

Members of the faculty, students, staff, families, and friends. Today is a special occasion, an opportunity for our university community to come together to honour a remarkable individual, a man who embodies the spirit of the Northeast of England, and a man who has been described as “a gentle tour de force”.

I'm speaking, of course, about Sir Robert Sydney Murray CBE. Affectionately known as Sir Bob!

A Passion for Education

His story begins in 1940's Consett. A town with a proud industrial heritage, dominated by its steel works, where opportunities outside industry were limited.

Despite leaving school with just one O-level, Sir Bob understood that education wasn't something that ended when you left school. It was a lifelong commitment, and he didn't accept the limitations of his circumstances.

He studied in the evenings at Consett Technical College, pursuing an accountancy qualification whilst he worked, and he qualified as a Chartered Certified Accountant in 1972. This passion for education, training and learning has stayed with him throughout his life and Sir Bob established himself as a shrewd and visionary entrepreneur competing and succeeding at the highest levels of commerce.

Transforming and Giving back

It's perhaps his work with Sunderland AFC, and latterly the Foundation of Light that defines his legacy in the Northeast.

When Sir Bob became Chairman, he didn't just run a football club. In a fanatical region where football isn't just a sport, it's almost a religion. He re-imagined what was possible. He transformed Sunderland's future by building the Stadium of Light, one of the most iconic sports venues in England. A beacon, literally and figuratively.

He championed the development of Sunderland's Academy, investing in young talent and the future of the club. His role in the Stadium of Light extended to the iconic Beacon of Light sculpture, a symbol visible for miles around, representing hope and aspiration for an entire community.

His influence didn't stop at Sunderland either. As an adviser to the FA, Sir Bob's experience laid the foundations for both Wembley Stadium and St George's Park, the national football centre for England.

In those years, Sir Bob did not forget where he came from. Consett, a steelworks town, where he lived in a two up, two down house and ...to quote.... “Red dust everywhere, in the air, in our faces, at our feet”. He understood that success in life means nothing if you don't use it to help others to rise. So, he founded the Foundation of Light, a charity dedicated to supporting the local community.

He has pledged all the proceeds from his autobiography to the Foundation of Light, already gifting over £100,000 towards his personal life-mission to make a positive difference to the lives of others.

There's profound wisdom in the title of Sir Bob's autobiography titled "I'd Do It All Again."

It's not just a catchy phrase. It's a declaration.

It means that despite the challenges -

He would choose Consett.

He would choose Sunderland.

He would choose service to this region.

His legacy and lasting impact

Sir Bob Murray's contribution to the Northeast cannot be overstated. He transformed a football club into a world-class institution. He gave our region a stadium that stands as a monument to ambition and progress. He created a charity that continues to support those in need. Most importantly, he showed generations of young people from this region that your starting point doesn't define your destination.

From the dust of Consett to the heights of national influence and recognition, Sir Bob's journey reminds us that talent, determination to get through the tough times, and personal integrity can overcome many obstacles. He believed in the Northeast when the Northeast needed believing in. He invested in our future when others saw only decline.

This year alone, the Foundation of Light has –

Engaged with over 25,000 people

Delivered 600,000 hours of support

Across over 50 programmes

In this, the 25th year of the Foundation, it has supported and influenced over half a million people. These are the marks of someone who is helping others to rise. These are the marks of a life well lived.

His passion for learning continues and Sir Bob works with Durham University to create initiatives that focus on driving meaningful change for individuals, families, and communities, through innovative education and health projects across Durham County.

So today, as honorary degrees are conferred upon those whose lives exemplify the values, we hold most dear, compassion, wisdom, and an unwavering commitment to the betterment of humanity.

And in a year in which Sir Bob turns 80 years of age, and we also celebrate 25 years of the Foundation of Light, we honour a man who stayed true to his roots, who used his success to serve others, and who proved that one person, with vision and dedication, can truly help transform a region.

Sir Bob it's been an honour for the Vice Chancellor and I to work with you, Leslie, Jaimie and the wider team at the Foundation of Light.

Durham University is proud to welcome you into this company of distinguished scholars and advocates. We present to you this degree of Doctor of Letters, honoris causa, in recognition of your remarkable legacy."

Sir Bob Murray CBE: a local Consett boy who became a Northeast legend.