



FELLOWSHIP OF THE UNIVERSITY
HONORIS CAUSA

SARAH STEWART

8 MAY 2026

Chancellor Dharker,

Sarah Stewart has made an outstanding contribution to Newcastle University and to the North East through her impressive career in marketing, consultancy, and business development. In the corporate sector, she held increasingly prestigious positions at Proctor and Gamble, Deloitte, Price Waterhouse, and Sage Group plc, before becoming a renowned independent consultant for a range of organisations, and later CEO of the Newcastle Gateshead Initiative. Sarah holds the distinction of being the first woman to join the board of a FTSE 100 company, and has received many accolades for her work, most notably the award of OBE for services to the North East Economy in 2016. Importantly for us, as well as being a lay member of University Court 2014-2023, and Chair of Court Steering Committee 2018-2023, she played a key role in the development of Science City, now Newcastle Helix.

Science City was an ambitious project. When it began in 2005, Sarah was Deputy Chair of the International Centre for Life, and she was soon asked to become the Director of the stakeholder group that oversaw the initial masterplan. She developed a strong working relationship with Professor Chris Brink, our then Vice-Chancellor, while also navigating tougher moments, notably the 2008 financial crisis and the disbanding of One NorthEast in 2012. Despite these difficulties, Sarah helped transform the former brewery site into a £350m crucible of collaboration between businesses, government, and our University's students, academics and researchers, especially in tech, data and life sciences, attracting over £700m in private investment and helping create 4000 jobs in what is recognised as one of the UK's leading smart cities. Sarah's role in this, and her illustrious career, are what we're celebrating tonight.

SARAH STEWART: HONORARY FELLOWSHIP

Sarah was born in Cheltenham and later moved with her family to Bristol. She attended a comprehensive school that was committed to an ethos of education that, in Sarah's words "gave as much emphasis to car mechanics as it did to A Level students," and she thrived there. After school, she attended Churchill College, Cambridge, graduating in History and Law.

It was the North East's good fortune that Sarah was then recruited by Gosforth-based Proctor and Gamble to its brand management department. She soon became involved in organising social events to help other young professionals network and make friends. One such event – a quiz night at MEA House – saw wine supplied by a merchant named Alastair Stewart. Once the wine had been served, Alastair joined Sarah's quiz team and a relationship blossomed.

There was, however, an immediate snag. Sarah had just accepted a new job with Deloitte in Nottingham, so their early time together became an "M1 romance". Particularly memorable during this period was the occasion when they bought a new gas oven and manoeuvred it with great difficulty to Sarah's top floor flat to discover that the kitchen was electric only.

Fortunately, after two years, Sarah moved into marketing and consultancy at Price Waterhouse here in Newcastle, where she worked among other things on bids for Breakfast television and cable TV franchises. She became a partner around the same time she married Alastair – one of only three women among 112 partners. Sarah recalls that although she didn't feel disadvantaged by this, she noticed that the new partners' "goody bag" conspicuously contained both a tie and a man's watch.

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In the event, Sarah didn't stay long because in October 1991 she was invited to join the board of her favourite client – Sage Group PLC – by its co-founder David Goldman. Her appointment as Marketing Director attracted broadsheet interest, but she was undaunted and loved her time at the company. The day Sage's value finally exceeded that of arch-rival Amstrad's remains an especially memorable moment.

In 1994 Sarah and Alastair started a family, and, seeking flexibility, she left Sage to become an independent consultant. It was at this point that she focused on regional development and worked with organisations including Work Wise North East, the Port of Tyne, and the Newcastle upon Tyne NHS Foundation. Most significantly, Sarah tells me that it was largely on the back of her work with Science City that the opportunity arose to become interim CEO of the Newcastle Gateshead Initiative (NGI).

Sarah quickly fell in love with the role, serving as CEO for nearly 10 years. As well as sustaining regional investment, she worked on bidding for, and then hosting, major international events, such as the Rugby World Cup, the World Transplant Games, and the Great Exhibition of the North in 2018. Her colleague and friend Kathie Wilcox remembers that "Sarah can be so calm under pressure, diplomatic, articulate, wise and warm", and she suggests that Sarah could easily have enjoyed a career as a diplomat or even a hostage negotiator.

Sarah retired from the NGI and full-time employment in 2019, partly so she could make the most of the honour of being appointed High Sheriff of Tyne and Wear, although sadly her year in office was impacted by the pandemic. But retirement didn't slow her down. She was Chair of Gateshead College during a challenging but rewarding time and maintains non-executive roles at Beamish Museum and the National Churches Trust, while continuing as

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Deputy Lieutenant of Tyne and Wear. Somehow, she finds the time for walking (with or without Sky the cocker spaniel), gardening, socialising, going to the theatre, and of course spending time with her family. We're pleased to extend a warm welcome to Alastair, Catherine and Robert, who are here to support Sarah this evening.

Throughout a long and impressive career, Sarah's passion for the North East has been evident to everyone. She told me that what she particularly loved about her role as CEO at NGI was being able to sing Newcastle and Gateshead's praises in national and international forums, and we can all agree that in doing so Sarah has been a steadfast friend and servant to our region. Her work to develop and champion the spaces for innovation, education, and business in the North East has amplified our University's values beyond our walls to have a positive impact on people's lives.

Chancellor Dharker, in recognition of her distinguished contributions to growth in our community and region I am honoured to present to you, Sarah Stewart, to be accepted into the fellowship of Newcastle University.

John Williams

Public Orator

8th May 2026