

It is my profound honour to present to you Heather Wood, a woman whose life embodies the very best of working-class solidarity, feminist activism, and unwavering commitment to social justice.

Heather's story begins in Easington Colliery, where as a miner's daughter, she learnt from a young age the values of community, collective action, and standing up for what is right. At just seventeen, working as a unit clerk, she organised her first walkout against forced overtime, making her first public speech and securing trade union representation for her fellow workers. This was merely the opening chapter of a lifetime dedicated to fighting for others.

Throughout the 1960s and 70s Heather was everywhere change was needed: demonstrating for indoor toilets in colliery houses, performing in plays about the Suffragettes, studying politics at Ruskin College Oxford, and becoming the youngest chair of the Regional Labour Party Women's Advisory Council in its fiftieth anniversary year. Her energy seemed boundless, her vision clear, her determination absolute.

But it was during the 1984/85 miners' strike that Heather's leadership truly blazed. As chair and co-founder of Save Easington Area Mines she established the first Women's Support Group in the United Kingdom, going on to organise thirteen more across the Easington district. When the miners walked out, Heather, her mother Myrtle MacPherson, and a dozen pitmen's wives created a free café feeding up to 500 people at a time, rising to 900 during school holidays. They provided not just meals but hope, community, and solidarity when families needed it most.

Heather's activism during the strike was extraordinary in its scope, organising women's pickets, coordinating international food donations from Russia, East Germany, and France distributing Christmas presents to miners' children speaking at meetings across the country, and working with Northern Arts on the play "Not by Bread Alone," which she performed throughout the North East, London, and Germany. She fought her way into all-male NUM lodge meetings, not for personal recognition, but to ensure the women's work complemented rather than duplicated the miners' efforts.

Even when ill health curtailed her political involvement, Heather never stopped. During her eight years as a county councillor, she continued to serve her community with distinction. She campaigned against underground coal gasification, established residents' associations, founded the Easington Heritage Group, saved her local church, and fought to save the Littlethorpe maternity hospital in Easington village. After training as a nurse, she went on to work in the Probation Service, bringing compassion and understanding to those navigating the criminal justice system.

In more recent years, Heather appeared in Ken Loach's last two social justice films, 'Sorry We Missed You' and 'The Old Oak' experiences that led her to form friendships with the local Syrian migrant population and organise community integration events. In summer 2024, she received the ultimate recognition from her community: an invitation to speak from the platform at the annual Durham Miners' Gala or the Big Meeting as it is known locally, in honour of her work with National Women Against Pit Closures.

Heather Wood represents the best of what education, in its truest sense, can achieve. Though her classroom was the streets, the meeting halls, and the community centres of County Durham, she has taught generations about courage, solidarity, and the power of ordinary people to create extraordinary change. Her life's work reminds us that genuine scholarship exists not only within these walls but in the lived experience and collective wisdom of working-class communities across our region.

In honouring Heather today, this University also honours a form of engagement with our local communities that has never been more vital. At a time when working-class voices are too often marginalised, and adult education opportunities have diminished, the gap between institutions like ours, and the communities we serve threatens to widen, Heather's example illuminates a different path. Her work demonstrates what becomes possible when expertise meets activism, when

education serves solidarity, and when universities recognise the profound knowledge held by those who organise, campaign, and build community beyond the academy.

The challenges Heather has spent her life confronting - economic injustice, the erosion of public services, the struggle for dignity and recognition - remain urgent today. In conferring this degree, we acknowledge not only her past achievements but the continuing relevance of her work and the imperative for deeper, more meaningful partnerships between this University and the region it calls home.

Heather Wood: activist, organiser, inspiration, champion of working-class communities, and eminently worthy of the honour this University bestows upon her today.

Chancellor/Vice-Chancellor I present Heather Wood to receive the degree of Master of Arts honoris causa.