GILL COOKE:

Gill Cooke was applying for a new job at an aerospace company when the manager interviewing her brought up her Whitworth Scholarship.

She had finished her apprenticeship, qualified as an engineer and had no idea of the door her recently-obtained Whitworth medal was about to open.

“The managing director actually said to me that it was the scholarship that made the difference,” Cooke recalls, explaining how she was hired. “His professor at Cambridge had been a Whitworth Scholar had been more proud of that than his PHD and his research.”

Later in life, being a Whitworth Scholar would help make important connections as Cooke secured consulting work, before moving into academia.

“It helps you stand out,” she says. “To be different. To add something that others don’t have. More informally, it’s the network, the society and being part of a group of like-minded people who are there if you need them.”

Professor Cooke, who is now head of teaching at the engineering school at The University of Warwick, is responsible for every aspect of what she calls the “student journey”.

With a background in quality engineering and machine tools, she feels a strong connection to Sir Joseph Whitworth’s work in the field of standardisation and precision measurement. But for her, Whitworth’s legacy stretches beyond his “technical creations” to the scholarship he founded in 1868, which continues 150 years later. She is a past president of the Whitworth Society, which supports scholars.

“Engineers have a duty to contribute to a better world. For me, the most important thing is that we have the best engineers. Doesn’t matter whether they are male or female, what their country of origin is, or what their political and religious beliefs are. To solve societal problems, we need the very best engineers. We should all be treated with dignity and respect.”

Cooke thinks that were he alive today, Sir Joseph would look at modern technology and think of ways it could make an impact in the future. He would be “looking for opportunities”, she reckons.

To those weighing up a career in engineering or applying for the scholarship, Cooke has this to say: “Engineering is the most worthwhile and rewarding career you can follow. It has the potential to impact many, many people in a positive way. It’s not an easy route. It’s a hard qualification to get. But that’s what makes it valuable. So hold on to your dreams, work hard and go for it!”