

TRIBUTE TO PETER BLUNDELL JONES

As part of the celebration of his life and work
University of Sheffield, 16th November 2016

Christine Poulson

I want to say how touched I am by these tributes to Peter and by this wonderful event that the university and the school of architecture has organised. I know Peter would have been, too.

Peter was fortunate in finding a home in Sheffield, where he was so well supported by heads of department who understood him and what he was trying to do and where he was surrounded by so many congenial colleagues.

Looking back over Peter's life I feel that he was fortunate too in knowing so early in life what he wanted to do. He was only twenty-three when he started publishing in the architectural press and twenty-nine when his first book on Hans Scharoun came out. And he never stopped writing. He was hugely prolific. And though he wrote so much, he took his teaching just as seriously and was so generous in the time he gave to his students.

I think he managed to achieve so much by the intensity and single-minded of his focus. And yet other academics are sometimes surprised when I tell them that Peter didn't work in the evenings. But it's true. We always had a family meal and Peter rarely went back to his desk. The twin poles of Peter's life were his work and his family.

Though perhaps it didn't always go so well on occasions when he tried to combine the two! He didn't really do holidays and I am sure the children can all remember the many times when Peter wanted to see just one more building and his cry of 'You can't want to stop for tea yet! We've only just started!'

Looking back over the years he travelled a lot – especially in recent years to China - and much as he enjoyed that, he was always happiest at home in the Peak District in the watermill that we restored and then in our French house that was his last project. His building projects, though few, meant a great deal to him. He was a very practical person and enjoyed working with his hands. He was a faithful friend and kept in touch with people he had known as a boy and as a young man. I want to end by reading from a letter that he wrote to one such friend, Deborah in New Zealand, written in the spring of 2004. In it I hear Peter's voice.

'Padley Mill is lovely, especially at this time of year with everything fresh and green. I am gradually getting the garden under control, getting to know the indigenous plants and encouraging them here, discouraging them there. I bought a coracle to drift around the pond on hot summer days when the trout are rising with a splash to take flies. The walks round here are the best I have ever known: down the valley, up the gorge to the moor, or along the various 'edges' with their rocky outcrops and fantastic views. It's a lovely place for Anna to grow up.

It's odd being middle-aged. Time speeds by so fast. The memory changes as it takes so long for the filing clerks to walk the dusty corridors of the mind, and it seems much more difficult to make a swift retort. All the same I feel a tremendous pressure to refine and round off my

work, to get all those ragged lectures neatly down on paper to see what I have. Hence the books, one after another. The intellectual quest, the discovery, putting things together, is still a big draw for me, getting completely absorbed in whatever it is. I also like to change the world physically by doing work on the house and garden, but it's a bit more effort than it was. I've more or less given up lying under the car to fix things - I get other people to do that, but I still pull pieces of wood out of the stream each winter and spend an afternoon with the chainsaw chopping them up. As for the electronics I used to do, that's now in the stone age, and I get as confused by my computer as everyone else of our generation, cursing the way they keep changing the programmes and making everything more complicated by adding facilities that you don't want.

And I am one of the last people in England without a mobile phone.'

That was something that didn't change!