

## **BERNARD ROBERTS**

Pro-Chancellor,

Bernard Roberts is the founder and Chief Executive of Marben Engineering Co Ltd, a Ferndown-based company which makes and supplies boiler technology equipment for power stations around the world. As a leading international specialist in boiler engineering, Bernard's expertise is much in demand, and he has played key technical roles in many high-profile power-supply projects, often in developing countries. These have led him into extensive charitable work, most notably in Zimbabwe where he has organised numerous relief projects and supported schools, universities, hospitals and churches.

Bernard grew up in a working-class suburb in Kent during the 1930s, and through World War 2, which brought tragedies to his family and neighbours. He left school without formal qualifications but inherited his father's talent for engineering and took an apprenticeship at a refrigeration engineering company in Dartford. He worked in the drawing office but promotion came too slowly there, so he moved to the Illinois Stoker Company of Great Britain where he quickly became chief design draughtsman, and the first contract was to build the power station at the Llanwern Steel Works in South Wales.

Illinois built boiler plants until the early 1960s when it gave up this work in the belief that it had no future. Working for companies associated with coal-fired power stations, Bernard quickly saw a market niche for a specialist UK company supplying stokers, the firing mechanisms for boilers in this industry. In 1972 he took a calculated risk and formed Marben Engineering. Initially he worked alone, making castings and selling them from the back of his car. He later graduated to a second-hand truck in which he lived for weeks at a time, buying and selling castings and boiler parts.

Marben now has two manufacturing facilities on the South Coast and a distribution centre in the

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Marben is the only UK manufacturer of stokers, essential parts without which power station boilers cannot work.

In 1994, Marben was awarded a contract, funded by the World Bank, to refurbish three power stations in Zimbabwe. Bernard found Zimbabwe an eye-opening experience, and was particularly struck by the needs of communities lacking water, and of children in particular. He saw a school in which 15 children would share a single stub of a pencil in their lessons. Before the school day started they would walk eight kilometres to a well, and eight kilometres back, to get buckets of water. The water was dirty, and children and teachers regularly died. Bernard's immediate response, as an active lifelong member of the Salvation Army, was to use its international networks to raise funds and start projects. One borehole and pipe, originally dug to supply that isolated school, now provides clean water for 22,000 people in the nearby village of Seula. Many other projects followed, and Bernard tells moving stories of lives and communities changed, and success built on success: water; crops; goats; wool; clothing for sale in the markets; and so it goes on. He has also raised charitable funding to repair and equip hospitals, and to build churches, which for many are the only source of help in Zimbabwe's humanitarian crisis.

Bernard is passionate about education at all levels. He has sponsored and promoted the education of many orphaned children. Working with Dr Ven Tauringana, a member of staff in this University, he has given immense support to Africa University, a Pan-African university at Mutare. Many BU academics, and our Students' Union, have supported his scheme to provide textbooks – over 3,000 so far – for students who cannot afford these things which we so easily take for granted.

Although he is very much at home in Zimbabwe, where he regularly braved the dangers of travel in the bush, Bernard is a true inte