Farm robot unveiled

The team behind the project are Dr Vic Callaghan, Dr Martin Colley, Dr Libor Spacek, Dr John Standeven, Adrian Simmonds and Hani Hagras. They have been working on the project for more than two years in conjunction with Malcolm Carr-West, Head of Engineering at Writtle, and Basildon-based tractor firm New Holland. HM Computing Ltd and Wind River Systems Ltd (whose software was used in the Mars Rover) have supported the project.

Before the practical demonstration took place, Dr Callaghan explained how the robot-tractor works on the principle of fuzzy logic with genetic algorithm based learning - a kind of computer intelligence inspired from work on biological systems. He said the initial motivation for developing fully automated machinery came from the need to make harvesters more productive, and the decreasing agricultural workforce.

Dr Callaghan (left) with Malcolm Carr-West of Writtle College systems Ltd (whose software was used in the Mars Rover)

The robot-tractor promises to be a new face down on the farm in the next century - thanks to the work of a research group from the Department of Computer Science. The researchers unveiled a prototype of their robot tractor to representatives from industry and the agricultural media at Writtle College, the University’s partner college near Chelmsford, at the end of last term.

Leaving presentation for ‘unflappable’ Registrar

A large number of colleagues gathered to wish Fraser Woodburn all the best for the future at a reception to mark his departure, after six years as the Registrar and Secretary of the University.

The Vice-Chancellor, Professor Ivor Crewe, told the gathering on 16 December that financial difficulties experienced by the University made his entry into the job an ‘uncomfortable’ one. He told Fraser that his ‘unflappable authority’ meant that ‘the University has not had to face such financial skids since.’ On the contrary, the University has grown and seen increases in student numbers, degree programmes, and academic staff, as well as the establishment of more centres, more grade 4-5-rated research departments, more library space and student accommodation, and improved IT facilities.

Fraser, he said, had managed these changes with ‘enormous skill’ and ‘little fuss...all of his successes have been accomplished without an angry memo or raised voice.’ After presentations from the University and the Students’ Union, Fraser said he had a lot of people to thank for their support during his time at Essex - the University, he said, could boast an administration ‘as good as any University I know and better than any I have worked in.’

He said it had been a ‘wonderful job,’ adding ‘it has taken a very special job to tempt me away.’ Fraser took up his new job as Secretary of the Open University earlier this month.