

# Adaptability, Resilience and Inventiveness

are characteristics that have, and continue, to define Teesside industry.

## Dr. Rowena Sellens shares her views on the future of Teesside.

Most people can easily conjure up a mental picture of Teesside's iconic landscape with its plumes of smoke rising out of giant blast furnaces set amongst vast industrial complexes. It can seem like a dark and imposing place to the imagination, but actually seeing it up close is far more dramatic and unexpected. When Dr. Rowena Sellens first moved to Teesside in the mid 1990s, the Sussex born former ICI researcher who became General Manager Materials of Lucite International's EAME businesses (formerly ICI Acrylics), was immediately struck by the contrasting surroundings. 'If you drive along the motorway towards Wilton, yes, there's the huge Wilton International site on one side, showcasing everything you ever imagined about Teesside, but if you look the other way you have views of Roseberry Topping, along with miles and miles of other rolling hills.'

It was the fact that Teesside actually has 'all needs catered for' in a relatively small geographical area where, according to Rowena, you can enjoy the benefits of busy and vibrant town centers, yet '...drive for an hour and be amongst beautiful countryside'; combined with the 'genuine sense of togetherness' of the area's 'open and friendly people' that persuaded Rowena to make it her home in 1996. And in 2014, when she finally left her twenty eight year ICI/Lucite career to become CEO at London based start-up Eonic Technologies, Rowena couldn't bring herself to move permanently south again. Instead, she retained her house in Northallerton and now enjoys working from home most Fridays, while commuting and living in London during the rest of the week.

As a proud resident of Teesside, Rowena explained that '...all of the people who live here love the area and desperately want it to prosper, but there is still a long way to go before we can call it a prosperous place to live.' As Teesside awaits the outcome of the government's Northern Powerhouse programme, which will likely see the south of



Dr. Rowena Sellens



Wilton International, Teesside

the region receive greater autonomy along with guaranteed funds for much needed investment in housing, transport and skills; Rowena is adamant that Teesside, more so than anywhere, is a region deserving of investment. 'It clearly has the potential to remain as a globally significant manufacturing area and efforts must be made to really drive and invest in the necessary infrastructure needed to help the sectors that genuinely have a long term future to survive and thrive.'

Rowena's frustrations are symptomatic of a region which has achieved so much yet seemingly and comparatively reaped so little. Teesside's industrial heritage began with shipbuilding in the fifteenth century before the discovery of iron ore in Cleveland in the nineteenth century led to the rise of steel manufacturing. Following that, the area played a key role in the development of coal mining in the North East, moving coal through its ports, as well as via the world's first ever railway between Darlington and Stockton. All of this activity paved the way for the emergence of a world class chemicals industry in the 20th century, with the establishment of ICI in Billingham, the firm behind inventions like Perspex and Polyethylene. Yet, despite all of this, Rowena notes that 'There's been limited growth in prosperity, significantly less than what people living here would have liked to have seen.'

Teesside does, however, continue to be at the forefront of industrial trends and innovation, carving out a reputation in biotechnology, electric cars, battery components, flexible toll manufacturing and renewable energy, among other sectors, as well as still boasting a healthy and diverse chemicals industry, made up of a cluster of

companies operating out of the largest integrated chemical complex in the UK. And it is Rowena's experience of the Teesside chemicals sector during her nineteen years in the region with ICI/Lucite that makes her confident that the area already has the strengths it needs to fulfil its potential and re-emerge as a global leader for industrial manufacturing. In her words, 'A key factor in the ongoing success of chemicals companies on Teesside is the world class skills and networks in the region that come from its ICI heritage. It is also these skills as well as the inherent adaptability, resilience and inventiveness that exist here that has enabled new sectors to emerge and flourish.'

Rowena explained that while the demise of ICI was undoubtedly hard for many people on Teesside, the actual break-up of the business ultimately helped make the local sector stronger and more globally competitive. ICI Acrylics, where Rowena worked, was the first major ICI division to be sold in 1999 and this sale signalled the beginning of a new era for the chemicals industry on Teesside, as further acquisitions followed and the demise of ICI began to gather momentum. But according to Rowena, under new ownership, many of the former ICI divisions received further investment and became more focused on continuous improvement and thus stronger operators overall. In her view, 'If this change hadn't occurred they probably wouldn't all exist today.' Furthermore, due to the sheer number of chemical firms that entered the region through merger and acquisition between 1999 and 2007, it meant that by the time AkzoNobel bought what was left of ICI in 2007, there was already an established multi-company chemical industry hub in Teesside, and the sector's future was not threatened by that final step.

Organisations such as NEPIC and CPI have also played a key role in the evolution of the chemicals industry on Teesside post ICI. Rowena argued they have done well to encourage inter-business networks, which have subsequently led to shared learning and increased cooperation among firms with common interests. NEPIC in particular, according to Rowena, has been very effective at gaining access to strategic information and groups of stakeholders. 'These two things can be very powerful, giving firms a far more coherent strategy as well as the ability to have more influence on what happens in the region as well as the sector.' Similarly, CPI has also '...brought in a lot of investment and has been very successful as a centre of excellence.' She was keen to point out, however, that the success of NEPIC and CPI relies heavily on the contribution of the chemical

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companies. 'A huge amount of time and effort is put into these networks by individuals working in the sector, on top of their days jobs.'

In terms of what the region needs from the Northern Powerhouse programme to ensure that the hard work that has gone into consolidating and diversifying industrial manufacturing on Teesside is adequately rewarded and supported, Rowena was quick to point out that the international scope of firms in the area means transport investment must be a priority. 'We need to make it easier for people working for and with global businesses to travel in and out of the region from overseas.' Secondly, Rowena believes that cost efficient energy to support the huge chemical compounds in Teesside is an obvious funding area, while at the same time the already strong skill-base in Teesside needs further investment to make sure the high levels of skills are maintained. Specifically, she added, developing the practical and academic foundations of science and engineering are fundamentally important. A key part of this in Rowena's opinion, is to 'build experiential knowledge through 'on the job' learning.' Being able to adapt to new technologies is also '...an ability that needs to be honed.'

Yet, the hope that there could be some real and impactful positive change on Teesside in the onset of greater investment and devolved powers, has been somewhat tarnished by a major industrial set-back, as steel making, which has been a defining characteristic on Teesside for over a hundred years, has finally come to an end with the recent closure of SSI. Rowena commented that although the ending of SSI is undoubtedly a single huge blow for the south of the region, it's important that Teesside isn't simply condemned. Instead, according to Rowena, the region needs to find a constructive way to respond to this by creating some positive stories about the area, particularly about the successes that help fuel the local economy. 'A way to tip the balance is to find some real 'human' stories that reflect the positive side of what it's

really like here and what is being achieved by the region's businesses. Basically, a positive national media campaign, and not just a defensive one.' She added that during her two decades on Teesside there has already been some big global economic downturns but the region has seemingly tackled those challenges and '...not taken too much of a step back.'

In terms of her own career, Rowena admitted it was a difficult decision to look for a new personal challenge after twenty eight years with ICI/ Lucite, but the opportunity to lead Econic Technologies was impossible for her to refuse. 'Econic has a very exciting and rare proposition in the sense that it's catalyst for utilising CO2 in plastics manufacturing has both strong economic and environmental benefits.' After eighteen months in the role, she is enjoying making an impact and taking on the many challenges associated with establishing a team and commercialising the technology; experiences that will further develop her ability to build different teams and businesses as she goes forward. Rowena explained that at some point in the future she would be happy to find an opportunity closer to her Northallerton 'home' yet admits the first class rail networks in and out of the region enable her to be very mobile, making it easy to essentially go wherever the opportunity takes her. 'I can catch a train from Northallerton on Monday morning at 7:15am and arrive at Econic's London office at 10:30am after working comfortably for three hours on the journey down.'

Rowena firmly believes that there are far more attractive opportunities in Teesside than many people inside or outside of the region perceive there to be. Her view is that people's perceptions of what constitutes an opportunity are sometimes misguided. 'The best opportunities aren't always bigger jobs in bigger companies with bigger salaries, but rather the ones that offer interesting challenges and opportunities to learn and develop.' With the growing diversity of chemical companies in the region those challenges do exist. For Rowena, the chance to develop her skills and knowledge are factors that take priority over the actual 'size' of the job. Rowena shared that she hopes to one day 'give something back' to the region that has given so much to her and would relish the opportunity to use the skills and experience gained through a rewarding career in the chemicals industry by working in a non-executive capacity, for example in an education and training provider as those things '...have been the foundation of my career.' She added, 'to make best use of the skills and talents available, the not for profit sector needs people who are prepared to 'give back'.



Roseberry Topping, Teesside