

President, Professor Sir Paul Curran's speech at The Rector's Dinner, Mansion House, 12th April 2018

Rector, Chair of Council, Sheriffs, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It is an honour and a privilege to be leading this great University of ours at a time of such significant change in higher education. For there can be few institutions so important for the success and wellbeing of a country and the development of its people, or simply “more beautiful than a university” as Poet Laureate, John Masefield wrote in his 1946 tribute.

We certainly have come a long way since our Victorian founding fathers established our institution in an impoverished Islington square. Their mission was to provide a ‘place of learning’ and their vision was of an accessible, outward-facing institution, responsive to the needs of this great capital city and the world beyond.

Accessibility was facilitated by lowering the barriers of social class, gender and location, with recruiting posters, across London, calling for ‘young men and women of the poorer classes’ to join a college at a convenient location on St John Street.

This widening of access continues today; and I’m proud to say that almost half of our exceptionally able UK undergraduates are drawn from some of the most disadvantaged areas of London.

Tonight, however, I want to dwell on those other two components of Victorian accessibility – gender and location.

This year we celebrate the 150th anniversary of the admission of the first women to UK higher education and the institution they joined was the University of London. Against that local background, women were considered explicitly in the design of our building, our social facilities and the attractiveness of our courses with, for example, optional sessions in domestic subjects and women’s trades under the pastoral guidance of a Lady Superintendent.

However, our primarily scientific and technical courses were for men only and only men were registered for a University of London degree.

This year we also celebrate the centenary of the end of the First World War, in which over two thousand of our staff and students joined the colours; the Representation of the People Act, that gave some women the vote and a new social order, in the wake of both.

However, an influx of ex-soldiers, coupled with the expansion of pioneering new courses such as aeronautical engineering and optics, caused a sharp decline in the proportion of women students.

Our second Principal, recruited in the mid 1920s, intended to address this gender imbalance by means of affirmative action.

Advertising for women students didn’t work; and reduced fees for women students didn’t work; but spending time talking to parents of single women employed in nearby Clerkenwell factories did the trick and Marjorie Bell joined us as our first woman engineering student. She was not allowed to be a member of the student engineering society, or even enter the student common room. But Marjorie’s quiet tenacity turned the tide and by the time she graduated in 1934 many other women were reading for degrees in engineering. She progressed to a distinguished career, was decorated for wartime service, was a leading light in the Institution of Electrical Engineers and her generous bequest supports women engineering students at City.

That brings me back to our founding fathers' belief in the link between location and educational accessibility. Our latest estate project, an iconic new building for our integrated Law School, has shed new light on our location; as we were not the first to build on its site. The first structure can be dated to 1642, when London took the side of Parliament, the King raised his banner of arms at Nottingham Castle and the Civil War started.

In response, and over a period of two hectic years, the City of London Corporation, led by the Lord Mayor of London, Alderman Isaac Pennington; his influential Sheriffs, Aldermen Thomas Andrews and John Langham; and around 20,000 Londoners, built the largest fortifications known in Europe at the time.

They comprised a huge earth rampart, forts and redoubts that provided a line of defence, across open fields, well outside London Wall. This massive feat of civil engineering passed through what is now our new Law School site, with Mount Mill Fort positioned imposingly at its centre.

The road network constructed to supply this strategically important fort was to provide the blueprint for major transport links that followed and made that impoverished Islington square the obvious place for our Victorian founding fathers to locate their accessible campus.

The broadly-based City of today is built on their aspirations. Well over half of our 19,500 students are women, over a third are postgraduate and almost half hail from outside the UK. The past few years have seen significant change; we have more than doubled the proportion of our staff producing world-leading or internationally excellent research, transformed our campus, increased the satisfaction of our students by more than any other university in the country and joined the University of London.

As for the future; we are continuing to focus on quality, we are growing in a way that maintains or strengthens our quality and we are doing this in partnership with others, within City, within London and across the world. Never forgetting that for over 120 years we have sought to serve as a 'place of learning'. For that is the real beauty of a university, defined so well by John Masefield, as "a place where those who hate ignorance may strive to know, where those who perceive truth may strive to make others see; where seekers and learners alike, banded together in the search for knowledge, will honour thought in all its finer ways".

Thank you.