

James Timpson
Doctor of Science
Durham Cathedral, 3 July 2024

James Timpson was always going to join the Timpson family business, having enjoyed helping out in shops as long as he can remember and getting his first Saturday job at the Timpson shop in Northwich when he was 14 years-old. His love of geography, travel and culture though lead him to Durham University in 1991, to pursue a degree in Geography. After that, his brother would join him and, much more recently, his daughter Niamh. He recounts his time at Hatfield College fondly, living above the porter's lodge in his first year before moving out to the viaduct area. Outside of his lectures he played rugby, starting in the fourth 15 and eventually playing on one occasion for the 1st team, alongside students who would go on to play for England and Scotland.

Outside of the great academic accolades Durham University is recognised for internationally, Durham's popularity as a place to study comes down to two infamous facts. First, that it is home to what was once ranked the worst nightclub in Europe – Klute. (RIP Klute) James remembers nights out at Klute, the Shakespeare, the Dun Cow, and of coming out of Dunelm to visit Jason's Donner-Van right outside. But the second statistic that Durham is known for, though hotly debated, is that 72% of Durham students end up married to each other, compared to a reported 20% at other universities.

This certainly rang true for James and his friends, and his life changed on the day he met an anthropology student called Roisin just a stone's throw from where we are today, at 24 North Bailey, where she was working behind the bar. Roisin went on to become his wife, and James recounts the day he met her as the very best moment of his time at Durham.

During his degree, James continued to work in North East Timpson stores, traveling to Bishop Auckland, Sunderland, Eldon Square and the Metro Centre branches to cover colleagues' annual leave. There was no Timpson then in Durham, although

James did try to persuade the then Master of Hatfield, Dr Barber, that his double garage by Dunelm bridge would be much better used as a small shop. Even James had to acknowledge though that it would have turned a greater profit selling alcohol to students rather than it would shoe repairs and key cutting.

On leaving Durham, James returned to the family business. He is now known not only as an innovative businessman and author, but also for his work on prison reform. Growing up as a child alongside many children and young people – 90 in total - who were adopted or fostered by his parents, James learnt a lot in his formative years about the harms that the criminal justice system could compound. As an adult, his interest was reignited when he and Roisin were offered a tour of a Young Offender Institute in 2002 and the young man showing him round had no job to go to when he had completed his sentence. ‘I’ll give you a job Matt’, James told him. Matt is still working at Timpson today as a branch manager.

From this one job offer, he slowly increased the number to 25, then 60, then 100. Today ex-offenders make up around 10% of the Timpson workforce, that’s 650 men and women from prison, making them one of the largest employers of ex-offenders in the UK. He has set up trading academies in prisons, established the employment advisory board network, conducted a review for the government on prison officer training, and has served as Chair of the Prison Reform Trust for the last 9 years. He is rightly proud of his work encouraging other companies to employ prison leavers, and the number of people leaving prison with jobs on release has grown from 14% to 34% today.

‘Prisoners are no different from you and I, they want to go on to home to their families after a day’s work, to read their kid’s bedtime stories at night, and they want to be treated as part of society’, James says. His work and passion for change is helping make this happen for many more ex-offenders, as well as at a more systematic level.

Vice-Chancellor, I present James Timpson to receive the degree of Doctor of Science *honoris causa*.