

President, Professor Sir Paul Curran's speech at The Rector's Dinner, Mansion House, 1st April 2019

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

It is an honour to be leading this great university and a privilege to be at the helm in this, its 125th anniversary year. We are proud to be the only university in London to be both committed to academic excellence and focused on business and the professions. Some 20,000 students are studying with us, of whom around 40 percent are postgraduates, 40 percent are from overseas and almost half of our exceptionally able undergraduates are from the most disadvantaged areas of London. City has certainly come a long way since the Chair of our Governing Body, Charles Dorman, laid our foundation stone in Clerkenwell's Northampton Square on the 9th July 1894. London, at that time, was the world's largest and arguably most powerful city, located at the heart of a major industrial nation and an Empire that spanned the globe. The country had a huge balance of payments surplus, minimal levels of unemployment and commentators of the day portrayed a confident, entrepreneurial Britain fizzing with invention and innovation. They also portrayed a socially unjust London with conspicuous wealth juxtaposed with low wages and grinding poverty; and a commercial London stymied by its under-skilled workforce. Against that backdrop there emerged a consensus around harnessing academic excellence in the service of business, the professions and society. The laying of that foundation stone, 125 years ago, was a commitment to that very consensus.

Clerkenwell, at the time, was a maze of small workshops for clockmaking, electroplating and engineering, interspersed with the occasional furrier, tailor and carrier. The recent Royal Commission on London's Housing had reported that although the area surrounding Northampton Square was inhabited by the 'better classes of the very poor', they lived in slum housing, with families of between six or seven to a room and were plagued by the evocatively termed 'rent racking', where unscrupulous middlemen increased rent slowly and continuously until the tenant moved on. Chronic drunkenness was common, with The Lord Mayor, Sir Horatio Davies, observing bluntly that the founding of a new institution would: "benefit working men and women not simply for its educational role but because it would also serve to keep young people out of the public houses".

Many individuals can be credited with linking academic excellence, business, the professions and society in the early days of, what was to become, City. However, two stand above the rest: William Compton and Robert Mullineux Walmsley.

Born on his family's country estate, Lord Compton, the second son of the 4th Marquis of Northampton, went to Eton and Cambridge prior to a series of Foreign Office postings. In November 1883 he decided, for reasons we will never know, to tour his family's Clerkenwell estate. Those shocking few days were to give purpose and direction to the rest of the young man's life. He went on to campaign for improved housing and social justice as a local councillor, London County Councillor and Liberal Member of Parliament. More importantly for us, he was appointed to our Governing Body and convinced his father to initiate improvements to local housing and release the centre of Northampton Square for public open space and its corner for our first building. This contribution is marked with a plaque on the Northampton Square side of that very building.

The second individual was Dr Robert Mullineux Walmsley, the institution's first Principal. He was a graduate of the University of London and joined from what was to become Herriot-Watt University where, as its first professor of electrical engineering, he had become a passionate advocate for the business, professional and societal benefits that could follow in the wake of academic excellence. He recruited high calibre academics with industrial or business experience, he promoted high quality

research and he prepared the most talented students for examinations of the University of London. To link academia directly with business and the professions, he pioneered the sandwich course and this remains, by far, his greatest claim to fame. Even in those early days Robert's dream was for his institution to join the University of London and in 1924, at the age of 70, he submitted our first application. Sadly, later that year and on his way home, he descended from a tram, was hit by a car and died of his injuries. He left a legacy that lives on today in City's use of academic excellence in the service of business, the professions and society and more recently, of course, in our membership of the University of London.

At the celebration of our 100th Anniversary in 1994 the then Vice-Chancellor, Professor Raoul Franklin celebrated all that had been achieved by setting our pursuit of academic excellence in the context of London's needs and went on to predict that with almost 7,000 students at City 'the huge general expansion in student numbers cannot continue into the next century'.

With such a reasonable but ultimately flawed forecast to reflect on, I am not even tempted to offer a parting prediction for my successor to use on our 150th Anniversary.

Thank you.