



**The University of Sheffield**  
**Roll of Benefactors, 19 July 2017**

**John Peter Charles Roach**

Chancellor,

Today, we are celebrating the life of a benefactor of the University of Sheffield, the late Professor John Roach, a distinguished academic who lived in this city for 50 years and who has left the University a very generous legacy to fund scholarships.

John was born in London in 1920, the only child of John Michael and Ellen Roach. From an early age, he was an avid reader and he spent much of his pocket money purchasing classics such as Dickens and Austen. At the age of nine, his family moved to Bedford whose most famous son is John Bunyan, the 17th-century writer and puritan preacher. Bunyan is best remembered as the author of the famous allegory, *The Pilgrim's Progress*, in which the protagonist 'Christian' journeys through the world weighed down by a great burden until he reaches the Celestial City.

In 1931, John passed his entrance test with flying colours and won a free place at Bedford School. He loved history, played rugby and joined the Officers' Training Corps. A strong interest in religion began to develop and at the age of 15 he started to think that he might wish to be ordained. By the time he had won a scholarship to study history at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, he had definitely decided to take holy orders. But his undergraduate career was dominated by the threat of war, and then by war itself. John decided that he had to serve as a soldier - becoming ordained would have exempted him from military service. I will, Chancellor, if I may, speak about John's life during the war a little later.

After graduating with first-class honours in May 1946, he became a sixth-form history master at Haileybury. He enjoyed his time there but the idea of independent research appealed to him and in 1950 he was elected a Research Fellow at Corpus Christi. He taught history and played a full role in many aspects of the

college. His academic works primarily focused on the history of education and social reform but he was also responsible for a history of the *City and University of Cambridge*, which at the time was considered to be a standard work. Later he compiled a book on the history of King Edward VII School here in Sheffield.

In 1965, John moved to Sheffield when he was appointed Director of the Institute of Education and Professor of Education. He is remembered with great affection for his kindness and the encouragement he gave to so many students and young academics. His department was responsible for the one-year postgraduate certificate course for teachers - work that he found hugely rewarding. He was also a member of Senate and of the Council of the University. On his retirement in 1983, he remained in the city, was very active in St Mark's, Broomhill, and played a key role on the editorial board of the University's centenary history, *Steel City Scholars*.

When John died in 2015, I attended his funeral. It was packed. I had known John for over a decade but it was only here that I learnt about a period of his wartime life which he did not speak of. It is relevant, Chancellor, because it happened when he was the same age as our graduands here today. When John joined up, he received a commission in the Indian Army in the 1st Punjab Regiment, taking command of 120 men in D Company of the 6th Battalion at the age of 21.

Fate can be cruel. His battalion were destined for the Persian Gulf but at the last minute the orders were countermanded and they were sent to defend Singapore, 'the Gibraltar of the East'. In February 1942, the forces of Imperial Japan captured Singapore, taking 90,000 Allied troops prisoner, including Captain Roach who was sent to the notorious Changi Prison. He then endured three-and-a-half years of toiling under unspeakable cruelty building the infamous Siam-Burma death railway, where some 15,000 allied prisoners of war perished of disease, maltreatment and brutality. He later said that this was the real testing time of his life.

I address these words to our graduands and our new graduates. It is easy to deal with success in life. Much harder is how you deal with adversity. Whilst John's body may have been broken by these unimaginable hardships, his heart and his spirit did not surrender. Indeed, his faith was strengthened. Remember, it is how you deal with life's challenges that will truly define you as a man or a woman.

Towards the end of his time at the University, John was asked by someone who did not know of his past as a POW to look after a Japanese visitor. This was difficult for him. It would have been easy to make an excuse. But he knew from the age of the visitor that he could not possibly have had anything to do with the war. John decided he had to face this test. The visit went very well and, as John said goodbye, like Christian from *The Pilgrim's Progress*, he felt an enormous burden lift from his shoulders.

There were three areas of his life which were incredibly important to John: his beloved godchildren - and we are honoured that some of them are here today; Bedford School; and the University of Sheffield. Free and fair access to education was something he believed in very strongly. He has, Chancellor, endowed a fund at his old school and he left this University the quite enormous sum of £800,000 to fund scholarships. This benefaction will help generations of students and the John Roach Scholarships will transform their lives. This is a truly remarkable legacy.

John epitomised all the best human qualities - kindness, consideration and generosity. He was a soldier, a scholar and a gentleman - as Chaucer would have said, 'a very perfect gentle knight'. He was the best of men and those of us who knew him miss him greatly. God bless you John.

Chancellor, I commend to you the late Professor John Roach as eminently worthy to be admitted as a Benefactor of the University of Sheffield and that his name be inscribed on our Roll of Benefactors.