

The first Professor of Adult Education

In 1923, Nottingham promoted Robert Peers – at the early age of 34 – to a chair, making him the first university professor of adult education in the world. He remained at Nottingham for over 30 years.

Peers was himself a product of adult education: born into a working-class family in Liverpool, and apprenticed to shipbuilders Cammell Laird as a teenager, he won a mature scholarship to Liverpool University through evening classes, and took a 1st class degree aged 25.



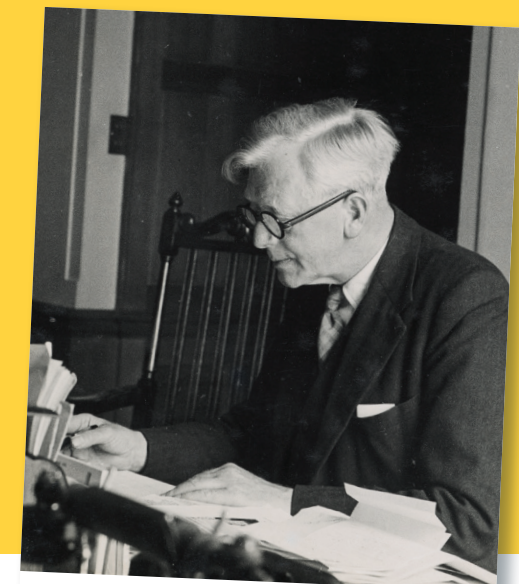
Peers is shown seated in the middle. University College Nottingham, c. 1922. Papers of Robert Peers, Pe Ph 1/15.

A vigorous organiser and advocate of adult education, by 1926 Nottingham had the largest extra-mural tutorial class programme in England outside London, with 11 academic staff; by 1936, when the university college had fewer than 600 full-time students, there were more than 4,000 extra-mural students and 2,000 part-time students in technical evening classes. He expanded both the department's geographical area (into Leicestershire, Rutland and Lincolnshire) and its subjects; he initiated scholarships for working-class students, such as miners. He was also a powerful operator within the University College; as Acting Principal after the Second World War, he won it a Royal Charter and full university status, and became its first Deputy Vice-Chancellor.

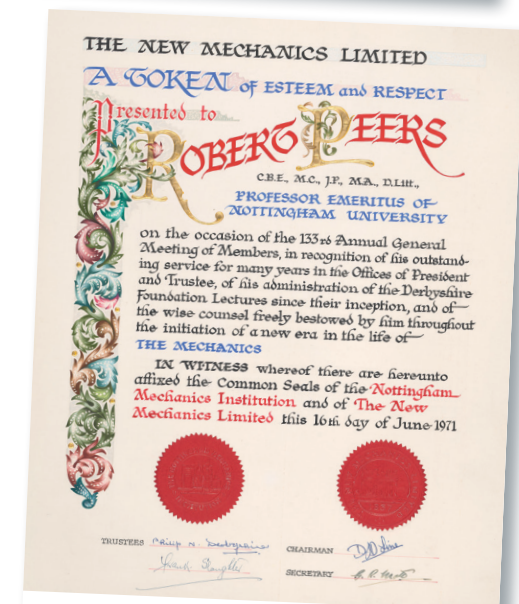
Harold Wiltshire succeeded Peers as director of the extra-mural department. A visionary, he built a network of university adult education centres across the East Midlands, instigated a major national debate about adult education's purposes and methods, and played an important part in establishing the Open University.

When Robert Peers died in 1972, the University decided to name the chair in adult education after him: Michael Stephens became the first Robert Peers professor in 1972, leading the department in the 1970s and 1980s.

The department's leaders did not work alone, of course. They were supported by full-time "staff tutors", by WEA tutor/organisers, by a host of part-time tutors. Many others – administrators, librarians, catering staff, porters – ensured the various centres were efficient, lively and congenial.



Photograph of Robert Peers in his office, c 1950. Papers of Robert Peers, Pe Ph 2/28.



Certificate presented to Robert Peers as a token of esteem and respect in recognition of his outstanding service to the NMI [Nottingham Mechanics Institute], 1971. Papers of Robert Peers, Pe X 21/2.



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