

# Steady on the tiller

The new patron of the Society of Operations Engineers is Sir John Parker, a near 60-year veteran of industry, who reflects on his career in shipbuilding and heavy industry and the importance of continuing to learn

Parker's career began as teenage apprentice draughtsman at the Belfast shipyard that had built the Titanic, Harland & Wolff, having won a place on a competitive five-year course in naval architecture and mechanical engineering, equivalent now to a sandwich course.

A few years after completing his apprenticeship, he took over a job to bring in the first computers to the cutting room floor. "Piece parts were previously made of wood templates full-size, so if you needed a big bracket for a frame, that shape would have been made out of wooden templates, on what was a full-scale lofting floor that had the shape of the ship."

Then pieces were taken to be outlined in chalk before welders cut them out of sheet. Instead, Parker transformed that time-consuming manual job into computer output, in the form of paper tape, that was fed into computer-controlled burners that could cut six times as many parts as a person.



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Sir John Parker

He describes the time as "very formative" because he had switched from shop-floor operations to managing a team of joiners, and of working with a novel production method. "That technology transformation was the prelude to computer-aided design and then ultimately to digital engineering as we know it today."

In recalling that period, Parker admits that he would have remained content to continue working in that environment. "Ships have every engineered system; they are floating cities. They have their own electricity, their own sewage system, their own hot and cold water, and their own accommodation. Providing it all is a huge mass of systems engineering. Plus, designing a ship's shape that is economical and competitive for the owner is not an exact science; judgement goes alongside formal education."

### **A NEW OPPORTUNITY**

However, opportunity came knocking in the form of an offer from his old production manager, but this time at Scottish shipbuilder Austin & Pickersgill, as managing director. Parker states: "It was a huge choice, because I was 32 years of age and I had never been an MD before, and I was moving to a part of the country that I didn't know. But I talked to him lots to understand what he considered the risks to be, and that is history now. It was a good successful relationship; we were the most profitable merchant shipbuilding yard in the country. We were building the standard SD14, which the yard was doing before I got there, but we perfected the production of it and delivered a 15,000t deadweight SD14 cargo ship every 27 working days."

Following that, he yielded to what he describes as an "emotional pull" to return to Belfast to save Harland & Woolf, which had managed to avoid nationalisation, but which was in dire financial straits. "It

had, I think, close to 8,000 employees; it was running out of work fast; it had a strategy only focused on merchant ships, and we had to find a new strategy quickly." That he did; less than four years was all it took to return the yard from £40m loss to profit, despite the Troubles raging around him.

From there, Parker continued to lead British heavy industry from the bridge - executive board management - first at Babcock International in the 1990s, then British Gas and later National Grid (infrastructure), RMC (concrete), P&O and Carnival (shipping again), AngloAmerican (mining) and Laing O'Rourke (construction). He was knighted in 2001 for services to defence and shipbuilding.

Parker remarks: "I've never joined a company that didn't have engineering running in its bloodstream. The only time I veered from that was chairing the court of the Bank of England during the financial crisis [2004-9]. However, under the bank there is a full-scale power station for emergency back-up power, as well as boreholes for water, to keep the credit system going in a major catastrophe. So I used to say, 'At least one aspect of Threadneedle Street I can comment on with some authority!'"

Turning serious again, he adds: "The engineering discipline is very helpful, because you learn the language of the business fast, you can add value much earlier in the cycle."

And that passion has kept Parker engaged, long after most of his cohort has retired. "I never get bored of working with people - even difficult people - and you hope that you are able to turn them around. If they have the talent, even if they are difficult, you have to find ways to harness that talent and make them much more team orientated and more aligned with the values of the organisation. Okay, if that fails, then they fail, and they don't stay with you, but I think it is an excitement of being involved."

### **VOLUNTARY WORK**

In addition to his business role, Parker has contributed to two government reviews about the participation of under-represented groups in corporate boards: women and ethnic minority groups. The latter, which he was invited to lead by politician Vince Cable, became known as the Parker report, and was published in 2017.

Of the challenges facing UK plc as regards human resources, he says: "We have to compete more and more to get really good people into our boardrooms, but also to get culture of differences in the boardrooms. Different mindsets create different observations and comments that lead you to, in my view, better decision making. So, I think that there is a strong business case for what we have suggested."

As far as his role at the SOE, Parker indicates that his main role is to support and advise. To wit: "I think any professional society has to remain relevant to its membership; it has to offer good opportunities for exchange of info and ideas, and good dissemination of knowledge that will help the younger people climb the ladder of experience."

Having directed organisations from inside and out, Parker is equally willing to challenge government. For example, he argues that one of the key issues for British manufacturing today is aligning government and industrial leadership - he cites Germany as a good example.

"There is a huge importance to government and business working hand and glove together. It is just critical that you get that balance right in order to create a strong tax-paying culture. When they want to make money, the first thing that politicians want to do is raise tax. But they should be very interested in the industrial strategy which creates the potential for a much higher profitability in the country in order to create the tax take and the employment that we all want to see." 