

**Birkbeck College, London
Presentation Ceremony**

Saturday 9 March 2002

**Dame Stephanie Shirley
Honorary Fellow**

My Lady President, Chairman (*Judith Mayhew*), Governors, Master (*Tim O'Shea*), Distinguished guests, members of the University, fellow Graduates, Ladies and Gentlemen.

It's a great pleasure to be back here and honoured by Birkbeck, the college I attended in the 1950s. Birkbeck helped me to join the meritocracy and the stimulating mental effort of my time there became, I am glad to say, my subsequent mind-set. Like physical training for games, minds have to be regularly exercised to get the most from them. I try to maintain that level of intellectual fire power, knowing that bit more, thinking a bit more analytically, working those extra hours, refusing to accept the soundbite as the answer to tough and deep seated problems but always aiming to get some right answers for myself.

So thank you Birkbeck.

I thank the college Orator for his kind words and Madam Chairman and all the Governors for nominating me to be a fellow of this college. My college.

It's a long time ago but certain memories remain crystal clear. Two spring to mind - of the crystallographer Professor J D Bernal (always keen on the girls he was) and of Professor Andrew Booth with his early speech recognition work. I spent hours intoning one, two, three, four, into a tape recorder. People think success comes overnight in the computing world but software development has its own tempo. It was 25 years before my own company paid a dividend. Even Microsoft took 10 years.

Business is not just about making profits, tho' if like Mr Micawber you spend more than you earn, you will not find life all that cheerful.

Business is about people. It's about communications between people. It's also about personal excitement, reaching out for goals you thought were unattainable, achieving a level of financial success that's not about greed but is about giving you choices in life, choices that are only there because you have the financial security.

It doesn't matter whether you decide to work for a large organisation with all the opportunities such corporations can offer here and abroad. Or whether you look for customers (rather than a job) and start your own company. The fact is you can make things happen in business. And you can see the results of your efforts. Just as you can see results, but of a different kind, when you go into what we term the caring professions.

I was very fortunate in beginning my career at the very start of the growing software industry – when heavyweight mathematics was required to do even simple programming – and working in a free market economy. Many parallels with the Internet world today.

I am doubly fortunate in now being able to use my wealth and skills in the not for profit sector. Concentrating on the two things I know and care about: Information Technology and the condition of autism.

There are over ½ million families in Britain today affected by autism. Some of the young people thus afflicted are studying for their degrees. Generally not, as you, successfully. They need additional support and assistance if they are to qualify.

George Birkbeck, set out 178 years ago to offer university education to people like me, only able to study part-time. I'm now lobbying the Master and others for similarly improved opportunities for people with conditions such as autism. Here IT can certainly play a very useful role, providing clear, precise and attractive knowledge tailored to the needs of each student.

But knowledge has its limitations. Perhaps knowledge is no longer the treasured possession we thought it was. It needs a range of skills to bring out its worth. Could it be that knowledge has become incidental to skills? Skills which last rather than knowledge which wears out? Skills which help employability in the real world of people, of politics and technology and business, full of subjectivity and human values.

I don't know. But I do know that Birkbeck has been instrumental in my worldly success, in my quest, my questioning and my quality of life. Thank you Birkbeck. Long may you continue your marvellous work.

I am proud to have been a student and very proud to become an honorary Fellow.

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