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Speech Made At the Centenary Dinner for Farnworth Town Hall

Presented by Dr Brian Iddon
Member of Parliament for Bolton, South East

Friday 27 March 2009

MR MAYOR, MAYORESS, DISTINGUISHED GUESTS, LADIES AND GENTLEMEN:

It is a great privilege for Eileen and me to be invited to join you this evening to celebrate the Centenary of Farnworth Town Hall. Thank you for the invitation and thank you also for allowing me to say a few words.

Let me now transport you back a 100 years and beyond.

The foundation stone for this noble building was laid on 18 March 1908 by Mr Thomas Ivers JP, a former Chairman of the Council, and the Town Hall was opened just over one year later by Mr Thomas Stanley JP, then Chairman of the Council, on Tuesday 30 March 1909.

The building was built at a cost of £11,450, including £1,450 for the purchase of the land. It was designed by W J Lomax, built by T E Cooper and the Clerk of Works was Mr W Blades.

It replaced cramped offices in Darley Street, where the Council had met since 1864, when the population of Farnworth was only 9,000. Whilst the provision of a new Town Hall had been planned and discussed for 30 years, it was the Education Act 2002 that prompted action. That Act devolved control of education to local councils, and more staff had to be recruited.

The building is Renaissance in character and is built of Ruabon brick with stone dressings. This room, originally the Council Chamber, is 45' long, 42' wide and 16' high. It was described in the press reports of the day as "very commodious". Indeed, remarks were made at the opening that Council meetings were likely to become prolonged due to the comfortable nature of the room. Originally, it had 40 chairs, far too many for the 18 Councillors, but larger meetings also used the Chamber.

On the opening day Mr F Whittaker, Chairman of the Building Committee, invited the architect Mr Lomax to call upon Mr Stanley to accept a "handsome key", suitably inscribed and bearing the coat of arms of Farnworth, with which to unlock the front door. In his address Mr Stanley said, "that it could not now be said that Farnworth

lagged behind". There had been much criticism from rate payers over this building and its cost.

After the door was opened, guests proceeded to this room, the Council Chamber, where several speeches were made and letters read out. In the evening "a company of 70 persons sat down to dinner", which was presided over by Mr Stanley. There were nine toasts altogether, each accompanied by a speech, beginning with one to the King.

Farnworth Library was opened just over two years later, on 10 April 1911. So, shortly, you will have the opportunity to celebrate another Farnworth Centenary.

Farnworth Town Hall and the Carnegie Library next door dominate the entrance to Farnworth from Bolton Road, and quite grand they look too, even in their relatively old age. Of course, they are set off by Farnworth Park, gifted to the Town by Thomas Barnes, a former MP for this area. It was opened on 12 October 1864.

Farnworth was obviously in 'fine fettle' at the beginning of the 20th Century.

The earliest recorded name for this Borough dates back to 1282, when this place was called Ffornword, before it became know as Ferneworth, then Farnworth. The name means "the enclosure amongst the ferns". According to a source dated 1787, the place was once overrun with ferns.

Between 1821 and 1921, the population of the Borough increased from 2,044, merely a village, to 27,894, which demonstrates the importance of the cotton and mining industries in this area at that time. Mining and cotton attracted engineering too.

George Hulton dug the first coal pits in this area in 1611. By 1848 there were 20 pits. Under Farnworth are the famous underground canals, 50 miles of them, that allowed coal to be mined and transported on water to Worsley, then on to Manchester on the Duke of Bridgewater's canal, dug in the early 1800's.

One of the earliest paper mills in Lancashire was built by the Crompton family in Farnworth. The first steam-powered weaving mill was opened by James Rothwell Barnes in 1828. It later converted to cotton spinning. The first foundry was opened in 1838. Farnworth streets were lit by gas from 6 September 1860. Thomas Brown, a "foreigner" from Kearsley, was the first lamplighter.

The first Post Office opened here in 1836. St John's, Farnworth's Parish Church, was consecrated in September 1826 by the Bishop of Chester.

Farnworth's first purpose built cinema was the Palace Cinema in King Street, opened in 1911. It had 764 seats and the cost of entrance at that time was 2d to 9d.

So, as you can hear, Farnworth has had a proud past.

Before 1939 Farnworth was an Urban District Council. Municipal Borough status was granted in 1939 then, in 1974, on local government reorganisation, Farnworth was incorporated into the larger administrative area of Bolton Metropolitan Borough.

In 1939, Farnworth became the first town in the country to take action to clear its poor quality housing. I like to avoid the phrase slum clearance, but that's what it was called then. It was the first town in the country too to provide for nursery education.

The former Borough of Farnworth always prided itself on its progressive policies, as its former Councillors often reminded us. I am minded, for example, of the late Cllr Joe Wild, who served too on Bolton MBC. According to Joe, things were never the same after Bolton took over the governance of Farnworth. Bolton dumped the furniture from this room, the tea service disappeared and the Mayoral Chain was burgled from Bolton Town Hall.

But, it's not just the place that makes a town, it's especially its people. Farnworth has produced many famous people and is full of talent and characters today. What I have noticed about Farnworth's people is that they have a pride in their town and a strong independence of mind. They will tell you straight; no playing with words. Many of them grafted in the past, in the mines, in the mills and in the engineering workshops. They helped to put the Great into Great Britain.

Here is a list of just some of Farnworth's famous people, who were born and lived in the town, and made a name for themselves on the national stage; please shout out if you are here or any relatives are with us this evening:

Brian Aspen (wrestler); Hylda Baker (comedienne); Alan Ball (footballer); Ralph Banks (footballer); Tommy Banks (footballer); John Bauldie (music journalist and author); Geoff Bromilow (footballer); Dr Mary Winefride Bousted (trade unionist and educator); David Bowles (actor); Jim Cartwright (playwright who wrote 'Little Voice'); Charlie Cooper (footballer); Lawrence Cunliffe (MP); Julian Darby (footballer); Glen Duncan (author); Frank Finlay (actor); Roy Greaves (footballer); Jim Halliday (olympic weightlifter); Dave Hatton (footballer); Paul Heathcote (chef and broadcaster); Jason Kenny (Olympic cyclist and medal winner at the 2008 Olympics); Ian Grant Jack (journalist and author); Roy Charles Lancaster (botanist, gardener and broadcaster); Tommy Lawton (footballer); Paul Mariner (footballer); Paul William Mason (sculptor); Paul Mouldon (footballer); Michael Pollitt (Wigan Athletic goalkeeper); Ernie Phythian (footballer); David Potts (front man for pop group Monaco); Mark Radcliffe (broadcaster and author); Lawrence Robertson (MP); Frank Tyson (cricketer); James Wilcox (footballer); Kenneth Wolstenholme (sports commentator on TV and radio - "they think it's all over; it is now!"); Bernard Wrigley (folk singer and comedian);

and, we mustn't forget either the Phoenix Club (St Gregory's Roman Catholic Social Club), made famous by Peter Kay, Dave Spikey (actually born in Farnworth) and Patrick McGuinness. Of course, Peter Kay was born in Croston Street, Daubhill, and not in Farnworth as suggested by Wikipedia.

From 1868 to 1885 Farnworth was a part of the South East Lancashire Parliamentary Constituency, which was represented successively by Algernon Egerton (Conservative) and Robert Leake (Liberal) as the 'First Members'.

It then became the Radcliffe-cum-Farnworth Constituency, until 1918, which was represented by Robert Leake (Liberal), John James Mellor (Conservative) and Theodore Cooke Taylor (Liberal). Taylor died at the grand old age of 102, one of the few MPs who has survived to such an old age.

From 1918 to 1983, the newly created Farnworth Constituency was represented by Edward Albert Ashton Bagley (Conservative), Thomas Greenhall (Labour), Guy Rowson (Labour), James Stones (Conservative), Guy Rowson again, George Tomlinson (Labour), Ernest Thornton (Labour) and John Roper (Labour; who defected to the SDP).

David Young (Labour) and myself have served the Bolton South East Constituency since 1983.

Therefore, since 1868, there have been only seven Labour Members of Parliament representing the Farnworth area, although I am the tenth Labour Member of Parliament who has represented the area that has now become the Bolton South East Parliamentary Constituency since the election of Arthur Henry Gill in 1906, when the Labour Party returned its largest cohort of Members of Parliament up to that date, 29 altogether and two from what is now Bolton.

The most famous of my Labour predecessors was undoubtedly George Tomlinson. I have prepared a potted account of his life, which is illustrative of the time that we are celebrating tonight:

George was born in 1890 in Rishton. In school he was troublesome. "I was thrashed in every room of that school. For particularly serious crimes I was taken to the Minister's vestry and thrashed there," he said.

The chapel and the mill were the greatest influences on his early life but, in the end, he chose politics.

In 1914, he was elected to Rishton Urban District Council.

In 1915, George became unemployed and left Rishton with his wife Ethel to begin work with his brother-in-law, who owned a temperance bar in Darley Street and a herbal brewing business then, because he was a conscientious objector, he worked on a nursery and market garden in Didsbury during WWII.

In the summer of 1919 he was given permission to return to the job in Farnworth with his brother-in-law, at Merton Pursell & Co, botanic brewers.

In 1926, he was elected to Farnworth Urban District Council. Some of his 'pop' customers refrained from buying from him for a while. Politics were extremely

partisan at that time.

George never made much money because he never charged a deposit on the two-gallon 'pop' bottles that he delivered and, as a result, he lost many. People used them as hot water bottles in bed!

From 1932 to 1934, George was Chairman of Farnworth Urban District Council. He was elected to the Lancashire County Council in 1931 as a representative of Farnworth, and served until 1945.

In 1935, George and Ethel returned to Rishton due to his wife's poor health.

If George had not returned to Rishton, he would not have been elected to the Textile Workers' Parliamentary Panel, which opened up his future.

He allowed himself to be nominated for the Parliamentary Panel and was selected to fight Accrington in 1937. He lost.

However, fate played a hand again. Guy Rowson, Member of Parliament for Farnworth died in November 1937. The Accrington Division released George, and the United Textile Factory Workers' Association nominated him for the Farnworth Division.

George was elected to Parliament in the by-election of January 1938.

From February 1941 until May 1945 George Tomlinson was Joint Parliamentary Secretary to Ernest Bevin at the Ministry of Labour and National Service.

He published the Tomlinson Report in January 1943 about the rehabilitation and resettlement of disabled people. Out of that was born Remploy.

George Tomlinson's work changed our attitudes with respect to disabled people, even before Alf Morris took up their cause again later. Some believe that the Disabled Persons (Employment) Bill 1943 was one of George's greatest triumphs in Parliament.

On 5 March 1945, the USA Government invited the free nations that had declared war against either Germany or Japan to a conference in San Francisco, officially known as the United Nations Conference on International Organisation. George was part of the British Delegation.

The United Nations Charter was signed by all the delegates that had attended this important conference at the Fairfield Hotel in San Francisco later that year.

There is no doubt that George Tomlinson's skills as a negotiator were key to the success of the San Francisco conference and he became a national hero. People loved him for his humour. Here are two of his favourite stories:

Two friends were returning home from a funeral when one of them said to the other, "You're looking very glum Bill, what are you thinking about?" "Well," said Bill, "two years ago we buried Tom and we were in t'third carriage. Last year we buried Arthur and we were in t'second carriage. Today we've buried our Burt and we were in t'first. We want no more promotion."

During one of his several election campaigns he was asked to explain the difference between inflation and deflation. "Well", said George, "when I'm in London and they call me 'Sir', that's inflation; when I come home and Mrs Tomlinson says George come and help me with the washing up, that's deflation."

He was Minister of Works from August 1945 to February 1947. At this time his Parliamentary Private Secretary was Harold Wilson.

In February 1947 the Education Minister, Ellen Wilkinson, died, and George was called to 10 Downing Street to hear Clem Attlee offer him the job of Minister of Education, a job he had always yearned for.

"They say there's an ignoramus at the Ministry of Education," said George, "and they're quite right, but perhaps it's only a man who's never had any education himself who can appreciate it to the full."

George Tomlinson spent four and a half years at the Ministry of Education, until October 1951. It was George Tomlinson who introduced the GCE.

Following the 1950 General Election George began to feel ill. When he finally recovered enough to return to the House of Commons, his friends and colleagues were shocked by his gaunt appearance. In his last speech, and the only one that he made in 1951, he reminded the House of the great debt that the Country owed to the cotton workers.

During the Parliamentary recess in the summer of 1952 George appeared to be making steady progress towards improved health, but he relapsed suddenly and died on 22 September 1952.

His religious beliefs stayed with him to his end.

Luck undoubtedly played a part in George Tomlinson's life, but he seized the opportunities that life presented to him. Although he was not born in Farnworth, George is still regarded today as one of Farnworth's own people.

Finally, I want to thank Cllr Noel Spencer for suggesting that this event be commemorated.

Thank you for listening and enjoy the rest of the evening.

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