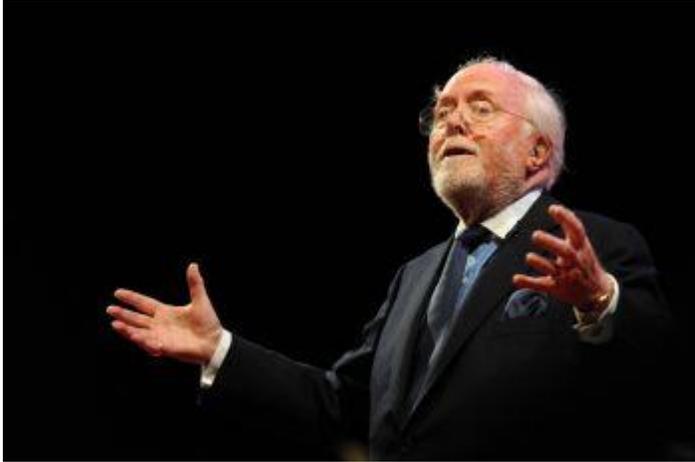


Lord Attenborough's forty years with Sussex



29th July 2009

By David Bradford

Lord Attenborough, who stepped down as Chancellor of the University of Sussex last year after 10 years as its internationally renowned figurehead, has been one of the University's most ardent and committed supporters for four decades. His passion for Sussex was borne of personal ties with Brighton and a deep-rooted respect for education.

It was in Brighton, in 1947, that Lord Attenborough clinched his acting breakthrough, turning in a menacing performance as a young gangster in the film adaptation of Graham Greene's *Brighton Rock*. Following two prolific decades of acting, he launched his career as a director with a musical critique of the First World War, *Oh! What a Lovely War* (1969), and Brighton again provided the backdrop.

During the filming of *Oh! What a Lovely War* in 1968 Lord Attenborough established his first connections with the University. He contacted Sussex's inaugural Vice-Chancellor, Asa (now Lord) Briggs, to ask whether he could recruit students as extras, to play soldiers being sent off to the trenches. Lord Briggs recalls: "I had no more power to conscript students to take part in his film than Asquith had to conscript soldiers during the first war, but I knew perfectly well they would all volunteer - and with great enthusiasm."

This seminal link with the university was celebrated in 2003, at a party held on campus to mark Lord Attenborough's 80th birthday - an event that coincided with the release of *Oh! What a Lovely War* on DVD and which raised £15,000 for student-support funding.

A year after Lord Attenborough was filming Sussex students playing "cannon fodder", his son Michael arrived at the University to study English. A keen thespian himself, Michael graduated in 1972 and went on to become involved with the theatre professionally. He is now the artistic director of London's Almeida Theatre.

Lord Attenborough forged his first formal association with the University, when he was appointed Pr-Chancellor in 1970. Familial links were bolstered further the next year, when his daughter Jane came to Sussex to study Sociology.

Jane became an influential arts administrator, but her life was cut tragically short when she, along with her daughter Lucy and mother-in-law Jane Holland, were killed in the tsunami that struck Indian Ocean coastlines on Boxing Day 2004. At the first Sussex graduation ceremony after her death, Lord Attenborough spoke bravely, declaring: "Today is, importantly, a day of celebration. What happened to my family and hundreds of others should not dent your happiness, sense of achievement and right to enjoy yourselves."

The poignancy of the occasion for the Attenborough family was heightened when Lord Attenborough was called upon to present his son Michael with an honorary degree for his work in theatre, which he dedicated to Jane.

Conferring degrees and doctorates at graduation ceremonies was, of course, one of Lord Attenborough's most important responsibilities as Chancellor. Since his appointment to the role in 1998 until his resignation last year, he presented literally thousands of awards. Despite the high turnover of graduands, Lord Attenborough had the gift of making every one feel specially honoured; staff and students alike note the enthusiasm, warmth and humour which he brought to every graduation event. What shone through at these ceremonies was Lord Attenborough's passionate belief that education is a world-changing force, which must be made available to as many people as possible - an ardour it is not difficult to trace. His father, Frederick, was the principal of University College, Leicester, who oversaw his institution's attainment of full university status. Unlike RADA-trained Lord Attenborough, both his brothers - John and the famous naturalist, David - were, in common with their father, Cambridge graduates. It is no surprise, then, that with regard to education, Lord Attenborough admits to always having felt overshadowed. It is this perceived inadequacy which he has confronted in university work and which, more importantly, has driven him to make films of inestimable pedagogical value.

"[...] that I should make a film [Gandhi] with something important to say which could use cinema to reach, entertain and, yes, teach vast numbers of people, had enormous appeal."

Education is only one of the causes Lord Attenborough has championed over the years. Somehow he has found the time and boundless energy - between acting in, producing and directing more than 70 films - to also support numerous charities in the fields of social justice, disability and the arts. Through his involvement at Sussex, Lord Attenborough became an influential advocate of the Jubilee Scholarship, a funding scheme to help students with severe disabilities gain entrance into university. In addition to being a governor of Waterford Kamblaba, a multi-racial school set, set up in Swaziland during the apartheid era, he was also a patron of the Mandela Fund, another scholarship initiative, which also opposed apartheid by granting each year the opportunity for one less-fortunate South African student to study at Sussex.

Lord Attenborough's charitable and film work came together in 1989, when his anti-apartheid film *Cry Freedom* was shown on campus and at a special premiere in Brighton to raise money for the fund.

Even now, after having stepped down as chancellor, Lord Attenborough continues to act as patron of the University of Sussex Endowment Fund, which helps support the development of the university. He is also actively involved with work to reopen the Gardner Centre, as a consequence of which the building is to be renamed in his honour. The comprehensively refurbished Attenborough Centre for the Creative Arts will open in 2011-12, to coincide with the University's 50th birthday. One of the rooms in the building will be named in memory of Lord Attenborough's daughter, Jane. Commenting on the proposals, Lord Attenborough said: "I am truly excited by the plans for the new centre and hugely touched by the honour the university grants in naming it after my family."

His son Michael added: "Jane loved her time at Sussex and was passionate about the arts; the establishment of a room bearing her name means more to us than we can ever explain."

In July last year, a grand farewell party was held in Brighton to celebrate Lord Attenborough's decade as Chancellor. Hundreds of staff and guests attended the event, including Lord Attenborough's wife, Sheila Sim, and his son, Michael. The actor Sir Ben Kingsley delivered a moving speech about Lord Attenborough's film-making career, describing the character traits that make him a great director:

"There is not a more empathetic soul in the world than Richard Attenborough. This gift of empathy makes him a voice to us and a voice for us. He seems always to embrace all of us when he speaks and we have a voice through him."

There followed the unveiling of a new portrait of Lord Attenborough by artist Bryan Organ. The acrylic painting, on a canvas measuring 42in by 46in, depicts an animated Lord Attenborough dressed in chancellor's gown.

"[...] as always, he is very explicit with his hands," explained Mr Organ, "I like the theatricality of the gown, which is appropriate for an actor."

The portrait now hangs in the library but will be moved to the Gardner centre once refurbishment work is complete. It provides a warm reminder of a cherished Chancellor and remarkable man who has contributed so much; his indomitable work ethic, professional brilliance and unending generosity set an example that will inspire students and staff for many generations to come.