

# OBITUARY



**Brian Flowers, one of Imperial's longest-serving and most popular Rectors, whose contributions formed the building blocks of the modern College, has died at the age of 85.**

Lord Flowers, a physicist, led Imperial for twelve years from 1973 with the ambition to make a good institution even better. Speaking before the College's centenary in 2007, Flowers said that being Rector of Imperial was the pinnacle of his career, one which spanned the worlds of science, academia, politics and public service. He is survived by his wife, Mary.

A passionate supporter of UK universities, serving also as Chairman of the CVCP (now Universities UK), Vice Chancellor of the University of London and Chancellor of the University of Manchester later in his career, Flowers laid the foundations of the modern College during his term as Rector. He set priorities that remain core to its teaching and research today, while recognising that success for the College was in the hands of its staff and students, whom he described as "a very likeable

bunch of people, a very clever bunch of people too."

## **CHARTING A NEW COURSE: INTERDISCIPLINARY RESEARCH AND TEACHING**

Lord Oxburgh, who led Imperial from 1993-2000, hailed Brian Flowers as a giant among Rectors, praising his vision for consolidating engineering and physical sciences at the College. Flowers' approach focused on building strong links between subject areas, which led to the establishment and development of interdisciplinary teaching and research activities at Imperial.

Lord Flowers' enthusiasm for the opportunities offered by collaborations across scientific disciplines, fuelled during his time as Chairman of the Science Research Council from 1967-73, led him to found the Centre for

Environmental Technology in 1976, which brought together environmental research at the College. The new Centre allowed Imperial to take the lead in providing technological solutions to environmental problems – a path which the College continues along today through the work of the Centre for Environmental Policy, the Energy Futures Lab and the Grantham Institute for Climate Change.

Sir Gordon Conway, who was the first Academic Director of the Centre for Environmental Technology and is now Professor of International Development in the Centre for Environmental Policy, paid tribute to Brian Flowers as a tough, principled and very wise Rector who gave his full backing to plans for the Centre for Environmental Technology when first mooted in 1975.

Describing Lord Flowers' philosophy behind the development, Sir Gordon said: "He faced down those in the silos who disliked cross-disciplinary activities. I remember one comment at a Senate meeting when a professor accused us of peddling 'pap for popinjays.' Brian would have none of that kind of ignorant prejudice. He was convinced from his experience on the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution that environmental education and research ought to be a central concern of the College. He also rightly insisted that the Centre should focus on postgraduate rather than undergraduate education. He came up with the name of the centre and he and the Pro Rector, John Sutton another sorely missed colleague, devised a fair and sustainable budget formula for us. He even found time to come and give lectures on the course – impeccably crafted and delivered lectures that were clear and well balanced."

Keen to modernise the university culture, Brian Flowers ended the custom of using titles and surnames to address professors and heads of department. He also introduced a democratic approach to appointing heads of department, establishing staff committees that were consulted on the best candidate to lead the department and encouraging all members of the department to

write to him in strict confidence with proposals. Physicist Sir Peter Knight, now Deputy Rector (Research) at Imperial, who was recruited to the College by Lord Flowers in 1979 and led his department's non-professorial staff committee when a lecturer, explains: "He wanted to hear a groundswell of opinion from all staff in a department – not just the professors – and was particularly keen to seek the views of the next generation who would shape the department's future."

Attuned to industrial trends, Brian Flowers drove the modernisation of undergraduate courses, recognising the importance of training students for their future careers. Engineering courses were developed to provide students with greater industrial experience and, aware of the increasingly important role of information technology, under Flowers all departments were asked to teach computing skills.

During Flowers' time as Rector the College's research and teaching activities focused on science and engineering, and there were Nobel Prizes for Geoffrey Wilkinson in 1973 and Abdus Salam in 1979, but his vision of a new framework for medical education in London led to one of the most significant developments in Imperial's history – the integration of a number of medical schools with the

College. His report, commissioned by the Vice Chancellor of the University of London and published in 1980, proposed the merger of a number of the many free-standing undergraduate medical schools and their amalgamation with multi-faculty colleges.

John Davidson, Personnel Secretary at the College from 1974 to 1989, explains the two strands to Flowers' thinking: "The first was that the medical schools were too small to be viable when funding was being reduced and secondly that it was highly desirable in the latter part of the twentieth century that the London medical schools should have a much closer association with institutions which had basic science departments. Although all of Brian's proposals were not enacted precisely as proposed the present structure of medical education owes a great debt to him."

In 1971 the College conferred upon him its highest honour, the Fellowship of Imperial College.

Lord Flowers often commented that his wife shared his job. Together they sought to catalyse good social relationships with and between students. They were renowned hosts of a twice-termly 'beer and bangers' parties inviting large numbers into their residence at 170 Queen's Gate. Speaking in 2006, Lady Flowers recalled:

"Once we found the sausages were going rather fast and I had to keep on sending down to the kitchen for more. Then I realised that there was a competition afoot as to who could sink the most sausages, and we got wise to that and found the culprits and rationed them!"

In return, Imperial College Union threw its own party for the Flowers at the end of his Rectorship, culminating in a celebratory trip around west London in Bo', a veteran car dating from 1902 owned and cared for by engineering students at Imperial.

"This we carried out to the considerable consternation of the police, who fortunately had a sense of humour and rubbed their eyes in disbelief and waved us on," Lord Flowers later remembered. "That was a great and jolly occasion, and a very nice gesture on the part of the students."

Lynda Davies, who worked as Lord Flowers' PA from 1978-1984, describes his open door policy: "As a young arts graduate I was barely older than most Imperial students, so there was a lighter touch in the office, less stuffiness. We had an 'open door' policy. Anyone could make an appointment to see the Rector. Staff, students, union representatives, parents and alumni – all were treated with the same courtesy and good humour, combined with



common sense. That approach was very novel and much appreciated."

Born in September 1924, Lord Flowers studied physics and electronics at Cambridge, before working as part of an Anglo-Canadian project codenamed Tube Alloys focused on nuclear weapon development during World War II. After the war he continued his research at the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell, becoming Head of Theoretical Physics in 1952 and pioneering computing methods to solve problems relating to the nuclear structure. He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1961 at the age of 36.

He went on to hold academic posts in the Universities of Birmingham and Manchester, before taking up the post of Rector at Imperial in 1973 and then Vice Chancellor of the University of London between 1985 and 1990.

While Vice Chancellor of the University of London, he became known for making extensive notes during committee meetings. Sir Peter Knight said: "There was a quite a bit of speculation about why Brian was making so many notes and apparently carefully writing down every word. People thought that maybe he didn't

trust the minutes. Later, when his textbook on computer programs came out, it all became clear."

In the preface to his 1995 textbook *An introduction to numerical methods in C++*, Lord Flowers confessed: "It was an enjoyable hobby, and immensely relaxing during interminable committee meetings, to write snippets of programs which could later be tried out at home, and was less visible to one's colleagues than other portable pastimes, such as wood carving or taking snuff".

During his time as Rector, Flowers chaired the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution, and served as the chairman of the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals, now known as Universities UK, the umbrella body for all UK universities. For six years he was president of the European Science Foundation, and as Rector he also began routine visits to south east Asia and Japan to promote the College overseas, helping to develop the College's international standing significantly. He was made an Officer of the Legion d'Honneur in 1981 – an honour of which he was extremely proud.

In addition to his high profile in science and academia, Lord Flowers is also notable for being one of the founding members of the Social Democratic Party,

created in 1981. When first asked by Dame Shirley Williams, one of the "gang of four" that created the party, to leave the independent cross-benches of the House of Lords and join them, he declined. He later recalled that "two days later I rang her up and said 'I've been looking at my face in the mirror and I can't stand the sight of it; do you mind if I change my mind and join?'"

He was knighted in 1969 and made a life peer in 1979, when he became Lord Flowers of Queen's Gate, the London street on which he lived as Rector.

After leaving the University of London he became Chairman of the House of Lords Select Committee on Science and Technology, and was fondly remembered as a parliamentarian by Lord Winston, Professor of Science and Society at Imperial, when he subsequently became chair of that committee himself. Paying tribute, Lord Winston said: "Brian was an extraordinary force, full of trenchantly-held but very sound ideas." He was also a longstanding Member of the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee.

Lord Flowers is remembered as a Rector who nurtured the strengths of staff to build a better College. His approach to leadership gained him respect

as John Davidson describes: "Brian was a delight to work with because he was honest and straightforward. He was also a bit puritanical in certain respects. I never remember him asking for any benefits for himself in terms of furnishings and accommodation in 170 Queen's Gate in his 13 years as Rector and one of his earlier acts was to get rid of the Imperial College chauffeur-driven car and acquire a bus pass!"