

# *Ten years forward* A CELEBRATION

## **Moving Worlds**

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## The City by the Water

CARYL PHILLIPS

Were it not for the river there would be no Leeds. The city exists because of the river. Two thousand years ago the Romans built a road from York (Eboracum) in the east to Manchester (Mancunium) in the west, and at the point where the road traverses the River Aire they constructed a crossing. Around this river crossing grew a settlement. By the eighteenth century, Leeds was a substantial place with a population of 7,000, and another 3,000 in the outlying townships. A subscription library, reading and assembly rooms, and theatres were built in the town centre to cater to the wealthier classes, while the working people lived in relative squalor and indulged themselves with drinking and variety entertainment. By the mid-nineteenth century, the population of Victorian Leeds had swelled to 150,000; and in 1847, Armley Gaol was opened to cope with the ever-growing numbers of so-called 'undesirables'. In 1858, Leeds was able to flaunt a new Town Hall, one of the largest civic buildings in Europe, a place impressive enough for Queen Victoria herself to open. Industrial Leeds was thriving, and continuing to grow.

Water plays a great part in the development of the city. As early as 1700, the Aire-Calder Navigation Canal opened and allowed cloth to be transported by barge out of Leeds and directly to the port of Hull, and thereafter to London or to the large markets of Europe. With a link to Hull in the east already established, work began on the construction of a canal that would link Leeds with Liverpool to the west, and thereby provide opportunities for exporting directly into the new markets of the Americas. Although it took until 1816 to complete, the Leeds-Liverpool Canal placed Leeds at the hub of an extensive water-borne transportation network. Goods flowed into and out of the city on water. Warehouses and factories sprang up along the banks of the river and canal whose muscular arteries cut through the centre of Leeds. Although rail transportation existed, and the roads were being continually improved, Leeds was primarily connected to the wider world by these bodies of water.

The bold words carved around the vestibule of the nineteenth-century Town Hall – 'Europe-Asia-Africa-America' – reminded the people of

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Leeds that the globe was the true sphere of influence for the British, and Victorian Leeds was perfectly positioned to take advantage of this fortuitous fact. The making of cloth remained important to the town's economy, but Leeds was becoming better known as the 'workshop of the world'. Hundreds of factories produced bicycles, cranes, nails, sewing machines, bolts, train rails, locomotives, axles, bricks and much more. Along the waterways there were scores of furnaces burning every day and the sky was choked with chimneys and pollution. Glassworks, tanneries, and breweries, every type of industry was represented on the banks of the river and canal.

And while Leeds gave to the world, she also took from the world. People. By the late 1840s a small community of middle-class German Jews had established themselves in Leeds, but the Jewry that followed in their wake was largely comprised of poor Jews from Eastern Europe. They would arrive at Hull and make their way west to Leeds in the hope of finding some kind of occupation in the clothing industry, for many were skilled tailors. And then there were the Irish, thousands of whom arrived in the wake of the great famine of the 1840s and congregated in the east end of Leeds in slums of great deprivation. The Irish. The Jews. And later, West Indians, Indians, West Africans, Pakistanis, Poles, and many others would come. Immigrants flowed into Leeds and slowly took their place in the order of things, but life was never easy for any migrant group. People were discriminated against. Stared at. Made to feel that they were the outsider. Made to feel ashamed of who they were. But Leeds offered one thing that everybody wanted and was prepared to pay the price for: opportunity. Here in Leeds there existed the possibility of transforming oneself from what you were into what you hoped to become. Leeds was a place of magical possibilities. A place with jobs and potential. To arrive in grey, grim, bleak Leeds was to arrive at a place of hope, and so they came. And so they continue to come.

In 1949, David Oluwale arrived in Leeds. A young nineteen-year-old boy, he stowed away from Lagos, Nigeria, and landed at Hull. In those days, an arrival in Britain as a stowaway was immediately rewarded with a mandatory 28-day sentence, and the courts in Hull decided that the young lad, who harboured ambitions of becoming an engineer, should serve out his sentence in the imposing gothic structure that was Armley Gaol in Leeds. Upon his release, Oluwale found digs near Woodhouse Moor and began working at the West Yorkshire Foundries, a place that made car mouldings, but only for top-of-the-line cars. During the evenings Oluwale began to study, and his routine was established. A quiet



of two Leeds City police officers for assaulting the immigrant. In the absence of any witnesses, it was not possible to try them for murder or manslaughter, but the details of the case, and the sentencing of the two policemen, received national attention and shocked people in Leeds. What kind of a way was this to treat a stranger to one's city?

Leeds rejected Oluwale. Friends and social work agencies tried to help, but there is no getting around the fact that the city looked the other way while this man was cast – literally – onto the waters. But back in the late sixties the city was busy, and the city stood on the threshold of a transformation that has finally come to pass. Dark, grim, soot-blackened buildings would soon be sand-blasted clean or torn down. New concrete and glass office blocks, and 'modern' sprawling estates, were being planned. The city would soon begin the process of regeneration. The city was busy. But that's part of the problem with the regeneration of Leeds. Somebody forgot to include the people.

Busy Leeds lowered her head and set about creating a city centre whose impersonal landscape would be shaped by architects whose atrophied imaginations had been given a blank canvas to work with by a City Council interested, or so it would appear, in serving only the financial and business sectors. Gestures in the direction of the people, such as Millennium Square (the Council's 'posh patio'), could not disguise the feeling that this busy new post-industrial Leeds, which hastily rebranded itself as the consumer capital of the north, has now lost a part of its soul. Along the banks of the river, new private developments have sprung up. White collar residences with views of the water. Fashionable wine bars, exclusive restaurants, all of which suggest glitz and glamour. Buildings before people. Who can afford to live and eat there?

David Oluwale came to pre-regeneration Leeds, the old Leeds, the Leeds with the inner-city problems, but a Leeds which still held on to the idea of people being important. The architecture seemed to foster a type of togetherness – urban trauma-bonding, if you will – but it worked. Well, it worked for most. The tragedy and the shame is that in pre-regeneration Leeds it didn't work for David Oluwale, and we – the city of Leeds – lost him. We feel shame and guilt for losing this mid-twentieth century immigrant to Leeds, and continue to learn from his story. It is a story we cannot afford to forget.

How would David Oluwale, or any newcomer, fare in today's regeneration Leeds? The Leeds that has defined itself as 'The Barcelona of the North'. The United Kingdom's Number One Clubbing city, with drink, music, and food available if you're prepared to get busy and spend

and consume, and overlook the fact that the gleaming city centre remains surrounded by unemployment, social alienation, and a population harbouring an increasingly uneasy feeling that this is not for 'us' but for 'them'. The city has undeniably changed but it feels colder. The temperature has dropped a couple of degrees as perceived affluence has taken hold. But all change is to some degree cyclical. To journey now along the river is to travel from abandonment to abandonment. From the old factories and warehouses and terraces that were once the backbone of industrial Leeds, to the new flats and developments which, in a failing economy, run the risk of one day becoming equally bleak monuments to an age of prosperity and ambition. The temperature of the water remains the same. The river remains the same. The water tells the story. Without the river there would be no Leeds. The same river down which David Oluwale made his fateful final journey to his resting place in a clump of weeds near the Knostrop Sewage Works. He saw it all. He was able to look at his adopted city from the proper vantage point. The city exists because of the river. And the river gently supported David as he made his final journey home.

