MICHAEL WOOD and

RIKKI JONES

Michael Wood has been a Whitworth Scholar twice as long as Rikki Jones has been alive.

Wood was awarded his Whitworth medal not long after the Second World War. Jones received his 63 years later, in 2016. The two men represent the depth and range of the Whitworth network, which both scholars consider to be incredibly valuable.

Wood is retired now, but spent most of his 90 years teaching at Cambridge University. He jokes that he only “gave up” because the undergraduate students became “far too clever”. As a past president of the Whitworth Society, he believes the scholarship is special.

“The programme combines practical experience in workshops with intellectual education in engineering,” Wood says. “It’s the combination of the two, which makes for really good engineers.”

Jones is the kind of engineer Wood has in mind. Having started out as an apprentice, Jones is now a principle engineer at Babcock, a global company with 35000 employees. The 30-year-old says he pursued his degree and the Whitworth Scholarship because of a hunger to know more about his industry.

“The greatest thing is the network of great engineers, right across the industry, that I now have access to,” says Jones. “We all share common interests and are all very passionate about what we do. There is always someone you can speak to.”

Jones is proud to be an engineer. For as long as he can remember, he has been ripping things apart to see what makes them work. He loves it when his 9-year-old nephew runs up to him and asks: “Can you fix this, uncle Rikki?”

To which Jones usually replies: “You know I can. I can fix anything.”

Jones sees the skills gap as a major challenge for the engineering industry. Wood says it’s about showing young people the benefits of apprenticeships. He says those without hands-on experience can sometimes find themselves “lost at sea” in university lectures.

Wood says the major change he has observed in engineering is a steady rise in the percentage of young people who study at universities. He thinks that if Sir Joseph Whitworth were alive today, he would be “enormously excited” by things like 3D modelling and printing, exploring their potential across industries. Jones reckons Whitworth would feel a great sense of pride but would continue to urge engineers to push boundaries. One way, he says, would be to apply for a Whitworth scholarship.

“Go for it. It’s a unique experience,” says Jones. “It’s taken me to some great places. I’ve met some great people. It adds another element to your life as an engineer. Grab it with both hands!”