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# JBP and the Uni article

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Bradford's University celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2016. What better time therefore to share some stories of the links between the University and the city's famous son?

## **New university, old story**

The University of Bradford came into existence on the 18 October 1966 when the Queen signed its Royal Charter. J.B. Priestley was then 72.

The University was not one of the new 'plateglass' universities that sprang up on greenfield sites during the 1960s boom in higher education, such as York, Sussex and East Anglia. Its roots were deep in the Bradford of Priestley's boyhood, the Bradford of Bright Day and Lost Empires.

Bradford Technical College was set up in 1882 to provide technical education for Bradford's industries. It had become increasingly clear to Bradford's industrialists that they were falling behind those on the Continent in the quality and innovation of their work and that improved technical skills were needed. The College was also influenced by the non-conformist emphasis on education and self-improvement exemplified by Priestley's socialist schoolmaster father, Jonathan.

From the outset there were attempts to transform the College into a University for Bradford: but the city missed out on the 'red-brick' phase that saw industrial neighbours Leeds and Manchester set up their own universities. But various initiatives failed, for various reasons. Change came slowly. Government response to the need for technological excellence made apparent in the Second World War led to the formation of Colleges of Advanced Technology (CATs) in 1957, of which Bradford was one. The higher education side became Bradford Institute of Technology, while other studies remained as Bradford Technical College, which after various other mergers became what is today Bradford College.

BIT was a university in all but name, but the lack of the name and the prestige made it very difficult for the organisation to attract funding and build the infrastructure needed. The CATs arguably could not succeed in the UK's class structure and in 1963 they were allowed to seek university status. It had only taken a century or so!

## **Doctor of Letters**

Naturally the new university wished to connect with well-known Bradford people, the great and the good. One way to honour them and to create new friends for the University was by the awarding of honorary degrees. Priestley was awarded his in 1970.

JB received his Doctorate of Letters from Chancellor Rt. Hon. Harold Wilson at the morning ceremony of the 11 July 1970. His fellow graduands were Alderman Hall, chairman of the Educational Services Committee of the City of Bradford, and the distinguished mathematician Professor Coulson. The afternoon ceremony included awards to "Bradford financier" Ralph C. Yablon, who had founded a Chair and fellowships at the University, and Kenneth Mellanby of the Monk's Wood ecological research station.

Honorary graduates were presented to the Chancellor by the University's Public Orator, who made a speech explaining the rationale for the award. The oration for Priestley's degree is a wonderful example, demonstrating considerable knowledge of the author's writings and a deep understanding of his significance:

"... his popular reputation – in itself most richly merited – quite certainly gets him wrong. He is widely thought of as vaguely inspirational, insular, traditionalist, reassuring, cheerful, safe ... He is in fact tough-minded, cosmopolitan, sometimes gay but often grumpy, professionally experimental, intellectually restless and enquiring, a literary artificer of enormous prodigality and power".

The oration makes the point that Priestley had not settled for a distinguished old age, but continued to be creative, citing his collaboration with "avant-garde" Iris Murdoch, and his "excoriating" university novels which "are capable of provoking, from an academic reader, a wince on every other page".

It is customary for the honorary graduate to make a speech of their own in thanks. Priestley used the opportunity to call for a better learning environment alongside more education, points he had made in many places in his writing career (think for instance of sympathy for the children of Rusty Lane in *English Journey*): "It is no use teaching children to read Shelley and Wordsworth if there is not a good bookshop in the city. It is also no use asking them to enjoy Shakespeare if there is no place where they can see Shakespeare. This university can help to change that." The city's image was one of "thick-skinned insensitive men of muck and brass", whereas in fact it had always been home to creative people, scientists, artists, musicians, theatre.

The event was clearly a happy one for Priestley. He later wrote to Robert McKinlay that the ceremony was "by far the most enjoyable of my four hon. Doc. occasions" and that the photographs were "excellent – even if I tend to look like Goering's cousin".

Also Tom ...

## **The Bomb and the Hungry World**

Bradford University's Charter includes a unique and famous clause: ... this appeared because two individuals vital in the University's story felt that science and technology must consider social concerns and work to create a better world. Ted Edwards 'Red Ted' was the first Vice-Chancellor, a believer in student involvement in University governance and interdisciplinary studies, a chemist by background; Robert McKinlay, his deputy, came from a Quaker background: both were active campaigners for peace. Where should the University focus its efforts? #cite

This consideration of ethics, of the human dimension to science, of moral responsibility, is characteristic of course of Priestley's own thinking.

Bradford is best known worldwide for its Peace Studies department. The University was the first UK institution to have a chair of peace studies, following an initiative by Quakers. Priestley was of course approached to endorse the appeal to fund the chair, which he did.

#cite

Peace Studies has survived serious attacks in the 1980s; staff are currently researching terrorism and working to bring reconciliation to many areas of the world.

## A Palatial Library

In 1975 a new library building for the University was completed. This was badly needed, replacing various ad hoc measures in which the collections and services were scattered across the city wherever space could be found (Wardley House, above the ice rink, for example). Whose name should it bear but the city's famous author?

Priestley opened the J.B. Priestley Library on 18 October 1975. Proceedings began the night before with a small dinner party in "one of the private dining rooms" in the main building. The menu survives: Florida Cocktail or Spring Vegetable Soup, then sole, lamb, and Cherry Cheese Cake. Harold Wilson, the University's first Chancellor and Prime Minister at the time, wrote to Vice-Chancellor Ted Edwards that "the warmth of the occasion surpassed even the high quality of the cuisine".

On the day, the Chancellor and Priestley spoke, Priestley unveiled a plaque, then the party toured the new building and had a buffet lunch before the University car took the Priestleys back to their home in Stratford. The event was planned to the last detail, including the whereabouts of umbrellas and keeping the lift free for Priestley to use (he was then over eighty).

The University's historian, Robert McKinlay, gives a delightful anecdote, which I have heard from other sources and shows Priestley's grumpy persona. The new building included a new state-of-the-art computer centre. "The opening ceremony was unique in that the opener declared his lack of interest in computers and bluntly refused the invitation to visit the Centre" (McKinlay, 1997, page 142).

The Library to this date bears the author's name, usually abbreviated to JBP and JBPL. Every student who attends the University will therefore have made a connection with the author!

## 1980s and beyond

The University kept in touch with Priestley thereafter, though he became of course too frail to visit much. Following his death in 1984, the connection continued through Jacquetta Hawkes, who visited on a number of occasions.

Via the Social Sciences Librarian and Priestley enthusiast, John Horton, the University played its part in the revival of interest in Priestley's works from the 1990s on. Society founded. The Library housed a major exhibition about him,

Priestley's Archive came to the University from the Priestley Estate during the 1990s. Priestley's Archive is the star and most popular of all the Special Collections, and new premises and digital

technologies allow us to bring his works and ideas to new audiences. The forthcoming refurbishment of the Library will see at last the archive and accompanying books in high standard premises which will allow us to make much more of them. ...

The University Archive is catalogued only very roughly. It is likely that further Priestley

## References

McKinlay, Robert A (1997). The University of Bradford: the early years. University of Bradford.

Priestley Archive. Album.

University Archive. Files on Library Opening, Honorary Degrees,

## Images supplied

Old Building

Richmond Building circa

The J.B. Priestley Library brochure, 1975. Visitors to Special Collections might recognise this incredibly durable carpet which lives on in parts of the building.

J.B. Priestley and Harold Wilson at the Opening of the J.B. Priestley Library, 1975.