Manufacturing Systems Engineer

Until suddenly and tragically cut down, John Parnaby enjoyed a full and amazingly fruitful life. Workington Grammar School, apprenticeship at Workington Iron and Steel and a King’s College, Durham first class honours degree in Mechanical Engineering were the start of more than two decades moving between academe and industry. He became successively project manager at the company where he had been apprenticed, Research Assistant at the University of Durham and Lecturer at the University of Glasgow, concurrently studying for his Control Systems PhD. He joined the Solway Chemical Company in 1966, rising to Works Director. Four years later he moved to the University of Bradford and soon, still only 36, was appointed Britain’s first professor of manufacturing systems engineering. The vibrant unit he built there won an outstanding reputation for teaching and research, was widely emulated and still thrives. Many of his ex-students hold senior positions all round the world.

He returned to industry by joining Rieter Scragg, the Macclesfield manufacturer of machinery and computer controllers. The considerable travel to Japan that this involved seeded his enthusiasm for the Toyota Manufacturing System.

In 1983, following a brief spell at Dunlop Slazenger, Lucas Industries head-hunted him to become their Group Director of Technology. Before long he also became chief executive of Lucas Electronics Systems Products, responsible for international businesses operating in the automotive, aerospace and industrial controls sectors. He later became Group Director in the merged Lucas Varity plc, serving until reaching mandatory retirement age.

Lucas was the perfect place for JP to apply his manufacturing systems methodologies. The manufacturing systems engineering operation he established within Lucas Engineering & Systems (LE&S) achieved a world class reputation for manufacturing effectiveness and step change improvement programmes. Through it he successfully led a crusade to transform British manufacturing productivity. The resurgence of British manufacturing owes much to John, for he recruited, trained, motivated and set a demanding personal example to his students and staff. Building on its successes within Lucas Industries, LE&S helped to transform the competitiveness of many enterprises - including hospitals, food processing, aero engines, and automotive components.

John also played a full part in professional engineering life. Elected President of the Institution of Production Engineers, he instigated major policy changes and initiated the Institution’s Silver Jubilee celebrations - including the free distribution of his influential Lucas Manufacturing Systems Engineering Mini-Guides to all student members of the Institution. He was instrumental in the renaming of the IProdE as the Institution of Manufacturing Engineers (IMfgE) and its subsequent merger with the Institution of Electrical Engineers.

Though he became President of the merged body in 1995, a single year in office proved too short to effect the changes he had in mind. In particular, his two initiatives to merge the IEE and the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, essential for unifying the
engineering professional bodies, proved to be ahead of their time. He was however influential in establishing the Institution’s physical presence outside London, in the form of Birmingham’s Austin Court, and was latterly delighted to see a major step towards realisation of his long-expressed unification vision when the IIE and IEE joined to create the Institution of Engineering and Technology.

John’s 1997 retirement was nominal, though he did squeeze in more hockey and sailing. He served on key national committees, took on several challenging non-executive directorships, chaired several successful start-up technology and engineering firms and started a consultancy with one of his sons. His commitment to academe never waned. He was a great advocate of sandwich student placements, carefully positioned industrial leaders in visiting academic positions and championed EPSRC’s forerunner to today’s Doctoral Learning Centres. Post-retirement he served as Royal Academy of Engineering Visiting Professor at Cambridge and did much for Aston University, including six years as its Treasurer.

On 19th January 2011, a celebration of John’s life was held in Solihull Parish Church. St Alphage was full-to-standing. One self-confessed acolyte – himself already a successful manufacturing professional when first meeting John 28 years ago – spoke for many when recalling that, at his first meeting with John, “for the first hour I was not sure if I understood John’s message, for the second hour I was not sure I believed it, but by the third hour I was a fully signed up member of the JP ‘Fan Club’, still am, and will be forever”. Other speakers, from academe, industry, family, and professional institutions, captured his personality: “a truly remarkable and inspirational engineer, businessman, entrepreneur, educator, coach, mentor, and friend; a great leader, very kind and generous; very hard working; a fiercely competitive sportsman and a strong loving family man, with a great sense of humour; always there when needed”.

JP received honorary doctorates from nine universities. Three others, along with the IEE and the IMechE, made him an honorary fellow. He also received the IMfgE’s Mensforth Gold Medal and the IEE’s Faraday Medal - respectively their ultimate recognition of engineering achievement, the IEE’s Silver Medal for achievements in Control Systems & Computing, two Silver Medals from the Plastics Institute and a Gold Medal from the Institute of Materials Handling. He was elected to The Royal Academy of Engineering in 1986 and appointed CBE by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in 1987.

John never forgot his Cumbrian roots, helped in this by marrying his school sixth form sweetheart Lilian, a wonderful supportive partner who coped tolerantly with his 7x24 hour life style. He is survived by her, their four children and seven grand-children - enough, as he was pleased to say, to make up his own hockey team and its umpire. This wonderful man will be sorely missed. But one great legacy is all those manufacturing systems engineers who were fortunate to learn from him, whether at university or within industry. And part of him lives on in all those he loved and led.

Ian Nussey OBE FREng