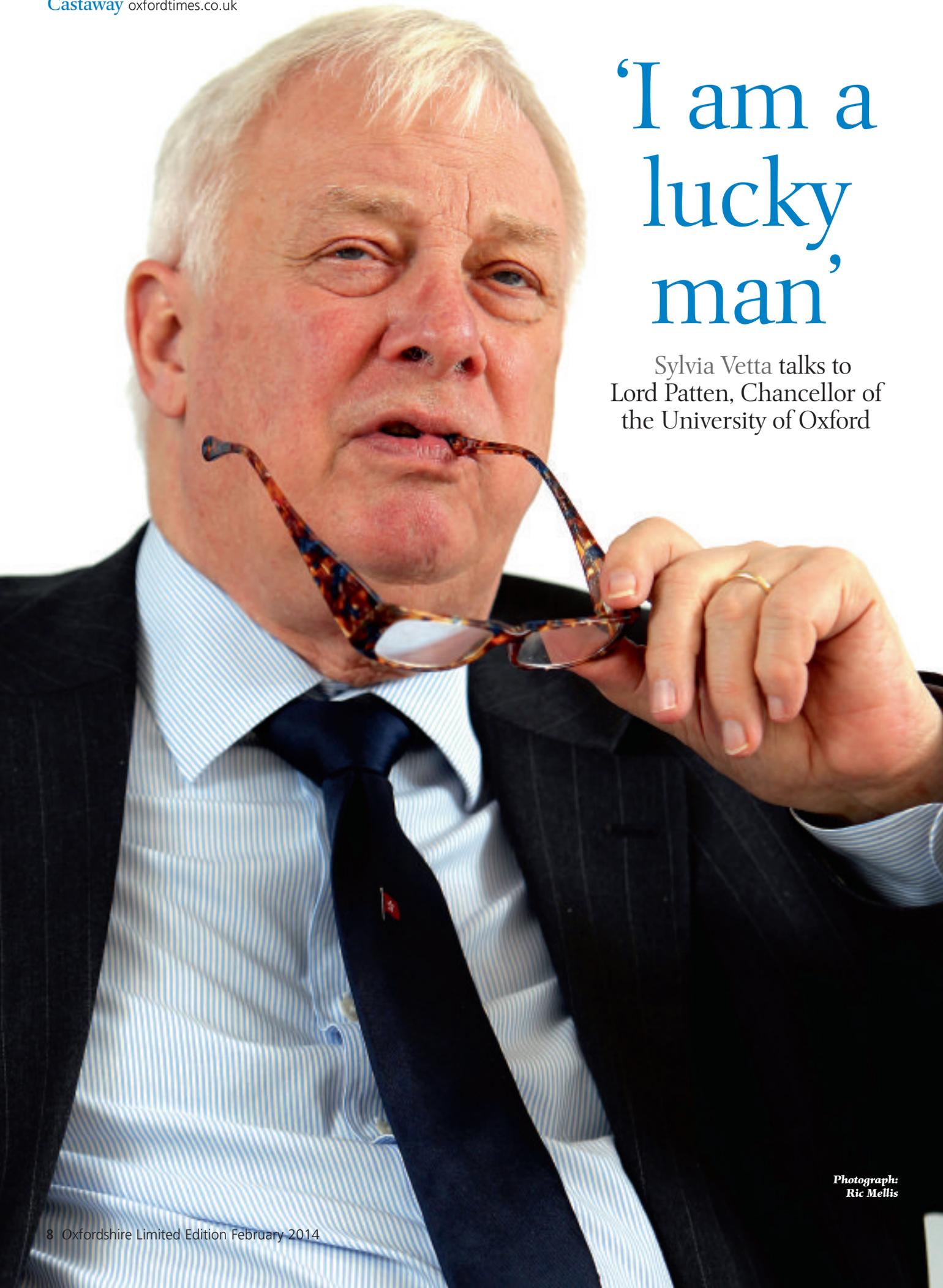


# 'I am a lucky man'

Sylvia Vetta talks to Lord Patten, Chancellor of the University of Oxford



*Photograph:*  
Ric Mellis

**L**ord Patten, Chancellor of the University of Oxford, will be probably best remembered as the man who helped orchestrate the handover of Hong Kong to China in 1997.

He has happy memories of his time in Hong Kong – and remains well-loved by people there. A fact illustrated by what he experienced on a return to the former British colony.

“Two years ago, 16 members of my family spent an unforgettable Christmas in Hong Kong. When walking around the city, I was recognised and treated rather like an ageing rock star!”

Born in May, 1944, Christopher Francis Patten’s story is one of considerable upward mobility. He arrived at Balliol College, Oxford, from St Benedict’s School in Ealing, having won an exhibition to study history – the first member of his family to attend university.

Between Lord Patten’s arrival in Oxford as a student and being appointed Chancellor of the University in 2003, is a story of an epic career in politics.

After graduating in 1965, Lord Patten worked for the campaign of then-Republican New York Mayor John Lindsay. He worked for the Conservative Party from 1966, first as desk officer and then – from 1974 to 1979 as director of the Conservative Research Department.

He began his Parliamentary career in 1979 as Conservative MP for Bath. Ten years later he was appointed to the Cabinet as Secretary of State for the Environment and was responsible for administering the so-called Poll Tax which, at the time, he robustly defended.

In 1990 he was appointed Conservative party chairman by John Major and, in 1992, orchestrated their unexpected fourth consecutive General Election victory – but lost his own seat in the process.

He turned down offers of a new seat and instead, in July, 1992, became the 28th and final Governor of Hong Kong until its handover to the People’s Republic of China in 1997.

In his book *East and West* Lord Patten wrote: “I felt as I left that Hong Kong had marked and shaped me more than anything in my life before.”

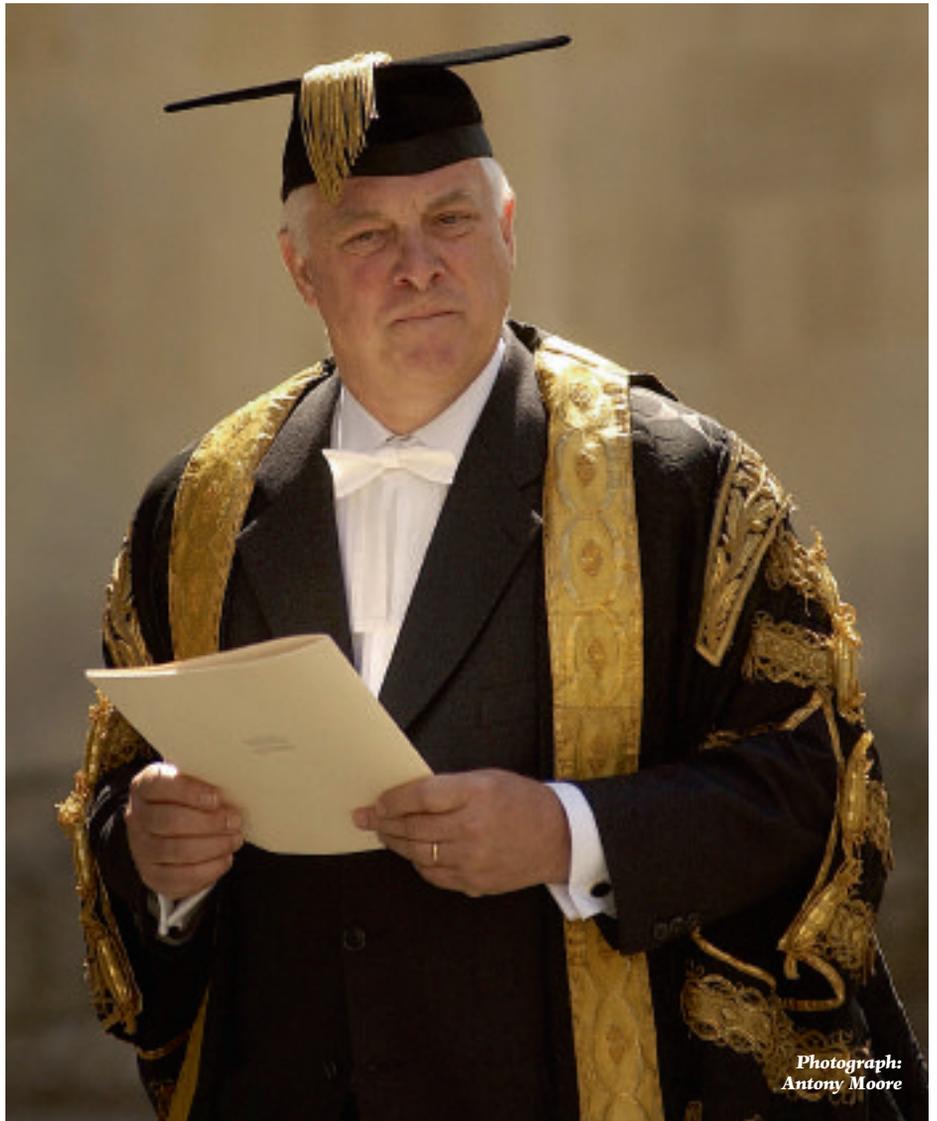
In 1999, he was appointed as one of the United Kingdom’s two members to the European Commission as Commissioner for External Relations where he was responsible for the EU’s development and co-operation programmes. Lord Patten oversaw many crises in the area of European foreign policy, most notably the failure of the European Union to come up with a common unified policy before the Iraq war in 2003. Although nominated for the post of President in the next Commission in 2004, he was unable to gain support from France and Germany.

In 2005 he was raised to the Peerage as Baron Patten of Barnes, in the London Borough of Richmond upon Thames.

In May 2011, on the advice of the coalition government led by Prime Minister David Cameron, Lord Patten of Barnes was appointed Chairman of the BBC Trust.

The son of Frank (a jazz drummer) and Joan Patten, he has experienced life at the pinnacle of many of this country’s top institutions. And he is hugely grateful to a teacher at St Benedict’s School, Ealing, who gave him the confidence to apply for a place at Oxford.

“It is thanks to my history master at St



Photograph:  
Antony Moore

*“Hong Kong has all the characteristics of a free society, except the ability to elect its own government. I would say it has reached the mid-point of my hopes and expectations. Hong Kong has a greater sense of citizenship than anywhere else in Asia.”*

Benedict’s, Paul Olsen, that I came to Oxford,” Lord Patten said. “I was expected to apply to Peterhouse, Cambridge to read English. The Cambridge entry exams were in January. Mr Olsen suggested I try the earlier Oxford exams (in December) even though I did not know much history. I guess I wrote good enough essays because I was offered an exhibition.”

Considering that he was only 16 at the time he sat those entrance exams, he is being rather modest.

Paul Olsen encouraged his pupil to study at his old college, Balliol. He took up his place 18 months later – so what did he do in the interim?

“I decided I was not going to do any more exams,” Lord Patten said. “I should have gone abroad and learned Swahili or something but instead I stayed at school and was captain of games’ teams. I played a lot of rugby and cricket and probably wasted my time.”

What were the future Chancellor’s first impressions of Oxford?

“My first impression was an extraordinary feeling of freedom. I had at least a partial sense

of being an adult – of having come coming of age – despite some of the ridiculous rules in those days concerning times when you could be locked out at night,” Lord Patten said.

“As a student at Oxford you are very much on your own. You leave behind the classroom structure and have to meet the demands of producing an essay each week for a demanding tutor.

“Some students find it nerve-wracking, but it is good training. I missed Richard Southern (the noted English medieval historian) but his successor, Maurice Keen, was also a distinguished medievalist. My other tutors were the Marxist historian Christopher Hill and Richard Cobb, who specialised in the French Revolution.

“I did not work as hard as I should have done but I learned to write, did a lot of acting and writing for reviews, played cricket and made friends for life.”

Would he have been surprised if someone suggested he would one day become Chancellor of the venerable university?

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“Some of their spokesmen used colourful cultural revolutionary language. They had said I was ‘a sinner condemned for a thousand generations’, but I got early remission!”

Lord Patten recalls negotiations over Hong Kong with Chinese officials



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“I would have concluded that the speaker had indulged in a heavy dose of pot!” Lord Patten laughed, adding: “In a very real sense I was made by my experiences at Balliol and Oxford.”

When Lord Patten graduated he was intending to become a graduate trainee in the BBC, however he was awarded a Coolidge travelling scholarship to the United States, another experience which shaped his life.

Sadly, his father died when his son was 23 and only recently returned from that life-changing experience in the USA working for the mayor of New York, John Lindsay.

“I was the first of my family to go to university and my parents were enormously proud of me and I am only sorry that my father did not live long enough for me to form a grown-up relationship with him.”

But working with Lindsay, Lord Patten got the political bug and back, in the UK, joined the Conservative Research Department.

“The rest is history,” he said.

That history was a high-powered political career in the Conservative Party before losing his seat in that fateful General Election in 1992.

“When veteran US politician, Adlai Stevenson lost an election he said he felt like a little boy who had stubbed his toe on the bottom of the bed. He felt he was too old to cry but it hurt too much to laugh,” Lord Patten

said. “That was slightly my experience, but the electors of Bath, did me a big favour. If I had won, according to John Major’s memoirs, he would have made me Chancellor of the Exchequer and a few months after the election, we were ejected from the European Monetary Union (Black Wednesday) and who knows how I would have fared after that.

“But thanks to the electors of Bath and for my own determination not to fight a by-election, I was sent to Hong Kong to the most fabulous five years of my life and I think that’s true for my family too. It was the best job I ever had so I am grateful to the electors of Bath.”

Part of the Chancellor’s book *East and West* tells the story of his time in Hong Kong and the five-year preparations for the handover of the former colony.

Negotiations were predictably difficult – and Lord Patten sometimes had to face a barrage of insults.

“Some of their spokesmen used colourful cultural revolutionary language – but when I left and became the EU Commissioner for External Relations, they behaved impeccably towards me.

“They had said I was ‘a sinner condemned for a thousand generations’, but I got early remission! In 2001, I made a semi-official visit to China and was treated very well and have been on all subsequent visits.”

Lord Patten explained that there was another aspect to his life in Hong Kong.

“I was in effect an all-powerful mayor of one of the greatest cities in Asia, a city of six and a half million people, which was – when I left in 1997 – responsible for 22 percent of the whole of China’s GDP. It was a hugely successful economic story.

“Each year I was there, we cut tax, increased spending and increased the amount of money in the reserves, and we built a spectacular airport and surrounding infrastructure out of income. Just running Hong Kong was huge and hugely enjoyable.

“Negotiating the handover to China was less fun. China wanted me to be their man in Hong Kong and in effect to prescribe what Hong Kong should be like in 1997, and insisted that I lock Hong Kong into that situation.

“But that was not in the terms of the agreement made with the British Government in the early 1980s, nor was it a way of producing stability so we had quite a few fights when I stood up for the people of Hong Kong.

“I am flatteringly described as if I introduced massive democratic reforms when all I tried to do was to make the existing far from perfect system fairer,” Lord Patten said.

“I had to try to ensure that Britain left Hong Kong with as great a sense of honour as possible and I think we managed that.

“There were occasional incidents owing to the people of Hong Kong being pretty jittery because of the events in 1989 when the

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Chinese government killed demonstrators in Beijing and elsewhere. They feared that might lead to a similar kind of crackdown in Hong Kong.

“We had big fights to protect people’s civil liberties, to guarantee the freedom of the press, to protect the freedom of civil society and secure the rule of law with a Supreme Court, a court of final appeal as it was called with some foreign judges to ensure that it remained independent.” Lord Patten explained.

Has the outcome of the handover turned out better than Lord Patten anticipated?

“Hong Kong has all the characteristics of a free society, except the ability to elect its own government. I would say it has reached the mid-point of my hopes and expectations. Hong Kong has a greater sense of citizenship than anywhere else in Asia, certainly anywhere else in China.”

Has what happened in Hong Kong had an impact on developments in mainland China? Lord Patten said: “The economy of China has grown phenomenally, but the Government of China is determined to avoid political reform even while it reforms the economy. So the answer is ‘no’.

“Whether China can continue to grow without political change is doubtful.”

Ten years ago, Lord Patten was elected Chancellor of Oxford University, the 159th person to hold the position.

“Like my predecessors I was elected for life,” he said. “I used to say ‘like the Dalai Lama and the Pope’ but I can’t say that any more since Pope Benedict’s resignation – so now (its just) ‘like the Dalai Lama’.

“Being Chancellor has been a huge privilege and a great intellectual pleasure. At Ensaenia

awarding honorary degrees there have been highlights like Aung San Suu Kyi able to return to Oxford and Tom Stoppard – a hero of mine, listening to Emma Kirkby (the English soprano singer and one of the world’s most renowned early music specialists) – there are always great moments,” Lord Patten said.

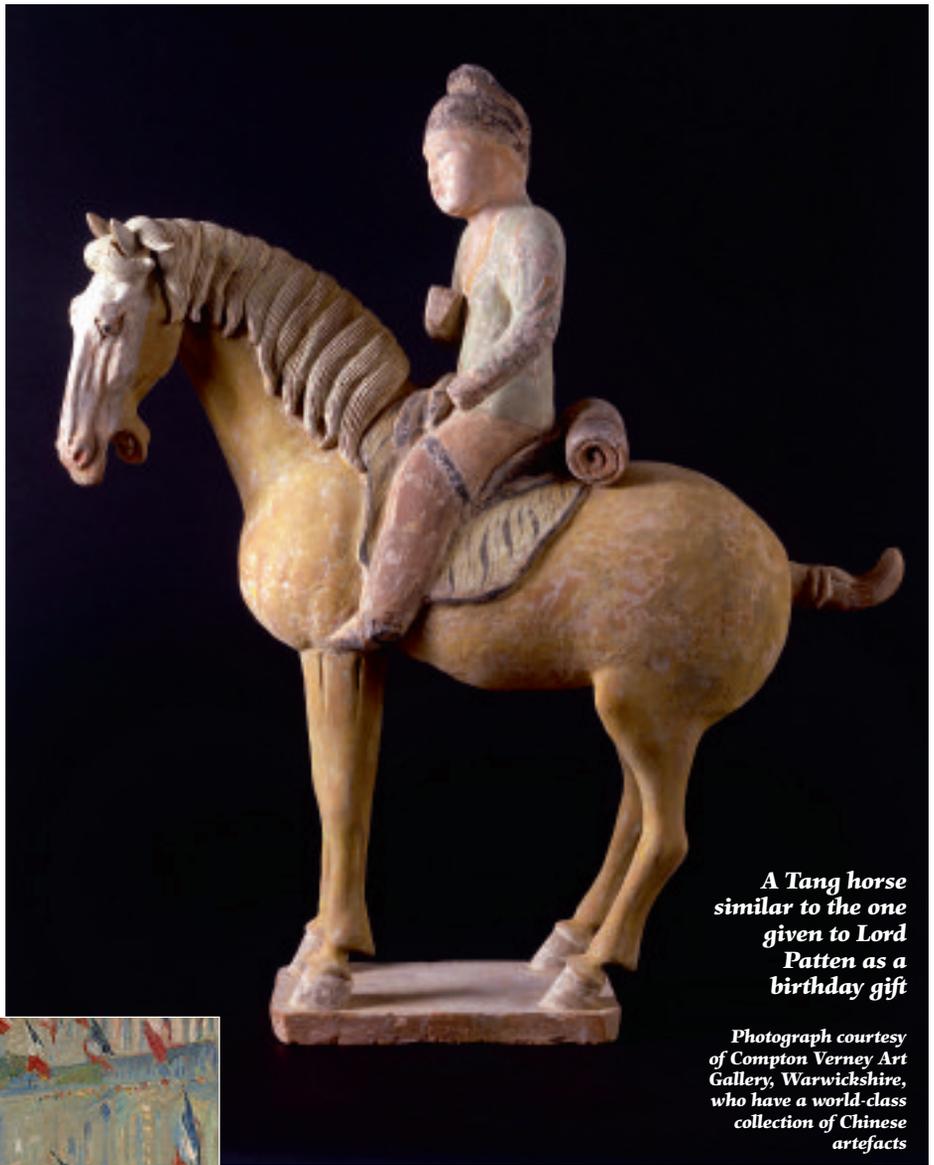
“I was recently at a ceremony in Japan when Placido Domingo was being honoured and he remembered the day he was given an honorary degree in Oxford with great pleasure.”

Since he became Chancellor, Chinese students have become the second largest group of foreign students after Americans.

I asked how he thought Oxford would change them and if their presence would change Oxford.

He said: “There are over 740 Chinese students and 80 members of the faculty and they make a significant contribution to the University. We are lucky to have them and pleased they are here.

“I do not think you can spend time in a community like Oxford in a democracy without



**A Tang horse similar to the one given to Lord Patten as a birthday gift**

Photograph courtesy of Compton Verney Art Gallery, Warwickshire, who have a world-class collection of Chinese artefacts



it affecting you. That does not have to be in a headline political way – probably more subtle, more low key than that.

“Oxford is a great international university – a world university and it would be absurd to reflect every

other nation and not the largest country in the world. I think the character of Oxford is to be international and global and not Chinese, American or German.”

Time constraints meant we did not have time to talk about Lord Patten’s role in the Independent Commission on Policing for Northern Ireland set up under the Good Friday Peace Agreement or his Chairmanship of The BBC Trust during some very troubled times for the venerable organisation.

The priority for the remainder of our time was to talk about the object, work of art or book which the Chancellor would like to find washed up on the beach of our desert island.

“The Coddington Library in All Souls?” he ventured. But as transporting a building to our island is not possible the Chancellor had to come up with something smaller.

“My favourite painting is Velázquez’s *The Surrender of Breda*, but it is the size of a room. It was in fact taller than the Hall of Realms in Philip’s Royal Palace and had to be folded at the top. A more practical choice would be Édouard Manet’s *Rue Mosnier with Flags* 1878,” he said.

The painting (left) shows a French village decorated with patriotic tricolours for a national holiday called the Fête de la Paix, which marked France’s recovery from the disastrous Franco-Prussian War of 1870-1871.

“Our eye is drawn to a veteran walking down the street using a crutch because he has lost a leg. This painting is a statement against xenophobia and war,” Lord Patten said.

But would the Manet be his final choice? “No, that would be the Tang Horse given to me as a birthday gift by my wife.”

His choice connects him to that “fabulous time” in Hong Kong when he played a big part in the history of modern China.

Away from his many official duties Lord Patten has a rich family life. He married Lavender Thornton, a barrister, in 1971 and they have three daughters, Kate, Laura and Alice.

As we said goodbye, Lord Patten summed up his life by saying: “I am a very lucky man.” It would be hard to disagree.