BERNARD ROBERTS

Pro-Chancellor,

Bernard Roberts is the founder and Chief Executive of Marben Engineering Co Ltd, a Ferndown-based company which makes and supplies boiler technology equipment for power stations around the world. As a leading international specialist in boiler engineering, Bernard's expertise is much in demand, and he has played key technical roles in many high-profile power-supply projects, often in developing countries. These have led him into extensive charitable work, most notably in Zimbabwe where he has organised numerous relief projects and supported schools, universities, hospitals and churches.

Bernard grew up in a working-class suburb in Kent during the 1930s, and through World War 2, which brought tragedies to his family and neighbours. He left school without formal qualifications but inherited his father's talent for engineering and took an apprenticeship at a refrigeration engineering company in Dartford. He worked in the drawing office but promotion came too slowly there, so he moved to the Illinois Stoker Company of Great Britain where he quickly became chief design draughtsman, and the first contract was to build the power station at the Llanwern Steel Works in South Wales.

Illinois built boiler plants until the early 1960s when it gave up this work in the belief that it had no future. Working for companies associated with coal-fired power stations, Bernard quickly saw a market niche for a specialist UK company supplying stokers, the firing mechanisms for boilers in this industry. In 1972 he took a calculated risk and formed Marben Engineering. Initially he worked alone, making castings and selling them from the back of his car. He later graduated to a second-hand truck in which he lived for weeks at a time, buying and selling castings and boiler parts.

Marben now has two manufacturing facilities on the South Coast and a distribution centre in the Midlands. It is still very much a family business, based on a small but close-knit team. It has achieved great commercial success, and in the depths of the recent recession its order-books remained full. The company says 'we can make anything' (and it does, from structural beams to stainless steel fittings and fixtures) but the name of Marben is still mainly known in connection with boiler plants for power stations. Because it stocks over 800 tons of spare parts it can immediately supply equipment to rectify power breakdowns anywhere in the world. Its markets include France, Iran, India, Kosovo, South Africa, Sudan, Svalbard and Zimbabwe

For the past 20 years all three international giants of the power-station world, Babcock and Wilcox, Rolls Royce Combustion and Alstom, have looked to Bernard as the leading national expert on boiler plants and consult him in their major projects around the world. Other major engineering companies such as the former Central Electricity Generating Board, Northern Ireland Electricity, ICI, Cadburys, Rover, Courtaulds and British Sugar have all turned to him as a consultant, and as their sole supplier for specialist equipment. Indeed,

Marben is the only UK manufacturer of stokers, essential parts without which power station boilers cannot work.

In 1994, Marben was awarded a contract, funded by the World Bank, to refurbish three power stations in Zimbabwe. Bernard found Zimbabwe an eye-opening experience, and was particularly struck by the needs of communities lacking water, and of children in particular. He saw a school in which 15 children would share a single stub of a pencil in their lessons. Before the school day started they would walk eight kilometres to a well, and eight kilometres back, to get buckets of water. The water was dirty, and children and teachers regularly died. Bernard's immediate response, as an active lifelong member of the Salvation Army, was to use its international networks to raise funds and start projects. One borehole and pipe, originally dug to supply that isolated school, now provides clean water for 22,000 people in the nearby village of Seula. Many other projects followed, and Bernard tells moving stories of lives and communities changed, and success built on success: water; crops; goats; wool; clothing for sale in the markets; and so it goes on. He has also raised charitable funding to repair and equip hospitals, and to build churches, which for many are the only source of help in Zimbabwe's humanitarian crisis.

Bernard is passionate about education at all levels. He has sponsored and promoted the education of many orphaned children. Working with Dr Ven Tauringana, a member of staff in this University, he has given immense support to Africa University, a Pan-African university at Mutare. Many BU academics, and our Students' Union, have supported his scheme to provide textbooks – over 3,000 so far – for students who cannot afford these things which we so easily take for granted.

Although he is very much at home in Zimbabwe, where he regularly braved the dangers of travel in the bush, Bernard is a true international, and his work has covered many other countries, and particularly troubled and war-torn areas. So, for example, after the Balkan wars of the 1990s he took a leading part in the rebuilding of Pristina power-station in Kosovo. Bombing put it out of action, he says, so it's right that we should restore it. His current consultancies include a project to repair the thermal power station at Bulawayo, which is potentially a key part of the solution to Zimbabwe's energy crisis, and could also produce enough electricity to share with neighbouring countries. But there's no money to pay for it, and Bernard is now negotiating with international development agencies to raise funds. Considering that he is – at least in theory – retired, he is immensely energetic and his commitment is as great as ever.

Bernard is a highly successful and internationally reputed engineer, who uses his business achievements and resources to help others, particularly in the developing world. He is rightly described as 'a true unsung hero of our day'.

Pro-Chancellor, I have the honour to present Bernard Roberts, and ask you to confer upon him the degree of Doctor of Engineering, *honoris causa*.