

SIR JOHN (WILLIAM) ATWELL
CBE, MsC(Cantab), BSc, LLD(Strath), FREng, FIMechE

Sir John Atwell, who died on 5 July 1999, served continuously on the Council of the Royal Society of Edinburgh from 1974 to 1985 becoming successively Treasurer (where his sound knowledge of financial affairs put it on a very firm footing) and President during a period of fundamental change including a complete refurbishing of rooms, which owed much to his sure touch and sound judgement.

With his death, Scotland has lost yet another link with that dwindling stream of engineers who served their apprenticeship on the shop floor, attended evening classes, gained high academic honours, rose through the hierarchy of management to attain high positions, graced the academic and learned world, had international recognition and throughout remained loyal to, and carved out their careers in, Scotland.

Jack, as he was known to his friends, was born in 1911 and attended Hyndland School, Glasgow, before leaving in 1927 to serve his apprenticeship as an engineer with Yarrow and Company, Scotstoun. During this period he attended evening classes at the Royal Technical College (now the University of Strathclyde), eventually resigning from Yarrow's to study full time for the Associateship (ARTC) in Mechanical Engineering which he gained in 1937.

This qualification was not recognised by Glasgow University as being suitable for progression to higher degree study but it was, interestingly enough, by Cambridge University and Jack, with the aid of a Caird Travelling Scholarship, moved to King's College in 1937, where he graduated with an MSc two years later.

During his period at Cambridge he befriended two fellow Scots who influenced his future life. One was Allan Baxter who subsequently introduced him to his sister, Dorothy, whom he married in June 1945. They were to enjoy 51 years of marriage together. The other was Sam Curran, who was in time to become Principal of the new University of Strathclyde.

Now aged 28, Jack Atwell joined Stewarts and Lloyds as a management trainee and stayed with the company for 14 years. During the war he was responsible for managing one of the largest shell-producing factories in Britain. Subsequently, he was manager of various factories in the Stewarts and Lloyds group in Scotland. In his own words, he was keen to get back to "real engineering" and in 1953 he joined G and J Weir as works manager at Cathcart. Subsequently he became works director, managing director and, in 1968, chairman of the newly-formed engineering division of the Weir Group.

He was deeply involved in the merging of the pump operations of Weirs, Drysdale and Company, and Harland Engineering Company to form Weirs Pumps Ltd (the largest in the UK) of which he became chairman in 1970. The list of companies in which he was involved reads like a roll-call of Scottish engineering. Among them – chairman, Scottish Offshore Partnership (1975-81); director, Andersons Strathclyde (1975-78); director, Govan Shipbuilders (1975-79); member, Board of Royal Ordnance Factories (1974-79); chairman, Requirements Board for Mechanical Engineering and Machine Tools DTI (1972-76).

He was awarded the CBE in 1970 and was knighted in 1976. He was a Fellow of the Institute of Mechanical Engineers (FIMechE) and a founding Fellow of the Fellowship of Engineering, later to become the Royal Academy of Engineering (FREng). He felt that the engineering profession was not fully appreciated and was concerned that the standing of the professional engineer should be recognised within the community.

He was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Edinburgh in 1963 and joined its Council in 1974, at a time when major changes in the role, scope and fabric were being contemplated. Given his key role in implementing these changes and transforming the Society's finances, it was fitting that he should be President when the refurbished Rooms were re-opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth in 1983, during the Society's Bicentenary celebrations. He continued thereafter to take a very active interest in the Society's affairs and worked closely with his successors in running a successful Appeal to allow the refurbished premises to be purchased..

He served as a member of Court of Strathclyde University from 1967-83, becoming chairman over the period 1975-80 when the university, under the dynamic principalship of Sam Curran (who we have noted was a fellow student at Cambridge), was expanding both physically and educationally. Sam Curran often spoke of the important part that Jack Atwell played in this and paid tribute to his enormous ability and judgement. He also served (1965-69) on the very influential University Grants Committee which was responsible for the funding of all British universities. He was awarded an Honorary LLD in 1973 and subsequently made a Fellow of Strathclyde University.

In 1995, he and Dorothy moved from their home in Burnside to Malin Court, Maidens, Ayrshire, where they had the facilities of a first-class hotel and a home environment in the cottage. Dorothy's death in August 1996 was a severe blow, but he was much sustained by his niece, Jennifer Dick, and his nephew, John Baxter and his wife, together with the staff at Malin Court. He remained at all times up-to-date and interested in current affairs, business affairs (including how Weirs

were performing!), politics, and sport. He made the long journey twice a week from Malin to Buchanan Castle Golf Club to enjoy the company, the banter, and the friendship of his golfing chums.

BILL FLETCHER