

Professor Patrick Dowling, 1939–2023

CBE, BE, DIC, PhD, CEng, FEng, FRS, FStructE, FICE, FRINA, FCGI

PATRICK DOWLING, who has died at the age of 84, was a 'once encountered, never to be forgotten' character – an eminent academic, a distinguished university figure, an adviser on high-profile and intellectually demanding construction projects, an enthusiastic contributor to professional affairs, and a figure of considerable standing in the community.

Especially important for the Institution of Structural Engineers was his recognition on becoming President in 1994 that its finances were in a dire state. Determined action was needed and, with support from a couple of recent past-presidents, a three-year levy on the membership subscription – designed to make us financially secure – was proposed.

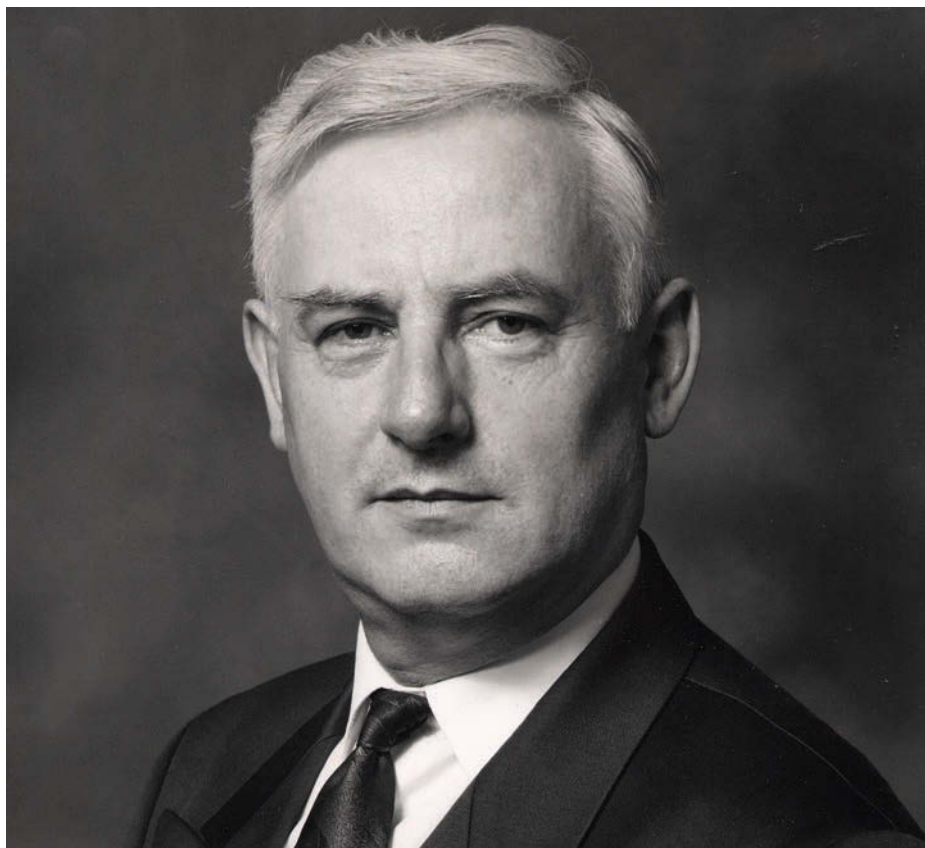
Because of Patrick's insistence that it be fully explained to the membership and presented as a fixed-term voluntary contribution, it was readily accepted, raised the necessary stabilising cash and, as promised, ceased after three years.

As an illustration of Patrick's rare ability to rapidly understand a problem, to conceive a simple but effective solution, to communicate it so that all affected understood the rationale and then to oversee its implementation, this was a model for so much of his professional career.

One of six children born and raised in Dublin, Patrick was an academic prodigy, obtaining his school Leaving Certificate at 16, graduating as the top student of his class from University College Dublin, and winning competitive scholarships for postgraduate education at Imperial College London, where he, once again, excelled and was quickly recruited on to the academic staff. The Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering became and remained his spiritual home.

Research in steel construction flourished in the late 1960s and early 1970s as support was needed for the Merrison Committee set up in the aftermath of the four steel box-girder bridge collapses: Vienna, Milford Haven, Melbourne and Koblenz. His reputation for high-quality research with an end product that could readily be adopted by industry ensured that his reputation – both nationally and internationally – grew rapidly. Recognising the importance for engineering academics of 'translation' and 'impact', he became the first chairman of the committee entrusted with writing EC3, the Eurocode for steel construction.

Patrick's technical and professional influence and contributions extended far and wide. Design work for the Thames Barrier rising sector gates and the Hutton oilfield tension leg platform –



both projects that received the Queen's Award to Industry – chairing both the UK and the subsequent European Steel Design Education Programme projects, playing a key role in establishing the Steel Construction Institute and so on and so on, and all while continuing to produce original and influential research papers – the list is endless.

Appointed professor at Imperial at the age of 40, elected to the Royal Academy of Engineering two years later, and becoming Head of Imperial's Civil Engineering Department in 1985, his legacy was secure. But Patrick had always been relentlessly energetic so, in the same year that he became our President, he accepted the Vice-Chancellorship of the University of Surrey. Two new jobs! How did he cope? In the usual Dowling fashion, by giving both roles the time and attention needed to make a great success of them.

Moving to Surrey provided Patrick with the bigger canvas on which to display his talents; his vision, energy, charm and powers of persuasion ensured that that 'magic touch' first

seen as a precocious schoolboy remained just as powerful. Focusing on industry-academic cooperation and working with the local community, Patrick transformed the university into a highly respected establishment, noted for innovative schemes, ambitious (and successful) expansions of the estate, and broadening the scope of the university while always insisting on high standards.

This Institution has been extremely fortunate to have had Patrick Dowling as a member, spokesman, president and supporter for some 50 years. During that time, his priorities may have changed but his enthusiasm always shone through. 'Get Paddy on the project' was the recipe for its success, while the many associated social gatherings were memorable for their conviviality, humour and longevity.

*Professor D.A. Nethercot
OBE, FEng, FTSE, NAE
Emeritus Professor of Civil Engineering,
Imperial College London, UK*