Leicester University's Richard Atttenborough Centre for Disability and the Arts was described as a centre that 'enriched the lives of us all' when it was officially opened by Diana, Princess of Wales.

The Princess was performing her first official engagement outside London for 18 months - and her first in Leicester since 1991. She looked radiant, relaxed and confident as she smiled and chatted to people who had lined Lancaster Road.

On a day filled with sunshine the Princess, dressed in a powder-blue two-piece suit, was greeted by Lord Atttenborough, Patron of the Centre, as she stepped off the Royal Squadron helicopter which landed in Regent College, opposite the RAC. She was received by the Vice-Chancellor of the University, Dr Kenneth Edwards, on entering the building and then went on meet to dignitaries, supporters, staff and students at the centre.

They included the Lord Lieutenant of Leicestershire Mr Tim Brooks; Lord Mayor Mr Ray Flint; Chairman of Council Sir Edwin Nixon; Chairman of the Fundraising Committee Mr Derek Mellor; honorary patron and leader of the City Council Mr Peter Soulsby; Chairman of Leicestershire County Council Mr Alan Kind; founder students Steve and Sue Pallett; associate directors Rachel Sullivan and Alan Caine; director Dr Eleanor Hartley; architect Ian Taylor and consultant quantity surveyor Michael Latham.

She was presented with a bouquet of flowers by student Claire Ribbins before entering the hall where she saw a dance...Continued overleaf

In this beautiful building I have seen what I thought was impossible. I have met students in wheelchairs who were dancing, visually disabled artists creating superb sculptures and a painter who has been blind since birth.

People with disabilities are able to become involved and excel in all kinds of artistic activities. The joy and purpose throughout the building can be felt.

Diana, Princess of Wales
workshop with wheelchairs staged by students of the centre and co-ordinated by dance tutor Louise Katerega. The Princess then toured the Centre during her visit which lasted a total of 105 minutes. She walked along the Patron’s Gallery featuring works by Elizabeth Frink, Bryan Organ, Sir Hugh Casson and Bryan Kneale among others. Moving into the Sculpture Studio, the Princess met students at work and chatted with them before going to the Library where there was a private reception with principal sponsors and patrons.

Thereafter, the Princess returned to the Hall for the official opening ceremony. The Vice-Chancellor spoke of his involvement over a decade with the Richard Attenborough Centre and paid tribute to Lord Attenborough and the supporters and staff for their efforts in the creation of the centre.

ORD Attenborough reminisced about his early years at Leicester and described the visit by the Princess as ‘an auspicious and triumphant day for the University.’

The Princess spoke about how touched she was being asked to open the Centre: “In this beautiful building I have seen what I thought was impossible. I have met students in wheelchairs who were dancing, visually disabled artists creating superb sculptures and a painter who has been blind since birth.

People with disabilities are able to become involved and excel in all kinds of artistic activities. The joy and purpose throughout the building can already be felt.”

Director Dr Eleanor Hartley thanked the Princess and Lord Attenborough not simply for their support but for their endorsement of the work of the Centre, before thanking some of the prominent individual patrons and workers of the RAC.

“The Princess of Wales spoke to every student and she had time to ask them all about their work. It was a terrific endorsement for everyone who has been working on this project,” said Dr Hartley.

Students too expressed their delight at being able to meet the Princess. Miss Maninder Sanghera was among those who took part in the contemporary dance workshop. She said: “It was a lifetime experience because I never thought I would meet her. It shows someone appreciates you and that you are not just doing it for your own sake.”

Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Terry Johnson, who is now a student at the centre, also chatted with the Princess. Maureen Herricks, another student, spoke of how thrilled she was that the Princess had taken an interest in her painting.

Mrs Sue Pallett said: “The whole idea of the centre is that both local people and people from further afield will come and use the centre and hopefully the Princess’s visit will help get that message across.”

Actor, director and writer Nabil Shaban, an honorary patron of the centre, said he hoped the visit would help gain recognition of the fact that disabled artists already contributed to British and world culture.

THE BUILDING

The building was designed by architect Ian Taylor of Bennetts Associates, following a national competition run by the Royal Institute of British Architects and sponsored by The Independent, to devise an arts centre which would be fully accessible to disabled people.

Out of 128 entries in the architectural competition, Ian Taylor’s designs were selected partly because of his insistence on discussing issues of access with different groups of people with disabilities in order to produce a centre to meet as many needs as possible. The result is a Centre which uses space, light, textures, materials and other features to move around the building and the use of equipment inside its workshops completely relaxing, friendly and comfortable. Each area has different floor coverings and surfaces, and use is made of feeling, sound and smell. Clever use has been made of glass to increase the light throughout, enhanced by imaginative artificial lighting.

The two-storey centre provides high quality acoustics and is equipped with sculpture, painting, music and drama studios, a research library and study area.
THE FUND-RAISING CAMPAIGN

Over a period of five years, inspired by Lord Atttenborough, the Richard Atttenborough Centre carried out a fund-raising campaign to raise the £2 million necessary to build an arts centre designed to offer full access to people with disabilities.
With stalwart support from the Friends of the Centre, who raised money locally through coffee mornings, bazaars and fashion shows, and financial support from local and national sponsors, the Centre finally reached its target in 1995 with the award of £730,000 from the National Lottery through the Arts Council of England.

Other major donors include The Baring Foundation, The Foundation for Sport and the Arts, The Vivien Duffield Foundation, The Richard Atttenborough Foundation and The Paul Hickenbottom Foundation. Leicester sponsors include The Lord Mayor’s Appeal and City Challenge.

AN AUSPICIOUS AND TRIUMPHANT DAY FOR THE UNIVERSITY


As many of you will know, I was brought up here - not just in Leicester, but on this very campus which was then a University College. My father was the Principal and he was largely responsible for the College achieving full University status.

As you can imagine, a father immersed, as he was, in higher education, desperately wanted all three of his sons to attend university and gain a degree. Two of his offspring, my brothers David and John, fulfilled this ambition. But I, mad keen to be an actor, went instead to the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art in London.

And so it is, that I stand before you on this very auspicious and triumphant day for Leicester University and admit that my biggest regret in life - perhaps my only true regret - is that I never attended university.

But had I wanted to do so - and been prepared to work hard enough to gain a place - there was nothing to stop me.

Unless, of course, I happened to be disabled. And the kind of higher education I wanted to pursue required active participation in the visual and performance arts. If that was the case - until today here in Leicester - I would find myself excluded. Excluded not by lack of ability or enthusiasm but purely because the buildings in which these arts have traditionally been taught are physically inaccessible and lack the aids that enable people with a whole range of disabilities to get around them and communicate with their tutors.

Of far too long we, as a society, have excluded disabled people from every form of artistic expression - both as participants and as spectators.

Some years ago, I was involved in an inquiry which set out to examine the whole question of accessibility.

What we discovered was shameful. The provision for access in almost every one of this country's colleges and major arts institutions was virtually non-existent.

Today, the situation is slowly beginning to improve and, even more importantly, so are attitudes. But I am conscious that we still have a very long way to go.

So when I was asked by Dr Eleanor Hartley, its Director, to help raise the money to build this Centre, I found it impossible to refuse. Here was an irresistible opportunity - to make higher education in the arts fully accessible to those with disabilities and to create a brand new building with their needs, for once, at the very forefront of the design. No cheap and bodged adaptations. No grudging, tacked-on facilities. No sending those in wheelchairs to some hidden rear entrance next to the dustbins.

Continued overleaf
This is not a building for able-bodied people. They are welcome, of course. But their needs and their comfort are secondary. That was the brief we gave competing architects in the competition organised with the help of The Independent newspaper and the RIBA in 1993. The building had to be totally accessible and - just as important - it was to be created out of the finest materials and it had to be beautiful.

The winner of that competition was Ian Taylor and I think you will all agree he has fulfilled his brief with elegance, with taste and with sheer inspiration. Indeed, Jonathan Glancy the architectural correspondent of The Independent wrote of Ian and of the building "... what could have been one of the worthiest but dreariest building types of its kind (because that is how we have tended to treat those with disabilities) is, instead one of the most subtly inspiring buildings in this country."

Here, on this site, Ian has proved that the United Kingdom is able to lead the way in such design. Our record in the past has been a disgrace. Let us hope that this Centre will be the first of many such new buildings, both here and throughout the world.

The vision of full educational access to the visual and performance arts for those with disabilities is, of course, that of the Centre's director, Eleanor Hartley and her two staunch associates, Rachel Sullivan and Alan Caine. Their persistence and their determination to take their classes out of the cramped, dingy basement across the road which was their original home, has made this new Centre a reality. I salute them for daring to dream what, along the way, often seemed an utterly impossible dream and with very real affection congratulate them on their magnificent achievement.

Today, eight long years after I first met Eleanor Hartley to discuss this building, it exists.

Already it has over 400 accredited students and 20 teachers - with many more to come.

There is, I believe, no more appropriate person than Diana, Princess of Wales, to be our guest of honour today. Her concerns - demonstrated so powerfully and so successfully on behalf of those who fall victim to landmines - echo those of all of us who have fought for so long to bring this Centre into being. It is, therefore, with the very greatest of pleasure that I ask her now to declare this Centre formally open.

THE WORK OF THE CENTRE

People with disabilities are the priority of the Richard Attenborough Centre, which is part of the University's Department of Adult Education.

It is open to everyone who would like to participate in a programme of integrated arts education. Most activities are planned to include a wide range of abilities. Some are particularly designed for people with little or no background in the subject. Other courses are intended to provide people with a route to further training and professional opportunities. Professional training courses are run regularly at the Centre.

The Centre employs staff with specialist knowledge of the arts, who have a real understanding and awareness of disability issues. It is expected that an increasing number of full- and part-time staff will themselves have disabilities.