

### From Apprentice to Director

All of us can look back on our lives and identify common elements that have made us the people we are today; the influence of our parents, where we were brought up, who we marry etc. Far fewer of us would add 'taking an apprenticeship' to the list. However, Keith Shankland, who after 36 years with Hanson left the company in December at the age of 58, is in no doubt that the apprenticeship he took during the 1960s affected the course of his life from that point onwards.



***"I attended Merthyr Country Grammar School, but in those days if you went to university you had to be academic and have relatively wealthy parents! I wanted to be a mechanical engineer and was offered an apprenticeship with the Coal Board – I've been grateful for that opportunity for more than forty years. Until my final months at work, I was still using and benefiting from the knowledge I learnt at that time."***

Keith Shankland left school at sixteen in 1965, but due to some unfortunate timing there were no apprenticeship places until the following year and so he spent ten months as a mining trainee, a 'hands on' experience that proved extremely useful.

***"In 1966 I moved to Merthyr Vale Colliery and started an engineering apprenticeship, attending Merthyr Technical College and Glamorgan Polytechnic from 1968 to 1972. I gained my City & Guilds Intermediate and Final in Mechanical Engineering and MTEC Engineering Class 1."***

***"No-one reading this should think for an instant that all this is a 'bit of history' and not relevant to people today. I'll tell you a few facts: apprenticeships provide a level of skills and training that university courses are generally not geared to, all of the other apprentices I met while I was doing mine have had very successful careers in their chosen fields, people who have completed an apprenticeship are very 'saleable' within a range of industries."***

The latter point is well demonstrated by Keith when he left the coal industry in 1973 following the miners' strike in 1972. He secured an interview at Butterley Brick's (National Star) Merthyr Tydfil works and when he walked into the room, found the prospective interviewers pouring over a factory plan, struggling to solve a serious problem with production.

*“They showed me the drawings,” says Keith. “Perhaps surprisingly, a lot of the technology behind brick production is similar to that in the coal industry and after a short while I pointed at the plan and told them the solution. I got the job there and then! “I would never knock university degrees, because they provide an excellent start to a career for many people. However, they don’t suit everyone and they don’t suit every situation. But the point is not whether to go to university or take an apprenticeship – it’s about considering an apprenticeship as your own personal career move. In my latter years in business I was responsible for overseeing the appointment of apprentices within the company and so have a keen interest in this from an employer’s point of view.*

*“There is normally a strong feeling of loyalty between the apprentice and the employer that goes both ways, and which often leads to the apprentice making their career with the company that helps to train them. Many of our senior managers began as apprentices years ago.*

*“And if I was looking to appoint someone from outside to an operational post, I would be keener to employ a person who had completed an apprenticeship, rather than a degree. This might not be the case for every post, but it’s hard to beat good hands-on experience for many fields. Training is vital – even if it’s just how to dig a hole in the ground correctly.*

*“The country needs skilled crafts people and it always will. I believe that any person, not just students but ‘mature’ people as well, who are looking to improve or change their careers should examine the huge range of apprenticeships that are now available.”*

Keith Shankland is a chartered engineer, and Fellow of the Institute of Materials, Minerals and Mining. Until December 2008 he was operations director of Hanson Building Products, with responsibility for 50 operational sites, engineering workshops and laboratories. He was also accountable for all matters relating to manufacturing operations, including health and safety, technical and major capital projects plus quality R&D.

Keith held the positions of president at both the Institute of Clay Technology (ICT) and the National Federation of Brickmakers, and has been involved at national level, via the British Ceramic Confederation, with industry-led health and safety initiatives. He is also a former director of Proskills, one of a network of 25 employer-led Sector Skills Councils (SSCs) tasked by the government with ensuring employers have people with the right skills to boost productivity and competitiveness.