

ALAN RICHARD REECE DSc

Mr Chancellor,

You are undoubtedly aware of the excitement being engendered here on campus by the Science City initiative. A principal goal of Science City is to establish our University as one of the first in the UK to be truly “open for business and regional development”.

The author of the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes wrote:

“That which has come to be, that is what will come to be;
and that which has been done, that is what will be done;
and so there is nothing new under the sun” (Eccl. 1: 9)

These words seem to me an appropriate description of how the Science City initiative stands in relation to the lifetime achievements of a man who was a prophet before his time, Dr Alan Reece.

After graduating from King's College and gaining substantial industrial experience, Dr Alan Reece served this University for 28 years in the Department of Agricultural Engineering, proving himself to be both a highly innovative researcher and a passionate and gifted teacher. Alan's many former students recall with gratitude how he enabled them to pursue successful careers in farming and many other sectors.

Alan's engineering brilliance lay in pioneering the application of soil mechanics principles to the design of earth-moving equipment. He can now claim not only to have moved earth, but to have moved the Earth! In the early 1980s, the foundations for today's Global Economy and 'Information Age' were being laid, quite literally, in the form of undersea pipelines and telecoms cables. As fast as they could be laid on the seabed however, they were being damaged by trawler dragnets. Extrapolating from his agricultural experience, Alan Reece designed a highly efficient undersea plough, slashing the costs of installing cables and pipelines safely below the seabed, beyond the reach of dragnets.

Alan's first instinct was to commercialise his invention alongside his academic pursuits. Sadly, the culture of the University at that time was ill-prepared to accommodate such an inventive and entrepreneurial talent. Rather than see his inventions gather dust, Alan reluctantly resigned his Readership in 1984, and

founded a company to bring his seabed plough to market. Soil Machine Dynamics, the first of the three companies Alan would eventually own, began life as a three-person operation, 'camping-out' in the front room of his house. In Year One, turnover reached £100,000. In Year Two it was £1.5 million. By then employing eight graduates from this University, the company went on to sustain an annual growth rate of 20%, achieving an annual turnover of £60 million by the dawn of the new Millennium. Along the way, Alan established Pearson Engineering Ltd as global leaders in the manufacture of specialist equipment for the safe removal of land mines, and for related military ground-clearing operations. To date, more than £400 million worth of business has been brought to Tyneside by Alan's companies.

Impressive as they are, these financial figures cannot convey the full extent of Alan's achievements in business. The companies founded by Alan now employ several hundred people on Tyneside, giving the lie to those who maintain that the UK can no longer compete globally in engineering and manufacturing. Alan's commitment to the region goes far beyond job creation: substantial charitable donations have been made to numerous educational and community projects in the region. Further afield, Pearson have supported humanitarian organisations involved in removing land mines in former war zones.

The dedicated engineering and technical staff in Pearson draw their inspiration from Alan's enthusiasm, passion and *joie de vivre*. His particular charisma as both an engineer and a businessman lies in his ability to rapidly analyse problems and explain them, before lucidly outlining how they may best be solved.

Alan brought the same enthusiasm to his principal recreational activity, as an accomplished mountaineer. An excellent rock climber and skier, Alan has long maintained as his principal indulgence a transporter van known as "The Daysack", which allows him and his partner Margaret to escape at short notice to the Lakes or the Highlands. He got within a dozen summits of completing the Munros before wear-and-tear on joints placed the high ridges beyond his reach; so he took to a mountain bike instead, which is now Alan's principal means of communing with the great outdoors.

Alan's enthusiasm for the mountains proved infectious at work, and his companies soon developed a tradition of evening rock-climbing outings in Northumberland, and ski holidays in Europe and the USA. The notion that business should be fun remains a cardinal principle of life at Pearson Engineering to this day – to the extent that it has sometimes left American clients speechless as their preferred suppliers took a

break from the earnest contract negotiations to keep a prior appointment on the nearest piste!

Despite his mountain-biking commitments, Alan retains a strong personal interest in the research and design aspects of Pearson. For instance, he is currently active in the development of designs to improve the boat guidance structure beneath the Gateshead Millennium Bridge.

As we begin to pursue the Science City vision, there can be no more appropriate time for this University to honour the lifelong achievements of one of its most successful alumni and former staff members. If you had the power of canonisation, Mr Chancellor, I would be asking you to make Dr Alan Reece the patron saint of Science City. Failing that, I urge you to award him the Degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*.

Citation by Professor Paul Younger