As he prepares to stand down as Vice-Master of Birkbeck in summer 2014, Professor Philip Dewe reflects on the magnificent new campus

Just over 190 years ago, George Birkbeck called a meeting at the Crown and Anchor tavern on the Strand in London, to discuss the idea of establishing a Mechanics’ Institute to educate London’s working population.

That Institute went on to become Birkbeck College, and George Birkbeck’s rallying call that “now is the time for the universal benefits of the blessings of knowledge” is as powerful and relevant today as it was nearly two centuries ago.

Our 190th anniversary – a significant milestone in our history – seemed like an auspicious moment to launch a major new initiative. Along with our partner, the University of East London, we formally opened University Square Stratford (USS) in the presence of Her Royal Highness The Princess Royal, Chancellor of the University of London, on 5 November 2013.

This has been a long journey for Birkbeck. Beginning eight years ago, in 2005, even before the Olympics were announced, we identified Stratford as a place to take our research-led, part-time evening teaching model.

The success of this venture is a tribute to the whole College and all those who have contributed to our work in Stratford and east London. Together, we have worked hard to develop our own unique presence, by engaging with the community, tirelessly exploring opportunities for widening participation, developing programmes that capture the aspirations of those living in east London and which complement their ambitions and hopes, and teaching in ways – and in places – that allow people to study in their own community, achieve their ambitions and become part of the wider Birkbeck community.

This has been accompanied by our desire to build relationships within the community, by establishing our presence in the heart of that community, adding to (and becoming part of) a regenerative process, and contributing to the change that continues to add to the vibrancy and diversity of Stratford today.

All this while we watched USS grow into the magnificent building that it is now. We worked in groups, established teams, developed partnerships, managed, administered and taught to ensure that we could now celebrate our part in this success.

This achievement is a tribute to the courage of our governors, the leadership of our Master and the work of all those across the College who simply believe in what Birkbeck stands for and the unique contribution that we make to higher education.

Birkbeck has constantly adapted and changed to face many challenges over the years, and I think that we can confidently say that we have stayed true to the founding mission. I am proud that we are a college that George Birkbeck would still recognise and that the new USS building breathes new life into our established traditions.

I am certain that this is not the last word on our important work in east London, even if these are the last words that I may write on a project that has been very close to my heart in my time as Vice-Master at Birkbeck.

Philip Dewe is Vice-Master of Birkbeck and Professor of Organizational Behaviour.