

**LEEDS CITY COUNCIL**

**SPECIAL  
MEETING OF THE COUNCIL**

Held on

Wednesday, 26<sup>th</sup> January 2011

At

THE COUNCIL CHAMBER,  
CIVIC HALL, LEEDS

In the Chair:

THE LORD MAYOR  
(COUNCILLOR J McKENNA)

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VERBATIM REPORT OF PROCEEDINGS OF THE SPECIAL MEETING  
OF LEEDS CITY COUNCIL HELD ON WEDNESDAY 26<sup>th</sup> JANUARY 2011

THE LORD MAYOR: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and can I welcome along the family of Jimi Heselden for this Special Meeting. Can I welcome Julie, Jason, Joanna, Jodie, Lisa and Kirsty. You are very welcome.

As you know, Jimi was an amazing man who, apart from being a real success story for Leeds, was also remarkably selfless and generous, giving millions to local charities and other worthy causes.

Everyone who knew Jimi will remember his quiet manner, good nature and tremendous pride of being from Leeds and being a Leeds miner. This is our opportunity to meet tonight and bestow the highest honour the City of Leeds can on such a marvellous, marvellous citizen.

Can I ask Councillor Wakefield, please, to move the resolution.

COUNCILLOR WAKEFIELD: Thank you, Lord Mayor. Lord Mayor, High Sheriff, distinguished guests, Councillors, ladies and gentlemen and, of course, people in the gallery, which I am delighted to see there are so many. Can I welcome you to this special event and can I also thank those people – officers and friends and family, I have seen Patrick Hennigan running around – for helping to organise this event which, as the Lord Mayor said, is about giving the highest honour a city can give to any citizen, Freeman of the City, posthumously, for Jimi Heselden.

If you look, as we know, in the room that we are going to after, you will see a list of great names – Nelson Mandela, Jane Tomlinson, Alan Bennett and so on - and all of them have a special quality. They have all inspired people, millions of people across the world. Jimi Heselden, in his own way, has managed to do that.

I realised that when I was in America at the same time as the tragic death of Jimi. I actually saw the tributes that were put into the American media about Jimi and his role and his life. It struck me that Jimi Heselden was actually a national hero in America, not just because of the work he did with the New Orleans flood with his material and minimising the damage that that flood did, but because he had saved hundreds and thousands of lives in the Middle East with his reinforced mesh which actually managed to limit the impact of bombs.

When I went to the funeral, which was a very moving occasion, I could not help being struck by the amount of emotional support that was there and an American serviceman came in specially, straight from American, to pay tribute to him. He paid tribute to him because if it was not through that reinforced mesh, he would have been dead. Actually that reinforced mesh helped to save his life and he felt he owed Jimi an honour to come across and speak at the funeral.

Tonight is not just about Jimi being almost a national hero in America. It is about his contributions, as the Lord Mayor said, to many things in this city to enrich people's lives.

I am delighted to see the staff from Red Hall and the Parks staff who obviously played a very key role in actually managing to get Leeds to win a gold medal for the first time at the Chelsea Flower Show. *(Applause)* It was the first time a local Council had won a gold and I can tell you it is a very competitive competition and it is a very prestigious one as well. There is no doubt, as Councillor Procter will no doubt know because he played a role there with him and the Chelsea Flower

Show, that without his encouragement, without his enthusiasm – and he spent many hours, as staff told me tonight earlier, talking to them and asking them questions – and without his generous donation, we would never have been able to enter it and to win it.

I think that was a great pride to him. I met him with Councillors Procter and Ogilvie and the Lord Mayor just after when he came up to the Blue Room to look at the gold medal and you could tell he had immense pride in the fact that Leeds had won a gold medal. He did not shout anything but you could see that all his support, all his encouragement, had led to this wonderful gold medal for Leeds City Council.

Do you know, I could spend hours, which we have not got, talking about his contributions elsewhere – Leeds United, Leeds Rugby, the hospitals, the charities, community groups, many of them across the city. I will talk about one later on in particular but do you know what, I did not know, none of us would know the extent of his generosity, his spirit of generosity because he never wanted publicity.

In this day and age of publicity, celebrity culture, it demonstrated that he was a man of great sincerity and great integrity and great morality.

Some people have said he is a man also who never forgot his roots. As you know, he was born in Halton Moor and never forgot that, never forgot his family, never forgot his friends. He worked at the pit till the 1984/85 strike, took the redundancy and invested in a small business, sandblasting business. That business grew to an international global entity now called Hesco Bastion, and yet he never changed. It was within 300 metres of where he used to live and he was extremely loyal to his family and to his friends and to his community. He employed over 300 and, again, at the funeral I saw great love and respect and affection for him because he also had great love and respect for his workers. He paid them generously and he used to even take them on holiday. That was the kind of man that he was – a man, I believe, who showed true integrity.

My view about the most generous donation he ever gave, not just in financial terms, was the £23m he gave to Community Foundation, which helps to support people and groups in the city, be they disabled, be they ex-servicemen or women, be they people struggling to keep a community centre open, as I say, disabled people. He knew, he just had a feel for the kind of support that they needed and he generously donated that. That, to me, is an inspiration. He used to say things – “If I am doing well, if my life has improved, I have a moral duty to give something back to people in this city who are struggling to make it for them.” I think that is quite a profound statement about a man who had great character and depth.

I think that we have a duty in this city to keep that inspiration, that generosity going and I would have thought after tonight has concluded we need to think about how we inspire young working class people in this city, because he is a role model for them. He is a person who lifted himself up extremely successfully and never forgot his roots, never forgot his family, never forgot his friends. I think perhaps that is something we should think about, how we as a Council can keep that spirit of generosity going.

I feel quite privileged and humble, actually, to be able to move this resolution that Jimi Heselden becomes a Freeman of Leeds City. Thank you, Lord Mayor.  
(Applause)

THE LORD MAYOR: Thank you, Councillor Wakefield. Can I now call on Councillor John Procter to second, please.

COUNCILLOR PROCTER: My Lord Mayor, High Sheriff, guests. It gives me great pleasure to support this proposal on behalf of my group, and also in the absence of Councillor Andrew Carter, who is deeply sorry that he cannot be here this evening as he was taken ill yesterday, as some of you may know.

Lord Mayor, I was thinking earlier today that this is actually only the third occasion in what is coming up to 20 years that I have ever had written notes in this Council Chamber and I sat in front of a computer screen earlier today and started writing some of the things that I knew about and knew of Jimi Heselden and I have to say it took me several hours, and I suddenly realised that I had probably got the best part of two hours-worth of speech, so I thought I had better set about it and chop it down, but such is the amount that many of us knew.

Lord Mayor, I am sure there are many people who are sad, with heavy hearts here this evening. I am here to celebrate the life and work of somebody and I am here in a happy refrain, as it were, because there are many stories and many tales will bring smiles to many people's faces, certainly friends and family.

I am delighted that Julie, the children, brothers, sisters and family and friends are here to see Jimi's home city pay tribute to him this evening.

Jimi Heselden OBE was, quite frankly, the most remarkable man I have ever met, and I do not say that lightly – an outstanding inventor, businessman, philanthropist and family man. He never forgot where he came from and did much to help that very same community.

As the Leader of Council has already said, and as many of you know, for a number of years Jimi worked down Waterloo Colliery. One of the happiest things I think he managed to achieve was actually to set up a business on that very same colliery site in due course, and he delighted in telling people that tale. He had the opportunity to leave, in due course setting himself up in business as a sandblaster. I heard many a tale of him swinging from church steeples and tall chimneys. The business was a great success and it was whilst looking to solve a problem within this sandblasting and coatings business that he came up with his unique version of a gabion basket - from humble beginnings to a mighty global business player.

It was built all in Cross Green, with military and civil products that were simple but, frankly, ingenious. The UK business, based in Cross Green, employed somewhere around 300 people or so, mainly derived from his beloved East Leeds. Jimi demanded high standards from those who worked for him, but in return a devoted workforce was rewarded handsomely.

Jimi had business interests in the US and, indeed, could have relocated the factory literally anywhere in the world. He could have taken advantage of low labour costs, maximised the profits for himself, but that simply was not the man he was. He cared about employing local people, giving them a start, a chance, an opportunity to improve their lives and that of their families. He believed in hard work, giving people a helping hand, not a hand-out.

Jimi was probably best known for his charitable work – Help for Heroes, Leeds Hospitals, local hospices and the amazing Hesco Fund. Staggering sums of money given to needy causes, the majority of which were right here and are right here in this city.

Jimi was a constituent of mine, first living in Wetherby, then, more recently just outside the town. I first met him and Julie when I went to their house to assist

with what I thought was just a routine constituency issue. I think I spent something like three hours there, chatting about everything from Council bureaucracy to pygmy goats – and before any Councillor Officers jump to conclusions, there was a pause between the Council bureaucracy and pygmy goats.

Over time Jimi became a keen supporter of the Chelsea project and I worked closely with him and Patrick on the 2009 and 2010 gardens - as the Leader has already mentioned, winning gold last year. That was a bonus to Jimi and not the main event. It was great to spend some time in Chelsea with Jimi, Julie, their family and friends and the Hesco team. Many of the workers from Leeds had the opportunity to travel to London and share in the success. None of this was for him or for his company. He wanted it simply for Leeds City Council and for the Parks staff who had worked so hard in that endeavour, and I am delighted to say that many of the Council Park staff are here joining us, quite rightly, this evening – that is certainly what he would have wanted to see.

“It is their reward, not mine”, he remarked. “I have just put up a bit of cash to let it happen.”

As we were celebrating the award Jimi’s phone pinged, as it did so often. It was a text from his factory in the US. Attached was a copy of the front page of the New York Times. There was a picture of the President’s helicopter inspecting some 40 miles of Hesco front line coastal protection, deployed to repel the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico – a genuine global businessman who took it all in his stride.

Lord Mayor, we employ many people in this Council who strive to get the city known, strive to get the city recognised, strive to have a positive profile for Leeds. With this one sponsorship arrangement for Chelsea, I distinctly remember a particular officer of Council coming to me when I was the relevant Exec Member saying, “Councillor, Councillor, have you seen this? We are in US Today! We are in US Today and it is talking all about Leeds and Chelsea. Isn’t that amazing?” That was the reach that the man had.

I have many fond memories and tales I could tell, many related to me over a pint or three, but I think this story tells you all you need to know. The last time I saw Jimi he gave me a polite but firm – and excuse the language, Lord Mayor – bollocking for the state of the wheels on my Audi motorcar. Covered in brake dust, letting the Audi side down, I was told. Jimi then spent 20 minutes telling me all about ceramic brakes, how they were the future of braking systems, no dust and an option that I should certainly choose when buying a motorcar in the future. Polite, firm, knowledgeable – that was just some of his qualities.

Those of you who had the opportunity to meet him will also know that he was a great joke teller and a great joker. I remember with much amusement the joke glasses that he used to keep in his pocket. He always had a funny line which he always managed to bang in just at the end of any conversation.

My Lord Mayor, I am proud to have known Jimi Heselden – a man from Leeds who cared about Leeds and its people, a Leeds lad through and through. It is only right we should award him posthumously the highest honour in our gift. I beg to support the proposal, Lord Mayor. *(Applause)*

THE LORD MAYOR: Thank you, Councillor Procter. Can I now call on Councillor Stewart Golton to support, please.

COUNCILLOR GOLTON: Thank you, Lord Mayor. I would like to support this honour to Jimi Heselden on behalf of the Liberal Democrat Group and start off by

doing so by harking back to the 19<sup>th</sup> Century. I know we often do this as Liberals because that is the last time we were actually in charge on our own. *(laughter)*

I think it is particularly apt for Jimi Heselden because he has actually, hopefully, started a new trend of distinguished citizens of this city making use of their own success to further the success of others in a very tangible fashion.

I use the word “distinguished” in a particular manner because I know these days a lot of people use it the wrong way; they think it is to do with how you dress or it is a comment on your taste. A distinguished person is someone who distinguishes themselves from other people precisely for their acts and their achievements and I think Jimi Heselden has been perhaps one of the most distinguished people that this city has ever had and that is why it is appropriate today that we do honour him with the Freedom of the City.

I would just like to follow on from the comments of Councillor Wakefield because, because of where Jimi comes from I personally had an affinity with him because I thought, great, somebody else from Halton Moor who has made a success of themselves, and all of a sudden I thought, well, compared to his success and your success, Stewart, *(laughter)* he has achieved a little bit more. I think it is precisely because of where he came from that people can feel an affinity for him and can actually be that more inspired because he came from where they are at the moment and they could do just as good as he could.

In terms of creativity, he took an idea and turned it into a multi-million pound venture through sheer force of will, through sheer character. That is something that we can teach to our next generation in terms of holding the dream and taking it forward.

As an employer he did not just follow the letter of the law and give people the bare minimum of what they should expect as salaried people; he made sure that they felt valued and members of a wider family and if he wanted them to work harder, they worked harder for him because they were loyal to him, because he inspired them. I think a few more of our employers could do the same too.

As a benefactor for the city Jimi Heselden was not the richest man that this city has, or of people who work within this city who make it this boom town that it has been for quite a few years, but through his example he can show plenty of people in this city, actually, to give a little bit more does not make you any lesser – it makes you greater. Hopefully that is a lesson that has been learned in the city too.

More importantly, I think, is Jimi Heselden’s reserve. He never, ever courted publicity. He never glorified in what he offered to the city. The millions that he gave, he did not give it to a Jimi Heselden fund that was for a particular pet project. He trusted the people of this city and people like the Community Foundation to prioritise what needs to happen and he does not have to have the final say. To give up control of such a large amount of money I think says a lot about a man and his self-confidence, that he does not need to control everything, that he can offer it to people and hopefully, as I said, that will set an example for us as well.

His reserve means that, ironically, for someone who is very, very shy, to be given the Freedom of the City, he would be very, very embarrassed, if he was here personally, I would think, but sometimes you have just got to put up with it because every now and again people have to say “Thank you” and this is the best way that this city can say “Thank you” to a man who has given so much, so thank you. *(Applause)*

THE LORD MAYOR: Thank you, Councillor Golton. Can I now call on Councillor Grayshon, please, to support.

COUNCILLOR GRAYSHON: Thank you, Lord Mayor. High Sheriff, distinguished guests, members of Council, it is my privilege on behalf of the Morley Borough Independent Group to speak in favour that James William (Jimi) Heselden be admitted as a Freeman of the City of Leeds.

Jimi Heselden was a remarkable individual. His invention of the Hesco Bastion Concertainer is a world leader, acknowledged as the most significant development in field fortifications since the Second World War. Hesco Bastion Concertainer Units have become the benchmark in force protection. They have been a key component in providing force protection since the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

It is very easy for me to tell you what a difference Hescos make in theatre, but I am sure that the following testimony from the mother of an American Marine does it far better than I can ever wish to do so.

"I just got a call from my son. He was telling me about a mortar round that struck right next to their tent. Fortunately, he said, there was a Hesco barrier right next to them where the round struck. The barrier did its work well and the tent was not hurt at all, although their bathroom was destroyed.

As a mother I would like to say thank you to whomever came up with the marvellous idea of the Hesco barrier. Every life saved is a miracle and my own son, it is hard to put it into words. Thank you seems a very small thing to say, but I do give thanks."

That is, as I say, Chris, she is the mother of a US Marine from Georgetown in Kentucky.

There can be no denying that Mr Heselden's invention has helped to protect and save the lives of many, many members of our armed forces. St Matthew tells us, "When thou doest a good deed, sound not the trumpet before thee." When Jimi Heselden gave to charity there was no fanfare, no Secret Millionaire film crew following him. He gave freely because he wanted to make a difference.

The people of Leeds, in particular the Halton Moor area, continue to benefit greatly from Mr Heselden's benevolence - philanthropy on an almost Victorian scale.

When asked what it was like to be such a great philanthropist his answer was, "I am not even sure what one of those is, but the reason I give is because I just want to help people who need it most. I believe that businesses that do well should give something back to their community."

As well as helping charities here in Leeds, Mr Heselden was a major donor to the charity Help for Heroes, already having given £1.5m for a flight with the Red Arrows. Bryn Parry, founder of Help for Heroes, tells the following story.

"When we opened the Help for Heroes rehabilitation complex, Jimi was unable to attend the opening. Instead, completely without any fanfare, he arranged for a cheque for £1m to be presented, quietly and privately, to me before the ceremony."

I do not think we will ever learn how much Jimi Heselden gave to charities. My research for this ceremony has thrown up so many small organisations and local

groups that have received donations from Mr Heselden it is almost impossible to keep track.

On a personal note, I am told that Mr Heselden was a man who cared deeply for his friends and family. I know he was somewhat of a legend in Halton Moor and he never lost his connection to that area, supporting his community whenever possible. If he could find local workmen to carry out tasks, he would prefer to use them rather than outsource the work from the city of Leeds. He could walk into a room and tell you a dozen ways how you could improve things to make them better. He was visionary in his outlook, always looking at how things could be improved.

Lord Mayor, what comes across to me is that Mr Heselden was a man of vision. That vision brought him great wealth – wealth which he put to good use supporting those who needed a helping hand. He was a good and caring man. I am sure that we could all learn something from Jimi Heselden. He is a rare breed, and I speak wholeheartedly in favour of this nomination on behalf of my Group. Thank you, Lord Mayor. *(Applause)*

THE LORD MAYOR: Thank you, Councillor Grayshon. Can I now call upon Councillor Ann Blackburn, please, to support.

COUNCILLOR A BLACKBURN: My Lord Mayor, High Sheriff, distinguished guests, members, it is my privilege to speak on behalf of the Green Group on the motion.

Jimi Heselden left school at 15 and worked as a miner until his job was made redundant in the 1980s. He grew up in Halton Moor and when he and a friend formed Hesco Bastion, they based the firm in Cross Green. He made his fortune after inventing a system of wire cage walls which are used to protect troops from bombs, as well as for flood protection but, unlike many people, he did not forget his roots and he gave millions to charity, including Help for Heroes and the Leeds Community Foundation. His generosity helped the Foundation to support a network of groups, including helping elderly people in South and East Leeds, including his own loved Halton Moor.

His firm Hesco also funded our Council's gold winning garden at this year's Chelsea Flower Show.

As has been said here, Jimi Heselden did not really want thanks for what he did. He thought he had been lucky, he had made his money. He wanted to put something back into Leeds and particularly into the community that he came from.

Jimi Heselden wanted to make a difference and I think that we can all agree that he definitely did. He will be sorely missed. I support the motion. Thank you. *(Applause)*

THE LORD MAYOR: Thank you, Councillor Blackburn, for your support. May I now put the motion to the vote? *(A vote was taken)* I believe that is unanimous and the motion is PASSED. Thank you very much.

I now say that the Council would also wish to record its deepest regret on the untimely death of Jimi Heselden OBE. Can I now ask a family representative to respond.

MRS JULIE HESELDEN: Jim would have been proud to be standing here tonight and, as a family, we are all proud of him. Who would have thought - Jimi Heselden from Halton Moor, being made a Freeman of the City.



Many people have only just recently become aware of Jimi's achievements from Hesco Bastion design, business skills and his support of many charities but to those who really knew and loved him, to us he was just Jimi and that is why I am so proud to accept this honour on behalf of my lovely husband, Jimbo. Thank you.  
*(Applause) (Standing ovation)*

THE LORD MAYOR: Before I call on the Chief Executive to read the tribute from the City of Leeds, can I say that I am aware that Jimi has many friends in the galleries and Leisure Services, Parks and Countryside, those who work for him, officers and staff and I feel that, to allow them to take part in this tribute to him, we should now stand in a minute's silence in memory of Jimi, please. Can we all stand?

*(Silent tribute)*

THE LORD MAYOR: Could I now invite the Chief Executive to read the tribute from the City of Leeds.

THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE: Thank you, Lord Mayor. It is a genuine privilege to read this.

"Leeds City Council.

At a meeting of the Council of the City of Leeds held in the Council Chamber at the Civic Hall on 26<sup>th</sup> January 2011, at a Special Council convened for the said purpose, the Lord Mayor, Councillor James McKenna in the Chair, resolved unanimously that the name of Jimi Heselden OBE be inscribed alongside those of the Honorary Freemen of the City of Leeds in recognition and high appreciation of his generous support to Leeds charities and other worthy causes and as an outstanding citizen of Leeds, and for the contribution his engineering innovations have made to the reputation of this city."

THE LORD MAYOR: Thank you, Tom. I would now wish to present the scroll to Julie, please.

*(The Lord Mayor presented the Scroll to Mrs Julie Heselden)*

*(Applause)*

THE LORD MAYOR: Thank you. Can I invite Councillors and invited guests to the Banqueting Suite for some refreshments, and I now declare the meeting closed. Thank you very much.

*(The meeting closed at 6.45 pm)*

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