

LEEDS CITY COUNCIL

SPECIAL MEETING OF THE COUNCIL

Held on

Friday 12th May 2006

At

**THE COUNCIL CHAMBER,
CIVIC HALL, LEEDS**

In the Chair:

**THE LORD MAYOR
(Councillor W S Hydes)**

VERBATIM REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS

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VERBATIM REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF LEEDS CITY COUNCIL
SPECIAL COUNCIL MEETING HELD ON FRIDAY 12th MAY 2006

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hyde): Good evening, Members of the Council, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen. This Council Meeting is a very, very unusual Council Meeting. It is a Special Council Meeting for a special purpose. It is, I suspect, and certainly from my point of view, a much more enjoyable experience than your average, run of the mill two-till-ten Council Meetings.

Welcome to this evening's meeting. I am delighted to open it. I call on the Leader of the Council, Councillor Andrew Carter, to move that Alan Bennett be made an Honorary Freeman of the City of Leeds. Councillor Carter.

COUNCILLOR A CARTER: My Lord Mayor, Deputy Lord Lieutenant, High Sheriff, Honorary Recorder, Honorary Aldermen, Members of Council and most of all guests, welcome to a very special evening in the history of our city, with a particular welcome, of course, to our guest of honour, Alan Bennett.

I was listening to the radio – as some people here know, I am a cricket enthusiast and I was listening to the radio yesterday - and apparently Ashley Giles, the England spinner, has been made a Freeman of Droitwich. I was listening to this with great care because apparently, besides the fact he can drive his livestock through the streets of Droitwich, he is also entitled to a free drink in every pub. My Lord Mayor, I do not know how many pubs there are in Droitwich but there are a damn sight more in Leeds! I know that you do not drink, so if we can manage to persuade the public houses in Leeds to extend the same honour, Mr Bennett, I volunteer to accompany you around! (*Laughter*)

Alan Bennett - academic, playwright, author, screen writer, dramatist, social commentator and humorist – surely the greatest literary figure that this city has produced. Leeds has many famous names to boast but Alan Bennett has become not just famous but a household name to anyone who goes to the theatre, to the cinema, reads books or watches television.

If you will excuse my massacre of the English language, his Yorkshireness and his Leedsness have endeared him to the world. By proxy, this in turn has shown the world some of the city's finer characteristics – a gentle, down to earth, sometimes amused honesty, an ability to acknowledge our heritage and be thankful and proud for our past while at the same time building for our future.

Alan Bennett was born in Armley on 9 May 1934. Both his parents had grown up in neighbouring Wortley, so Alan is truly a son of Leeds – a son of west Leeds in particular.

The Bennett children, Alan and his older brother Gordon, grew up in a secure if mildly eccentric extended family, where he knew all those sights familiar to many of us similarly born in Leeds – the rhubarb fields, the trams, the parks, not to forget Gott Park or Charlie Cake Park which we keep talking about in this Chamber. There were picnics in the countryside, holidays to the coast, notably Morecambe, which he later described as just Leeds by the sea, which strangely is what my father used to call it.

He taught himself to read at an early age, gazing over his brother's shoulder at comic books. By the time he went to primary school he could already read and, though he probably did not know it, an academic and literary career was clearly set out for him.

His first school was the Armley National School and, after that, he attended Leeds Modern School, now Lawnswood School, where he took his School Certificate in 1948 and clearly got a very good education.

I always believed that my deputy, Councillor J L Carter, had gone to Leeds Modern School. When I was reading through this book that Alan has written – one of a number of books he has written – and realised how good Leeds Modern School was, I thought Councillor J L Carter cannot possibly have gone to it. (*Laughter*) So, I taxed him on the issue tonight and he said, “No, it was the old Modernian's Club I used to drink in.” (*Laughter*) I begin to think we have an obsession with drink in this place – well, some do, some don't.

You sat your School Certificate in 1948 and this was clearly an important moment, even for one so young. You recall being made fun of by the other boys for turning up on the morning of the first paper in the School Certificate dressed up in your only suit, which was already too small, but to wear it did not seem silly to you because, as you say in your book, you thought the examination, “...was an occasion, that I might rise to this occasion accordingly.” What an example to young people today. Leeds Modern School was a very good state school which regularly sent boys to Leeds University but, as Alan arrived in the sixth form, the Headteacher, who was Cambridge educated, decided to push some of his more able students towards Oxford and Cambridge.

Anyone who has seen or read Alan Bennett's play *The History Boys* will immediately recognise the scene and sense how Bennett draws on so many aspects of his life in Leeds in his later work. Alan gained a place at Cambridge but decided instead to do his National Service at the Joint Services School in Cambridge, where he learned Russian. Then, in 1953, he decided to sit for a scholarship to Oxford, which he won, and entered Exeter College.

He says his reason for going for a scholarship was a mere whim - the scholar's gown was more stylish than that of a commoner - but this whim turned out to be one of those coincidences that sealed the journey of Alan Bennett's life

and brought his amazing talents to the British stage and literary scene, because it was then that he went on to teach mediaeval history at Oxford and he joined up in 1960 with that set of brilliant young satirists and actors, Peter Cook, Dudley Moore and Jonathan Miller and, as they say, the rest is history. Together they wrote and performed their landmark satirical review *Beyond the Fringe*, which had its debut at the Edinburgh Festival and was later acclaimed in London's West End and in New York. This show revolutionised British humour, introducing satire to political comment in a way the British stage and, indeed, the British public had never seen before.

The 1960s saw Alan Bennett's writing and acting career gather pace. He continued to sketch shows like *Not So Much a Programme*, *More a Way of Life* and in 1966 his friend Jonathan Miller wrote an adaptation of Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* in which Bennett memorably played the dormouse.

His first stage play was *Forty Years On*, written in 1968, originally starring John Geilgud, re-written as a screenplay 30 years later in which Bennett himself played the headmaster.

His television career took off in the 1970s and this is when he began to draw more and more on his northern roots. The BBC screened *A Day Out*, the exploits of a Halifax cycling club in 1911. *Sunset Across the Bay* told of an elderly couple, probably based on your own parents, Alan, who retired to Morecambe only to find that perhaps it is not Leeds by the sea, after all, and long for their native city.

Then in 1978 came the series *Six Plays* by Alan Bennett, followed by a further series, *Objects of Affection*. This included the first of the monologues which became so famous and, as I said to Alan earlier, my mother was absolutely addicted to watching and I watched them with her and I will never forget particular parts of some of them. *A Woman of No Importance*, starring Patricia Routledge. This was to be the forerunner of the *Talking Heads* monologues starring, as I am sure you all remember, Thora Hird, Maggie Smith, Stephanie Cole, Julie Walters, Patricia Routledge and again, of course, Alan Bennett himself. It is this series that is perhaps the best remembered of Alan Bennett's television work.

Writing for stage and screen in the 1980s he produced classics such as *An Englishman Abroad* and *the Insurance Man*. The screenplay of *Private Function* was a tender comedy about meat rationing in World War II. In it he shares with us wartime childhood memories and echoes of his father, the pork butcher of Armley and later Headingley. Widely acknowledged, his greatest success was the screenplay *The Madness of King George*, starring Nigel Hawthorne, which he later adapted for the cinema and for which both Bennett and Hawthorne won Oscar nominations.

How is it that we know so much about Alan Bennett, who many of us understand is a very private man? It is because he has given us two volumes of his memoirs that allow us glimpses and insight into his life - his family, his career, his friends and his feelings. In writing *Untold Stories*, Alan Bennett reveals how much of his Leeds upbringing has stayed with him throughout his life in London, Oxford, North Yorkshire and New York. It is evident that his Leeds background is always with him. Yes, they draw a picture of Leeds gone by, but it is a picture that is all the more valuable because few other people have recorded this period in the city's history. Few of us could recall it with such a eye for small and poignant details, with such style, such honesty, such humour and, most of all, such tenderness for Leeds, for Armley and for Headingley.

I was reading through the book *Untold Stories*. There was a particular passage, a very brief passage, which I am going to read to you because actually I found it personally extremely touching and I think a number of you here, particular those of you from Leeds, born in Leeds, may feel the same. It is about Alan's mother, who he always affectionately refers to in these books as "Mam", who had a dream of some sociability to come in later life, but after Alan's dad died she went to live with Alan's brother and he was clearing out the kitchen cupboard and this is what it says:

"I was clearing out the kitchen cupboard, and there behind an old bottle of Goodall's vanilla essence and a half-empty packet of Be-Ro Self-Raising Flour, I came across a sad little tube of cocktail sticks",

sometimes thinking people would turn up and those would be needed. That to me is very reminiscent of a number of things that perhaps some of us can think of in our own lives relating to our relatives, born and brought up in Leeds and the surrounding area.

Ladies and gentlemen, Leeds has many great ambassadors in many professions and in many walks of life, but in stage and screen and literature there is none greater than Alan Bennett.

Now, I have to make a little plug, so this is now a personal conversation, please, between me and Alan Bennett, because last year I made my debut on the stage. Now some people in here think that I have been on the stage for the past 30 years, but politicians know that it is a very tricky way of life. You can be here today and gone tomorrow and it is far better to have more than one string to your bow – indeed, in the case of Bernard Atha, who will be following me in a few moments, he has so many strings to his bow it has become a harp!

In my capacity as President of the Calverley Players, I was offered a part. I regret to say it was not a part in one of your plays. This is why it is a private conversation, because really I am lining myself up for a job! It was a part in J B

Priestley's *When We Are Married* and I am sure some people here will guess the part that I played. It was, of course, the Mayor of Cleckleywyke. The Mayor of Cleckleywyke has precisely one line, which I think I did very well, so if you ever have a part going that is no more demanding than one, two or three lines, I am your man!

My Lord Mayor, it is a great privilege for me to be able to move this resolution today because Alan Bennett is one of those very special people who has never forgotten his roots, he is an ambassador for this city and has been for very many years and the honour that I hope we are going to bestow upon Alan Bennett today is overdue.

It is my very great pleasure to move the resolution that Alan Bennett be entered on to the Roll of Honorary Freeman of the City of Leeds. I so move.
(Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hyde): I now call upon Councillor Bernard Atha to second.

COUNCILLOR ATHA: Thank you, Lord Mayor. Ladies and gentlemen, I am standing in, as it were, for Councillor Wakefield. It is my very great privilege to second this motion and to speak in a less lengthy way but with equal sincerity as Councillor Carter has done. I thought when he went through Alan's life it was like reading a charge sheet, though I will not actually be making any charges.

All I would say is that he did start off life rather well by going to the Modern School, because I went there too – in fact I was there at the same time, although a little ahead - and my God, what a splendid job they did on both of us!
(Laughter) I can well understand why Les never went there. *(Laughter)*

Leeds has a remarkable, or has had, a remarkable ability in producing writers of great stature in many different genres. We think basically of someone like Hoggart so many years ago who wrote a book that was quite boundary breaking, very significant sociologically as well as in literary terms. There is Waterhouse and Willis who wrote plays of very great distinction. We have a lady, Barbara Taylor Bradford, who was a scribe, like Waterhouse had been, on the *Evening Post*, who also became famous as a writer and millionairess and who has come back to Leeds several times in order to share her past with her present, but none of these people – and I can mention many more equally the person who wrote *Swallows and Amazons*, a favourite of so many children which was in fact written in Headingley. I could go on with other luminaries and mention them but no, I do not think there is anyone more illustrious in the literary world than the person we are here to honour today and that is why it is such a great privilege to have the opportunity to second this motion.

He has, as Councillor Carter said, had an exceptional career as a performer, playwright, diarist, TV presenter, film script writer, broadcaster and occasional director. He has got more awards from the industry than most politicians make promises in a year! A quite remarkable number of awards – the Standard Award about five times, the Olivier Award, the Tonys – he has had them all, and well deserved too.

It is fascinating to think about the work he has done, but whether the work is a play, a TV programme or a presentation, it is always imbued with the same genuine compassion for others and an understanding of human nature and concern for the human condition. I think that is what makes Alan Bennett a person who is so much more, not merely respected but loved by those who have never met him, who have just experienced his work and seen the underlying compassion and the spirit that engenders it.

Equally at the same time it is gently ironic, so the very thing he talks about with affection he also in a way almost mocks in this gentle, ironic way and that is one thing, I think, that makes his work no longer cloying but in fact extremely effective.

I am sure he will see the irony in today's proceedings. Here we are bestowing on you, Alan, the highest award the city can give and yet you look at it – what benefit does it bring? You certainly do not get a drink in every pub. You certainly do not if you go with Councillor Carter, because you will be paying! (*Laughter*) I do not think you will have the chance to drive your cattle across the Leeds Bridge, although if ever you are going to try do tell us and we will all come and we will doubtless make a programme about it.

Here we are, we are giving you this great honour that has no tangible benefit at all. You can almost imagine one of Alan's characters saying in one of his plays, "It does not matter it is the thought that counts" and quite frankly, it is the thought that counts and the fact that we have thought about giving this to you is, in fact, a great tribute to you as an individual who we all respect, not merely someone who has been successful. There are very many successful people about – there are many successful people about who we do not like at all. There are very few who are successful and people get to love without even knowing them personally.

More than 40 plays for television - including one in which I feature, with rather more lines than the one word, I may say, Councillor Carter. I had a whole two pages! (*Laughter*) It was actually somewhere out on the coast, I think An Afternoon Off or one of those and it was a very good play indeed and I performed the part singularly well. So well, I was never invited back, but that was obviously some kind of technical mistake in the office.

He, of course, has produced this latest play of his, which is taking New York by storm, but I just think it is remarkable that we can see a different kind of imperialism than what we ever had. It is almost an artistic imperialism now where the artists of this country are being taken abroad and showing that this country can produce art of the highest form which has an appeal right across international boundaries, borders and cultures.

His prose work demands equal public appreciation. The diaries and memoirs – and I think Andrew referred to this – evoke many waves of memories of nostalgia for so many of us who are of a certain age – let us say over just 30 or 40 – and recognise the places he paints so precisely and so economically. He uses forgotten vocabularies. When you come across words like sculleries, middens, ginnels – words that in fact are the equivalent to the things found in the cupboard – they do have this evocation of the past for many of us.

We have mentioned in his books of the long departed picture houses which many of us went to. Some of us are old enough to know those picture houses where if you went for the afternoon Saturday matinee, you took two jam jars and you got in for the two jam jars. Then there were the later ones where you paid tuppence, it was the tuppenny rush, and for those who are a bit more astute, one person paid and got in, went round the back, opened the back door and you got into the Victory by not paying at all. This, of course, was something I never have done.

There are other things, odd things you read. You mentioned Kennedy's Latin Primer. There will be a number here who studied Latin, a number here who had that Kennedy and I have still got a copy – not thrown away, for the same reason she did not throw away the sticks or the Be-Ro flour packet. It is something that takes me back to a different time. It also reminds you that one way to learn the magic rules of grammar is to learn Latin and do it from Kennedy.

Alan, despite all his success which takes so many away from their roots, has always retained his connection with Leeds and an interest in Leeds. Some years ago he wrote to me expressing fears that the Reference Library was going to be dispersed. He wrote in these words:

“It is a library I am very fond of since I was virtually educated there and I would be sorry to see it dispersed. Could you let me know what the situation is? I am sorry to land you with this, but short of the staff in Hertz car hire and one or two ladies in Marks and Spencer, you are the only person I know to ask about these matters.”

I was very pleased to reassure Alan that the library was not going to be dispersed, it was going to go on from strength to strength, but the interesting thing

is, here was a man who was a literary giant, fêted everywhere he goes, treated with an enormous amount of respect – all of which, of course, you deserve, I am sure you agree – but at the same time is concerned about a rumour that affected the library in Leeds.

He made two remarkable programmes about the art galleries in Leeds, which really we should have in our archive and show regularly. One, if I remember rightly, is the black and white, the second followed on in a better form in colour.

I had other occasions to write to Alan over the years. When we were developing the new Playhouse we wanted a name for the main auditorium, what we now call the Quarry, the big lyric theatre and we wanted an appropriate name. I was asked by the Board – I was Chairman at the time – to write to Alan and ask him whether he would agree to us having his name on that auditorium and naming it the Alan Bennett Theatre. He wrote back on the lines of this, saying he was terribly honoured to be asked but as he had noticed that most theatres are named after people who are dead, he did not wish to risk it. (*Laughter*) So we did not call it the Alan Bennett Theatre, we called it the Quarry instead, which was rather a comedown, I think.

His plays, however, have been a great benefit to the city and the Playhouse because every time we put a play on there, it sells out. It is a magic word and some of us keep saying to the artistic director, “Let’s have another Alan Bennett.” From time to time they come, we had one not very long ago, and that was something that reminded us of another aspect of Alan that we all love and respect and acknowledge – his strange eccentricity, because who but a total eccentric would allow an old woman, an obstreperous old woman, to park her van in his drive and live there for very many years and call upon him as though she had the feudal rights over him? Not all the feudal rights, I may say, but certain feudal rights. A remarkable, remarkable story because, who else but Alan Bennett would make play out of that too, which he did, which was one of the first plays that played to full houses in West Yorkshire Playhouse very recently.

So, in order not to go on at greater length to embarrass everybody else and myself, all I can say at t his moment is God bless Alan Bennett, may you long continue to amuse us all, to stimulate us all, to challenge our concepts in the way that you do in all of your plays, and if ever you feel you are running out of inspiration for your work, I advise you to come to the Council and you will have enough material for a hundred Talking Heads – only two of them will be mine – the one with three is Councillor Carter! (*Laughter and applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hyde): Councillor Stuart Golton so speak in support of the nomination.

COUNCILLOR GOLTON: Thank you, Lord Mayor. First of all, I have to confess that this is not the first time that I have met Alan Bennett. We have been up close and personal – at the time I was wearing a pair of bright green ladies’ stockings. Before the journalists reach for their notebooks thinking it is Mark Oaten mark 2, I have to explain that Alan Bennett had come along to open our school theatre and I was playing the fertility symbol, the green man. It was not purely through choice I was got up like that! *(Laughter)*

Anyway, I have to say I got to shake his hand at the time and I remember being very, very impressed with the man and I was very honoured that he had actually come along to my school, especially considering it was a rival school – it was the Grammar School – and he had come along to have a look at our show and I was, as I say, very, very impressed to meet him.

That was because my early childhood – being a teenager you tend to spend a lot of your time in your bedroom and mine was in the attic so I was little bit more isolated than most, and I tended to watch a lot of television and, of course, the best stuff that was on at the time was the work of Alan Bennett. I grew up with Talking Heads, I grew up with An Englishman Abroad and, of course, A Private Function. He introduced some very great actresses to me in a sort of grander way than Bernard Atha, another avowed bachelor, has introduced some grand dames to us here in Leeds when he was Lord Mayor. I got to know the work of Maggie Smith, Patricia Routledge and Thora Hird and those have stayed with me.

Of course, I later became Councillor for an area that is associated with Alan Bennett, which is the Weetwood Ward, which includes Headingley and also the Lawnswood School as well and all I can say is that the people there were very, very proud of the association that your name had with the area that they lived in.

That is not just the only reason why this Council would want to confer he Freedom of the City upon Alan Bennett. It is not simply because he is a local lad done good. You do not get the Freedom simply for having talent, because there are so many, many people in the city who have great talent, and that is what makes it such a great city.

Of the people we do have with the Freedom of the City, of course, we have got Nelson Mandela – and you only have to introduce him as someone who is worthy of getting the Freedom of the City of Leeds. He displays courage through adversity, he had commitment to freedom, truth and peace. You have got Fanny Waterman, a dynamic spirit who created a space for Leeds on the world stage through sheer personal will and, of course, you have Jane Tomlinson, who has converted personal tragedy into inspirational physical achievement in order to help others through charity.

Joining those ranks is Alan Bennett. He has an impressive oeuvre of work. He has got awards, he is undoubtedly one of the most successful playwrights this country has produced. He has also been an articulate and urbane ambassador for the city, it has to be said, but what makes Alan Bennett an outstanding candidate to be a Freeman of the City of Leeds is the effect that his work has had on us. He does not write for an elitist audience. His work is intelligent and witty but it is always accessible and often times very intimate. His gift is to throw a mirror up to our faces and to create drama out of the mundane.

Many of his characters are also often at the margins of society. They are overlooked and misunderstood or ignored. What he gives them is humanity and he makes us look at our neighbours and our colleagues and perhaps members of our family who we have not talked to for a long while, perhaps in a new light, and that is the way that Alan Bennett has an effect on the wider society who enjoy his works.

He has created a body of work that amounts to a chronicle of the human condition and what is particularly pleasing for us is that often times it has been recorded in a good Leeds Yorkshire accent.

We are very proud of Alan Bennett and we are very proud to make him a Freeman of the city. Thank you, Lord Mayor. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hyde): I would like to ask Terry Grayshon to speak in support. Councillor Grayshon.

COUNCILLOR GRAYSHON: Thank you, Lord Mayor, distinguished guests and, of course, Mr Bennett. May I begin by offering Mr Bennett apologies on behalf of my group. It is tradition at these events that the Group Leaders speak. However, coming from Morley, as we do, I was the only one of us to possess a dinner suit. (*Laughter*). It appears that I am the only one in Leeds to possess a dinner suit this evening. (*Laughter and applause*)

Of course, the real reason for asking me to speak is that it is my great privilege, along with other Members of the Council, to nominate you for the Freedom of the City of Leeds, and you were an overwhelmingly popular choice, is the come back I got from Andrew Carter. This is the highest award the city can bestow on an individual.

When I was asked to address the Council meeting this evening, I was not sure how I should go about it. Should I deliver our congratulations in the guise of a Bennettesque monologue, I asked myself? You will no doubt be pleased to learn that I decided against it.

I then remembered a more suitable example of your work, A Private Function. Tonight's events could well be an updated version, what with the great

and the good as well as the elected members, of course, assembled to pay homage to the outstanding contribution you have made to the literary and film world, as well as theatre.

You will be delighted to know that things have moved on and that we no longer have to kidnap the only porcine in town to host gala dinners. Through your talents you have brought pleasure to millions of people across the world. Wherever your travels take you, the people of Leeds can be assured that you represent all that is good about this city. You take that delightful sense of humour which can only be found in Yorkshire. As well as that Yorkshire humour you have shown true Yorkshire grit when dealing with personal problems in life.

You are pre-eminent cultural ambassador for Leeds and it is only right that the Council has recognised the contribution that you have made. It is my honour to be part of this evening's events and the Morley Independent Councillors wholeheartedly endorse your being given the Freedom of the City of Leeds. Thank you. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hyde): Councillor David Blackburn.

COUNCILLOR BLACKBURN: Thank you, Lord Mayor. I would have worn my bow tie tonight, Councillor Grayshon, if I had known you were wearing yours!

Lord Mayor, honoured guests, fellow Councillors, ladies and gentlemen, I am particularly pleased to support Andrew Carter in proposing the honour of the Freeman of the City of Leeds to Alan Bennett. As Andrew so rightly said, Alan Bennett is a true native of Leeds, but as a Councillor from West Leeds I can truly claim him a son of our patch.

He was born in Armley, just off the Stanningley Road and spent much time in the house of his Grandma Peel, who lived in Gilpin Place, just off the Tong Road, not actually far from where I originally come from. His memoirs echo the places of Armley and Wortley, some of which are still there, some of which are not. His father was a butcher at the Co-op in Armley Lodge Road and bought meat from the slaughterhouse in Oldfield Lane. One grandfather had a gents' outfitters in Wellington Road and the other worked at the nearby gas works. He talks of family weddings at the chapel at the bottom of Fourteenth Avenue, going to the cinema in Wortley Road, school at Armley National School and after school reading at Armley Library. There is a description of his parents early morning marriage at St Bart's in Armley. He talks about Charlie Cake Park, Wingate Junction, names that to us in West Leeds conjure up everything that symbolises our part of the city.

I have just had a great idea. We have Bronte Land, Summer Wine Country, Heartbeat tours, All Creatures Great and Small pilgrimages – why can't we have an Alan Bennett trail in Armley and Wortley? (*Laughter*) His dad's Co-

op is still there, though no longer a shop. The church where the family weddings were held is still there, though it might now be a temple. His own first home and Grandma Peel's house are still there. So is the gas works – slightly smaller and a lot less pollution than when you remember it because I remember it from being a boy and it is a lot better than it was. I am glad to say the slaughterhouse is no longer there. Armley Library is now a combined library and flagship Council One-Stop shop. The rhubarb fields are gone but Gotts Park is still there. The opportunities are endless.

Joking apart, Alan Bennett paint such a poignant picture of West Leeds that his memoirs should surely be a set book for every pupil at West Leeds or Wortley High Schools.

Of course the family eventually moved off to the posh area of far Headingley, but even here the magic of his descriptions does not end. This time his father has his own butcher's shop near the tram sheds, opposite St Chad's church. He describes the tram journey up Otley Road to Leeds Modern School, a ha'penny fare. We would like to bring those days back, wouldn't we? Saturday concerts in Leeds Town Hall and visits to the cinema in Cottage Road and then there is the uncanny tale of the time his mother unknowingly met his own literary hero, T S Elliot, on a street once in Headingley.

Alan Bennett has left Leeds an account of its rich working class heritage and in a way no-one else has captured but, of course, echoes of his own city are not confined to his autobiography alone. His works for stage and screen are peppered with references to his beloved north of England. He draws his time as an evacuee Nidderdale, holidays at the coast, conversations overheard at the bus stop and finely observed family moments.

Alan Bennett, the people of Leeds hold you in huge affection and we are proud that you have accepted our offer of the Freedom of the City.

I will just take up something that Councillor Carter has mentioned earlier. I think if you ever do a screenplay of your biography, there are a few people in this building might want a few walk-on parts if they are going. I know that certainly Bernard would want a large one and Chris Townsley over there would also want a large one – they are both members of Equity – and by the sound of it Councillor Carter has already volunteered, but a few of us might be interested. Thank you, Lord Mayor. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hyde): The resolution before Council is that we move that Alan Bennett be made an Honorary Freeman of the City of Leeds and it is now my great privilege and pleasure to put that vote to the meeting. Those in favour? Silly question - anyone against? That is carried unanimously.

We now are in a position where we are entirely in the hands of Mr Bennett, because he has now to decide whether he is going to accept, so I have now to put it to him that we invite him to accept the Roll of Honorary Freedom of the City. Do you so accept, Mr Bennett?

MR ALAN BENNETT: I formally declare acceptance of the Roll of Honorary Freeman of the City of Leeds. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hyde): I can now invite the chief Executive to read the Scroll of Honorary Freeman. Chief Executive.

THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE: My Lord Mayor, at a meeting of the Council of the City of Leeds held in the Council Chamber of the Civic Hall on the 12th day of May 2006, at a Special Council convened for the purpose, the Lord Mayor, Councillor William S Hyde in the Chair, it was resolved unanimously that under and in pursuance of the powers conferred by Section 249 of the Local Government Act 1972, we admit Alan Bennett to be an Honorary Freeman of the City of Leeds in recognition and high appreciation of his worldwide achievements as an author and as an outstanding citizen of Leeds and for the contribution his work has made to the reputation of the city. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hydes): I can now invite Honorary Freeman Alan Bennett to join me in the well of the Council Chamber in order to sign the Roll of Honorary Freeman of the City. Thank you.

(The Lord Mayor and Mr Alan Bennett signed the Roll of Honorary Freeman of the City of Leeds)

(Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hydes): I will now invite Mr Bennett to say a few words to us by way of a speech of acceptance.

MR ALAN BENNETT (Honorary Freeman of the City of Leeds): To be given the Freedom of Leeds is a great honour, the greatest the city could pay me and I hope it does not diminish that honour if I say that I feel I was given the Freedom of this city more than 50 years ago.

I went to school, as has been said, at Upper Armley National School, now Christchurch Church of England Primary School and I then went on briefly to West Leeds High School and then to Leeds Modern School, where on a senior city scholarship from Leeds I eventually went to Oxford.

My parents set great store by education. They had both had to leave school when they were 12 or 13 and they were determined that my brother and me should not labour under the same disadvantage and they pushed our education

always – that was the first thing with them. They were fortunate to live in Leeds where education was such a primary consideration.

Leeds has always set great store by education and it was, of course, entirely free. At no point, apart from the fact that we were not in jobs, my brother and me, our education cost our parents nothing and I have always felt passionate about free education. All the loans and all the other stratagems which are used nowadays to pay for education I think are wrong. I think that students deserve a free education such as we were given in this city and I hope that day will return again.

Not far from here, just below the Civic Hall, is George Corson's Education Board building, a wonderful Victorian building which exemplifies the store the city set by education and below it, of course, is the library. On top of the library is the Leeds Reference Library, now I think the technical library. It is a wonderful example of high Victorian architecture, wonderfully colourful and decorated. As Bernard Atha said, I was very concerned for its future but I am so glad that it is assured. When I was a boy and a young man, I worked there in the school holidays and in vacations from university, as did many of my contemporaries.

Libraries do not have rolls of honour but if they did, the one at Leeds Reference Library would be very distinguished, because of the boys and girls who worked there over the few years I did, at least eight became judges and I am sure there were equally distinguished members of other professions.

Of course education is not simply a question of books and libraries and next door was the art gallery where I used to go as a break from the Reference Library. Then, across the road, was the Town Hall where every Saturday throughout my adolescence there was a symphony concert and I learned to love music. So, when I say I was given the Freedom of this city 50 years ago, that is what I mean. I was given an education for life and a freedom for life that education gives you. This, in a sense, is just a confirmation of that.

When I began to write – and it is something else that Bernard Atha mentioned – it is due also to somebody who lived in Leeds and that is Richard Hoggart. He was born in Hunslet in rather more straightened circumstances than ours. He is about ten years older than I am, I think, and he went to Cockburn High School and then to Leeds University, where he studied under Bonamy Dobree and then eventually became head of UNESCO.

For me his greatest achievement was the book he wrote in 1955, *The Uses of Literacy*. I read it when I was in New York with *Beyond the Fringe* in 1963 and it was this book that made me realise that my life and growing up in Leeds was something that I could make something of. I had always thought my life was rather dull and then I saw through Richard Hoggart's eyes how, if you get close

enough to any life, it is not dull and that it was worth writing about. I feel somehow he should be standing here too because he is a great man and I would like to take this opportunity of thanking him.

In conclusion I would just say I have not been a great one for honours, when tend to be bestowed on you. They come down on you and maybe it is an innate northern reluctance to be beholden to anybody and I have not really cared very much for them, but this is different. As I understand it, it was voted on by all the parties unanimously in the Council, so I feel it has actually come up and is the will and wish of the people of Leeds and I am very moved and touched and grateful for that. Thank you very, very much. (*Applause*)

THE LORD MAYOR (Councillor W S Hydes): Mr Deputy Lieutenant, High Sheriff, Recorder and other distinguished guests, our new Freeman, Members of Council, ladies and gentleman, that concludes the proceedings of this Special Meeting of the Council. I just have two very brief announcements to make before we adjourn from here. Those are that Mr Bennett's guests should assemble, please, in the Blue Room, through that door there, when we move out of here. Everybody else should assemble – or dissemble, or whatever – in the upper reception area outside the Banquet Hall where dinner will follow shortly.

Can I conclude and thank you all for your attendance and declare the meeting closed. (*Applause*)

The meeting was closed.
