

ROMY FRASER

My Lady and Chancellor,

Romy Fraser is a highly original and innovative entrepreneur, best known as a pioneer in the development, manufacture and retailing of natural medicines and toiletries. Neal's Yard Remedies, the company which she founded and which is based at Gillingham in Dorset, sells over 1,400 products worldwide and in its 30 UK shops. She has also co-published books on alternative medicine and beauty care.

Romy trained as a teacher at Froebel College. After three years' teaching in the state system she moved to a free school in south London. Here, in her own words, she 'learned to work in a team, and saw how brilliant children were'. This school, modelled on Summerhill, set out to give children space to learn, experience and discover in a community, and to create leaders for the future. This inspired Romy's dream of setting up her own school, so when the chance came to open a business she saw this as the means to another end: 'there's the money for my school'.

That business, which took its name from its location at Neal's Yard in Covent Garden, reflected Romy's other great passion, for natural health and for helping people to look after themselves using natural remedies and treatments. It was an apothecary's shop – taking its original meaning as a 'storehouse of herbs' – which soon evolved into a centre for making as well as selling remedies. Here she brought together key parts of homeopathy, herbalism, aromatherapy and the uses of flower remedies into a new approach which made and offered natural remedies in an accessible way which helped customers to discover remedies for their own use and also provided for the needs of professionals.

It was no small risk to establish a business, in the centre of London, to sell the products of an industry not yet established. Even so, within three years Neal's Yard and its distinctive blue bottles (the trade marks of the traditional apothecary's shop) had attracted a large following of people who felt empowered by individual attention, and an opportunity to select treatments from a range of realistic options offered to them.

As a mark of the company's environmental responsibility, Neal's Yard Remedies decided to create a new, sustainable headquarters in the countryside. Its eco-factory at Peacemarsh, near Gillingham, was opened in 2005 and received a Mention in the Civic Trust Awards 2007. Here new ideas are formulated and tested, and products are processed and packed; outside, a wide and growing range of herbs and flowers are grown in an unpolluted environment. This centre brought much-needed employment to Gillingham (characteristically, Romy took this into account in selecting the location) and is now the third largest employer in the area. The essential underlying principles which support natural medicine – enabling the body, which is naturally resilient, to heal itself – are also carried into the management of the factory. Romy and her colleagues have set out to create interesting, varied work in an

environment where people enjoy working, where communication is real, and where work and workplace relationships are a source of benefit to employees and their families.

At Peacemarsh Romy's love of design and fashion (as a school leaver she almost chose art school instead of teacher training) has found expression in the designing of her products and their presentation. Likewise her philosophy of life and business: she deeply regrets the decline of small manufacturers in the UK, and the frequent alienation of workers from managers. From the beginning Romy has set out to show that ideals and business can mix: that a company can make attractive things well, and also balance the needs and aspirations of the company and the individuals who work for it. She acknowledges the magnitude of the challenge involved, but her pragmatism, delight in finding things out, a lifelong openness to new ideas, and a willingness to learn and take risks, have all stood her in good stead, and the eco-factory at Peacemarsh is a mark of her success in this regard.

Now the wheel has turned full circle. Romy has described her vision of 'a school that would demonstrate how a good education could be a healthy education'. She is moving on from Neal's Yard and Peacemarsh to realise that original ambition by setting up a residential education centre in west Dorset, where school leavers will learn skills for healthy living and leadership.

My Lady and Chancellor, I have the honour to present Romy Fraser, and ask you to confer upon her the degree of Doctor of Business Administration.