Bench. His fair but firm judgement was recognised by the Home Secretary through his appointment to the Criminal Justice Council, and his work on Northumbria Probation Committee reflects his ethos – offering encouragement and promoting rehabilitation to those who find themselves in difficult circumstances.

His enthusiasm for youth abounds, and this has been manifest in a very practical way both at, and away from the workplace. George has been heavily involved in Scouting throughout his life, and having worked his way up the ranks from bare-kneed “sixer”, he is now County Commissioner for Durham Scout County and is the Director of the Scout Development Trust. This interfaces with other work in the community, as Chair of his local Sports Council, and Governor of two local schools, his intimate knowledge of local business led to a series of highly successful fund-raising bids.

So why have we not heard about his many achievements outside the workplace? Even George’s closest professional colleagues comment on his modesty. First and foremost, George is a “family man”, and he sees this as his major achievement in life. His immediate family includes Margery, his wife of 34 years, and their Dentist son Neil but it is clear that George and Margery have many friends, young and old, who regularly call on “Auntie Marge” and “Uncle George”, making quite an extended family group. Having spent quite some time trying to find out about George “the man”, without actually meeting him, I have come to realise that these qualities – above all – are what has made him so invaluable to the Marine Engineering Department for over 50 years. I think it is fair to say that he sees the University and particularly the students as part of his extended family.

Mr Chancellor, George Henry Gardiner Mitchell has worked tirelessly for our University for over five decades, and apart from a brief spell of unexpected illness in the year 2000 (from which I am pleased he has made a full recovery), he had only three days sick leave from work since 1957. He has given truly remarkable service to our Institution. He is a pillar of the community, and has been the main bulkhead in the Department of Marine Engineering for decades. I therefore ask you to bestow upon him an Honorary Fellowship of Newcastle University.

Citation by Professor Patrick Chinnery