

The Owl



Issue 3. Summer 2026

Grit, Ambition and Resilience: The Remarkable Journey of Barbara Taylor Bradford

A Decade of Change in Leeds: Two Perspectives

I Grew Up With A Real Life Writer! The Making of Louise Rennison's Comic Voice

The National Poetry Centre: A New Landmark For Leeds

Harehills Middle School

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Welcome

2026 is the National Year of Reading. This edition of *The Owl* is dedicated to the written word. We have two contrasting perspectives on the city’s physical environment from “Jones the Planner” (Adrian Jones) and geographer Anthony Silson.

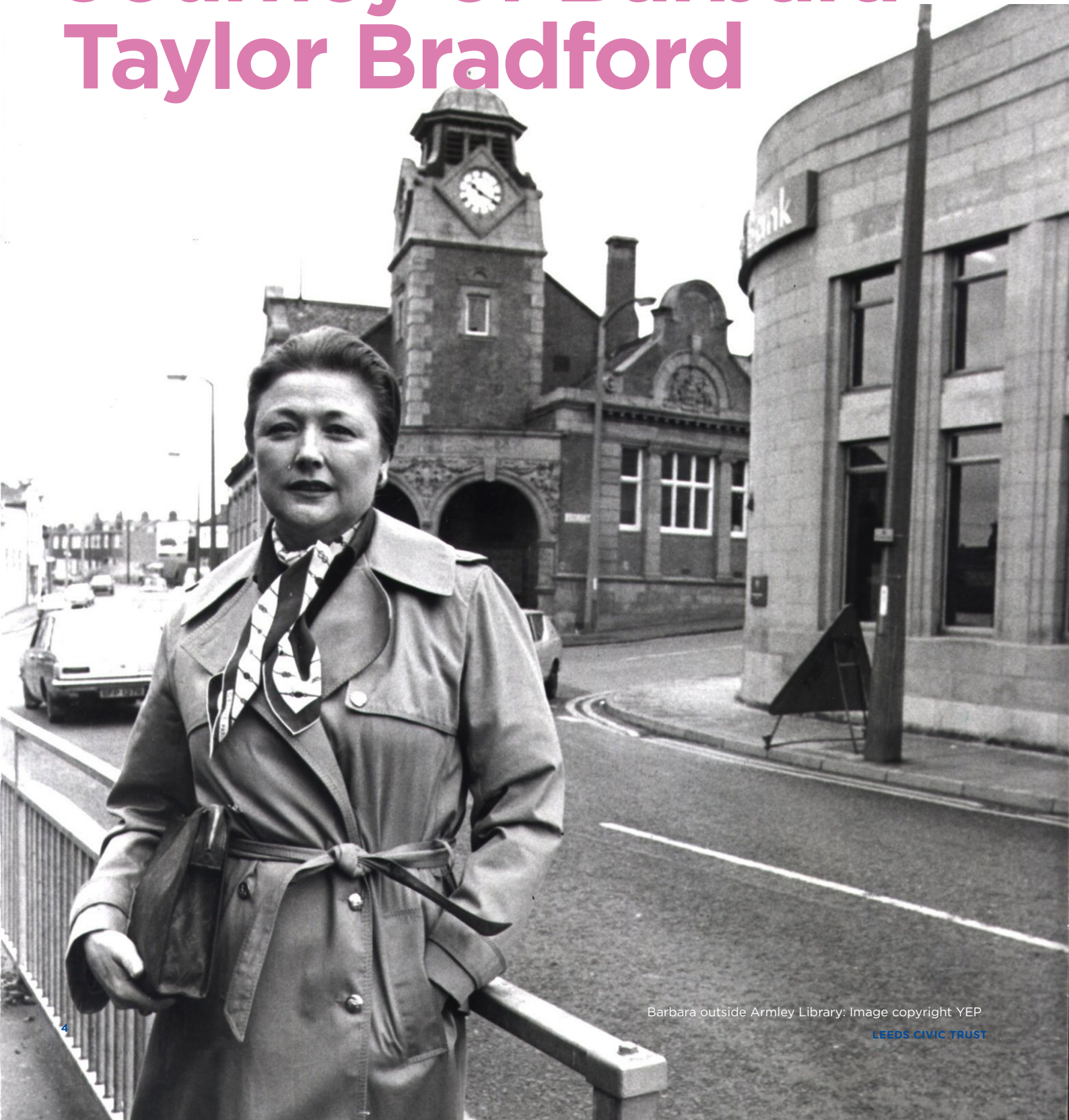
We feature the stories behind two of the city’s most prolific fiction writers. Sophie Severs, the sister of celebrated author of teenage fiction Louise Rennison, reflects on how a childhood in Seacroft provided inspiration for her future writing. The career of one-time Yorkshire Evening Post reporter and Woman of Substance author Barbara Taylor Bradford is discussed by the current editor of the newspaper, Laura Collins.

We celebrate the power of poetry: Professor Nick Barley tells us about plans to create a National Poetry Centre on the University of Leeds campus, and we spotlight local poet Khadijah Ibrahiim’s poem “Harehills Middle School”.

The National Year of Reading is hoping to rebuild the habit of reading for pleasure across all age groups. We hope this edition of *The Owl* sparks interest in the joy of reading.

Jenna Strover
Chair, Leeds Civic Trust

Taylor Bradford



Barbara outside Armley Library: Image copyright YEP
LEEDS CIVIC TRUST

Barbara outside Armley Library: Image copyright YEP



Unveiling of plaque to Keith Waterhouse: Image copyright YEP

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Alan Bennett and Barbara Taylor Bradford receiving honorary degrees at The University: Image copyright YEP

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HOME PAGE

Paris in the Spring

... it isn't what you expect

THE phrase "Paris in the Spring" may conjure up pictures of sunlit boulevards and elegant women, but as far as I could see the ordinary French woman is shabbier today than she has been for years. Though there are the eternally well-groomed women who frequent *Mammy* and the *Ritz* and the aristocratic patronise the couturiers, the *bourgeoise* wife or the shabby *ouvrière* is hatless and casually dressed. The *jeune fille* wears a simple dress or the small dressmaker, but she has a touch of the elegant for a reasonable price. In Paris this week I was astonished to find that even at the prices of ordinary garments, the two of the large department stores, Printemps and Galeries Lafayette, a plain wool dress cost 16,000 francs (about £18); in Yorkshire it will at £6 or £7.

Top coats, suits, underwear, shoes, I noticed, were often three times as much as in York.

Earlier this year, I had the pleasure to represent the Yorkshire Evening Post at the unveiling of a plaque dedicated to our very own Barbara Taylor Bradford at Armley Library.

having lived and interacted with Alan Bennett (a school friend), Peter O'Toole and the 'father of journalism', Keith Waterhouse.

Central to Barbara's writing were complex female protagonists at a time when the industry often sidelined them.

She never forgot her roots that shaped that strength of character that served her so well even from a young age - Barbara managed to wangle herself two library cards for Armley Library to make sure she had access to plenty of books to nourish her love of reading.

So inspired by her love of reading, the YEP launched its Leeds Reads campaign in the National Year of Reading to celebrate the power of storytelling and the creative doors it unlocks for people of all ages.

We're putting our local libraries firmly in the spotlight. 300,000 books have been loaned out across Leeds in just the space of three months.

Our city is home to 37 libraries and community hubs with no closures in the last 10 years.

Her remarkable journey saw her join the YEP after leaving school at the age of 15 for the typing pool.

Determined to make her mark in a male-dominated industry, she soon became a reporter on our newspaper, becoming the first Woman's Editor at 18, before leaving for the bright lights of Fleet Street and beyond.

The creative scene in our city provided the nurturing ground for her talent, with her being in cahoots with other Leeds literary giants of her time,

For her, the central theme of her work was to validate the demand for and, most importantly, the voices of women-centred stories with strong female leads who simply refused to stay on the sidelines.

It was testament to her grit, ambition and resilience that Barbara carried that strength of character and spirit that comes with being born and bred in Yorkshire, throughout her career.

It was testament to her grit, ambition and resilience that Barbara carried that strength of character and spirit that comes with being born and bred in Yorkshire, throughout her career.



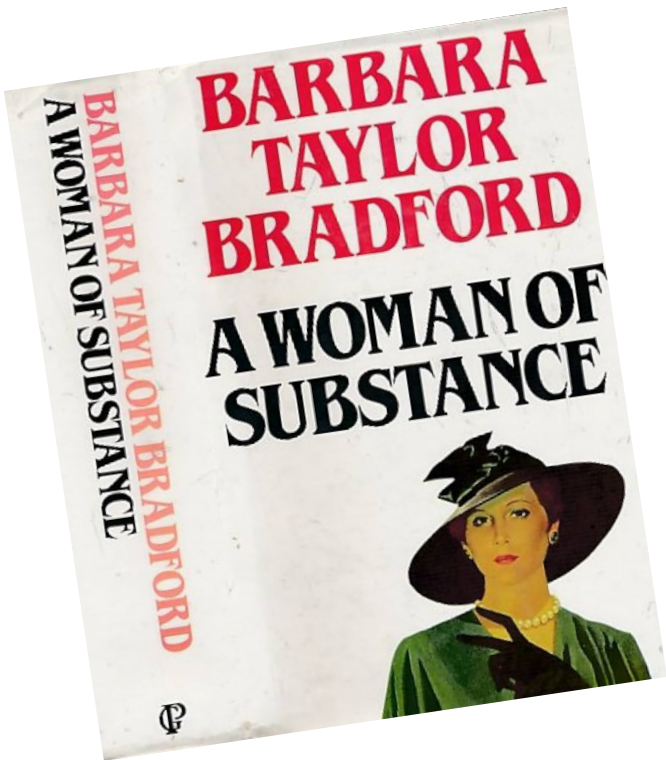
Actress Brenda Blethyn at the Leeds Civic Trust Blue Plaque unveiling for Barbara Taylor Bradford.



LCT Director Martin Hamilton at the Barbara Taylor Bradford unveiling



The Channel 4 team at the Barbara Taylor Bradford unveiling



Libraries are not just luxuries - they are the infrastructure for the imagination and vital community hubs that knit our city together.

Just a few weeks ago I found myself invited to Downing Street to honour Barbara's legacy.

Female leaders from across television, the creative industries and business gathered at Number 11 to mark the television adaptation of Barbara's best-selling rags-to-riches novel inspired by her Yorkshire roots.

Hosted by the then Chancellor of the Exchequer, the event honoured the Leeds-born author whose international bestselling novels have earned her a place among the most influential British writers of the 20th and 21st centuries.

While gathered in the capital's political powerhouse, it was a stark reminder of

just how trailblazers like Barbara have paved the way for so many women in the decades that have followed.

It comes as new figures reveal that women make up close to half of the UK workforce, but are consistently underrepresented in senior leadership across the creative and cultural industries, highlighting the importance of diversity and representation both on and off screen.

As I left one of the most photographed black doors in the UK behind to head back up to Leeds, it struck me just what a privilege it is to be the youngest female editor-in-chief of the Yorkshire Evening Post.

It's even more of an honour to be blazing my own trail on the title that defined and shaped the literary career of such a female icon like Barbara Taylor Bradford.

We hope we continue to make her proud all these years later.

Laura Collins

Editor at The Yorkshire Evening Post.



Barbara Taylor Bradford at work. Credit: photographer Carol Taveras, copyright The Barbara Taylor Bradford Trust.

A Decade of Change in Leeds: Two Perspectives

Retired lecturer Anthony Silson is a geographer, local historian and the author of *Leeds: 21st Century Landscapes*. In this article, he shares his personal reflections on Leeds' changing skyline, looking at how planning and development have transformed the city while asking whether the right balance has been struck between growth and protecting its green spaces.

Adrian Jones, a Leeds Civic Trust member and volunteer, was formerly Director of Planning and Transport at Nottingham City Council. He was a prime mover behind the Nottingham tram system and introduced the pioneering work-based parking levy. His early career was in conservation. Adrian has written and blogged widely on the subject of urban design under the pseudonym "Jones the Planner" with Chris Matthews.

It was the distant views from my home of Bramley that alerted me to great changes that were occurring in Leeds city centre. That was about seven years ago. Previously, the University's Parkinson Tower had dominated the skyline. Now, tall buildings were soaring up at a rate seemingly comparable to that of spring daffodils. These rapid changes engaged my curiosity and eventually led me to write a book called *Leeds: 21st Century Landscapes* that was published by Beecroft Publications in December 2025.

It rapidly became clear that most of the new buildings were strongly localised. Most were in parts of the city centre and parts of the inner city. In contrast, with a few exceptions, Leeds' countryside was hardly changing. This spatial pattern was essentially a result of Leeds City Council's decisions based on its planners' recommendations.

The basic issue planners faced was that land is a finite resource, but Leeds population was growing. In the ten years between 2001 and 2011, it had grown by almost 50,000 people and it has grown by almost the same amount over the next decade. More jobs were needed after 2011, and, even more crucially, additional residential accommodation was (and indeed still is) required. The planners' solution was to retain very large areas of countryside and build on the many brownfield sites in the centre and inner city. But with limited space, and often high land values in and near the city centre, new buildings had to be tall.

Spatially, at least, the planners' solution has proven to be mostly successful, noticeably so in the preservation of large areas of countryside. It is essential for British farmers to continue to produce food, partly to maintain national security and partly because home-produced food often tastes better than imported. Furthermore, air miles are reduced if perishable food is produced locally. Air temperatures, particularly when nights are clear, are much lower in countryside than built-up areas, so retaining countryside may help counter global warming. Lastly, exploring countryside on foot improves physical and emotional health.

Planners have been correct in discouraging building from much of Leeds countryside. However, small, scattered plots have been lost to

housing, for example at Garforth, and Micklefield (possibly because railway stations are available in those villages) and larger development has occurred in east Leeds from Thorpe Park northwards known as the East Leeds Extension, it has meant many low-storey houses have been built there to give some variety to the new housing stock within Leeds.

Though some greenfield sites have been lost, many brownfield areas have also been occupied by new buildings, but their designs have been of variable quality. Many builders, or occupiers of new buildings, flaunt their green credentials. I am fully aware of global warming, yet it is my opinion that many new buildings are too greatly insulated. I prefer more access to fresh air even in winter; in summer the heat can be intolerable in well insulated buildings. Many houses are now built without fireplaces and chimneys but it is the presence of these that help change a house into a home. The box-like form of the climate innovation houses does not greatly appeal either, though those with painted walls in east Leeds are preferable to those duller houses in the Kirkstall part of Bramley.

Like the recent housing stock, the new office blocks in the West End are of varying visible quality. City Square House is as attractive as the 1920s former Majestic Cinema building on the opposite side of the road. 11 and 12 Wellington Place have some outer bronze work that makes them a little more attractive. But my heart sank when in the Yorkshire Evening Post of 21 April 2026, an artist's impression of an office block at 31 Wellington Street showed a simple box-like structure of windows and brick. In reality, the brick might turn out to be faux brick too. The high density of the new office buildings and their disorderly street plan disorientate me and make me feel

that I and my fellow human beings are insignificant parts of the total landscape.

Many of these reservations about the new office buildings are also applicable to the new multistorey flats. Some may enjoy high rise city centre living, but I am not one of their number. Should lifts fail, I would struggle to get down flights of stairs! The fire risks are well-known, but strong winds are hazards too. In the last century, almost 100mph winds battered Leeds and it is far from clear whether the new multistorey canyons would be able to cope with such gales. Moreover, living in such proximity to so many others does not appeal to me, and I would miss the large parks on my doorstep.

With brief exceptions, I have lived in proximity to large parks or countryside all my life. Bramley, where I still live, lost most of its farmland to council housing in the post-war period. However, as well as farmland, there were large parks and woods in walking distance of my home. These green spaces remain and still thoroughly enhance my life.

Accordingly, I most strongly approve of the new green spaces made in the last decade. These include those tiny ones made within the new suburban housing sites and the slightly larger ones to be enjoyed at Wellington Place and by the former Tetley's building near the city centre. But Leeds merits more and even larger green spaces to meet the demands of its growing population. Yet, with high land values in and near the city centre, and the pressure to build more offices and more flats to meet the needs of a rising population, this is most unlikely to happen.

Anthony Silson

Author of Leeds: 21st Century Landscapes



Nearly ten years ago, Leeds Civic Trust hosted a lively debate on my book *Cities of the North*, which employed the precepts and aspirations of Lord Rogers's seminal *Towards an Urban Renaissance* to critique planning and regeneration in the big Northern cities since the Millennium.

Whilst recognising the strong character of Leeds city centre, many of my comments were critical of the quality of much of the new architecture and, more so, of the urban context left by the legacy of the 'Motorway City of the 70s'. These were the impressions of an outsider, but I now have a Leeds postcode and am a member of Leeds Civic Trust and know the city better. After a torrid, if eventful, decade, it is interesting to reflect on how the city has changed.

The most striking thing about Leeds today is just how lively and resilient the city centre is, certainly compared with many other cities. It seems confident, young, diverse and metropolitan. The

scale of new development, mostly apartments and student residences, is staggering, although the quality of much of this new architecture and townscape is less impressive.

The most profound, positive and hopeful change is that traffic in the centre is now far less dominant and many of the principal streets have regained their qualities as public spaces. The City Centre Loop is gone and the new street designs, giving priority to pedestrians, are generally very good, especially the landscaping at Cookridge Street, although the Corn Exchange landscaping should be more robust.

Unfortunately, the holistic 'City Boulevard' streetscape design template, proposed by uber-urbanist Jan Gehl in the Southbank masterplan, has been weakened with over-engineered and over dominant cycleways. Nevertheless, Leeds is now a much more people-friendly place than it used to be. The redesign of City Square to the competition winning 'city woodland' concept awaits funding, and let's hope there is a realistic maintenance budget

too. The renovation of the Majestic as Channel 4's HQ is a big success, as is the redevelopment of the 'temporary' car park at the point of Aire Street and Wellington Street, long advocated by the Trust, and now quite elegant offices. Both provide effective enclosure for this important civic space.

There are ambitious plans for the urban repair of what is now called the 'city centre rim', that huge, hostile swathe surrounding the central core, fractured by dual carriageways and motorway slip roads. Hopefully this will enable the realisation of the exciting vision for Eastside promoted by Leeds Civic Trust, which could transform the area around a new linear park and a revealed Sheepscar Beck. New housing, mediating in scale between the more intimate conservation area around the Minster against the much larger new blocks along Marsh Lane and East Street, would help to stitch the inner city and the city centre together again. The currently proposed redesign and landscaping of Penny Pocket Park and the Minster environs will be a first phase of this transformation.



Page\Park's redesign of Leeds Playhouse, with its exotic decorated facade for the new entrance and cafe onto St Peters Street, is a big success, bringing a new vitality to this key cultural space.

Page\Park's redesign of Leeds Playhouse, with its colourful decorated facade for the new entrance and cafe onto St Peters Street, is a big success, bringing a new vitality to this key cultural space. The new Leeds City College is also a good addition to the townscape – well proportioned with satisfying street facades. Its students provide animation for the newly landscaped steps and the public spaces leading to BDP's hulking Quarry House. This is now framed by the SOYO complex of high-rise flats and student residences which have some thought about urban design. However, the riff on the New York artist quarter SOHO is a cheek given that the complex turns its back on the York Road motorway and the communities beyond.

The new Victoria Quarter divides opinion. It is certainly blingy, but I see this as an intelligent reinterpretation of the extravagance of Matcham's arcades and the Burmantofts' tradition. It adds an extra dimension to a city centre undergoing profound economic change. So far, the loss of high street retailers has largely been contained, with some stores like Debenhams

successfully converted as ground floor shops and upper floors residential, mostly student flats. The demolition of the execrable Core shopping centre is to be positively welcomed – a pity its car park on Albion Street remains.

There seems to be no end to the student housing boom. Ten years ago the first lumpen tower with its 'look at me' red fin intruded into the view up Briggate. It is now submerged in a cluster of – [Editor's note: Hold it there! Some of Adrian's opinions can be a little strong even for us. We recommend his books and blog if you'd like to read more!]

The office centre of Leeds is moving west with many of the controversial 'Leeds Look' buildings along the inner ring road now demolished or repurposed for students. It is fashionable to give postmodernist architecture a more positive appraisal, and certainly some buildings like the Magistrates' Courts and 1 Park Row have considerable quality. The new office quarter at Wellington Place has a clear plan which knits well with the street network and includes bars, restaurants and coffee shops.

The architecture of the office blocks is polite but becomes repetitive and could have had more diverse design, such as you find at Brindley Place in Birmingham, for example.

Leeds Station has seen improvements like the expansion and daylighting of the concourse, with the pedestrianisation of New Station Street and a grand stepped pedestrian access up from Bishopsgate Street in progress. More improvements are promised, including a new over-bridge and a new exit to Neville Street to ease passenger circulation in what is the second busiest station outside London. The new mass rapid transit (MRT) tram route is not finalised, but is likely to run through City Square. It is not at all clear how these elements will fit together. Arguably bus interchange, taxi and drop off/pick up is already less convenient than before.



Overall, the regeneration of Leeds city centre in the last ten years has been impressive, especially given the national political and economic context

It is evident that the congested Leeds Station needs a more holistic and radical upgrade, as has been done for London Bridge for example, also on a very constricted elevated site. More track and platform capacity is urgently needed, as is more circulation space. Leeds station is a very utilitarian place, giving no sense of arrival in a great city; it needs much exhilarating new architecture. The only realistic location for more platforms is the existing car parking at Princes Square, possibly with taxis and drop off/pick up at an upper level above the platforms. There could be a grand new daylit concourse between the platforms and the Deco north concourse, similar to King's Cross. That would be really something!

Leeds City Council deserves credit for its sustainable development and transport strategies and also for championing green space through 'Leeds Our Spaces'. However, capricious government funding, and fear of being accused of a 'war on the motorist', is holding back progress. The funding announced for phase one of MRT is to be welcomed, but the bureaucratic delay in delivery is very frustrating. One can only weep at the 20 years lost by Whitehall vetoing the

previous tram proposals and also for the 40 years of bus decline imposed by privatisation and deregulation. With franchising, Leeds can now hopefully expect to see its abysmal bus service improved at least to the standards Manchester has achieved. This and MRT will be essential to acceptance of congestion management, which is the only way to end the vicious circle of car dependency, the legacy of the 'Motorway city of the 70s'.

Overall, the regeneration of Leeds city centre in the last ten years has been impressive, especially given the national political and economic context. The great icons of Leeds, the Town Hall, Kirkgate Market, Corn Exchange, the Arcades and great commercial architecture of the C19th and early C20th, the astonishing Dark Arches and Chamberlin Powell and Bon's university campus all make for a very distinctive and distinguished character.

However, the raw dynamism of a vibrant commercial city does sometimes make Leeds insouciant of its distinctive qualities; its huge confidence can be a liability as well as an asset. Despite the continuous

efforts of Leeds Civic Trust, the special character of Leeds is still being eroded, the most egregious recent example being Tower Works. There have been some positive conservation moves, for example the emerging regeneration of Mabgate and the beginnings of a revival for Kirkgate, although the collapsed and derelict buildings here show much still needs to be done. When the renovation is completed Kirkgate can be pedestrianised as a key link to the Minster and Eastside.

The biggest issues and opportunities for Leeds over the next ten years will be how successfully the 'city centre rim' is regenerated to reconnect the city centre with its inner-city districts and create new neighbourhoods for attractive family housing. This will require making the most of new public transport investment so as to reduce the dominance of traffic to enable connected communities and healthy street environments.

Adrian Jones



MODA

I Grew Up With A Real Life Writer!

The Making of Louise Rennison's Comic Voice

Later this year, Leeds Civic Trust will be unveiling a Blue Plaque for the Leeds-born author Louise Rennison. She is best known for her bestselling 'Confessions of Georgia Nicolson' series, which began with 'Angus, Thongs and Full-Frontal Snogging' and was later adapted into the hit film "Angus Thongs and Perfect Snogging". The plaque will be unveiled at Leeds East Academy, formerly Parklands Girls' School where Louise was a pupil and where many of the experiences that inspired her much-loved books took place.

As part of the project, we were delighted to speak with Louise's sister, Sophie Severs, who has been a great supporter of the plaque. We are very grateful to Sophie for sharing these wonderful memories of growing up with Louise. Her article gives a warm, funny and personal glimpse into Louise's early years in Leeds and the family life, humour and friendships that inspired one of the city's most celebrated authors.

Louise was 12 when I was born in 1963. There were lots of photos by our father 'Vati' of the Christening. Professional photos too

mum had a penchant for studio photos since she started working at Leeds University in Bacteriology. One photo even included a struggling Angus, half Scottish Wildcat, held by mum in her jewellery. Others were of Lou and I with our favourite toys.

We were both lucky to have family who loved buying 'special occasion' gifts and novelty props just to share the smiles. Most of them ended up in my

room. Most of mum's special gifts to herself ended up in Lou's room.

On weekdays, Louise would arrive home at Somerville Drive around the same time as mum after having collected me from my Grandma's in East End Park.

Once we were all inside, it seemed we could all relax more. The neighbours still kept a watchful eye on children whilst they were playing outside; the street was less of an extension of the home as it was in East End Park during the war, but there was a vigilance still.

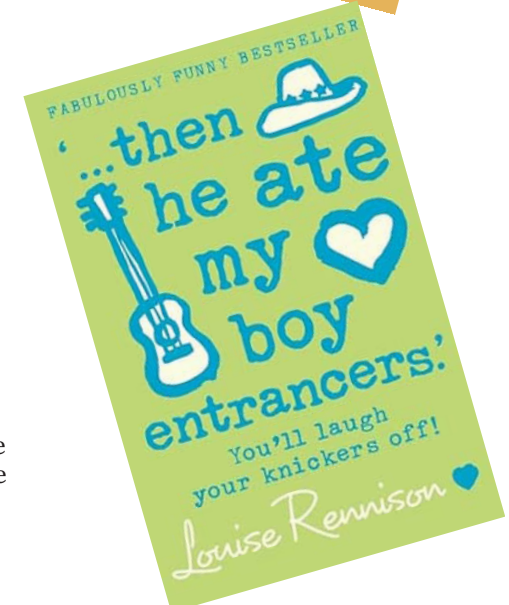
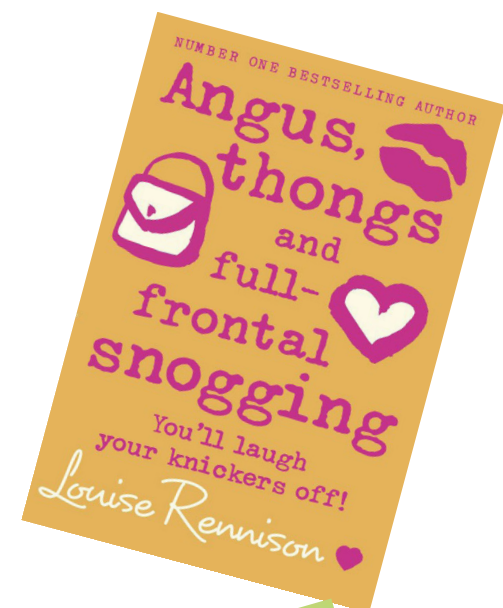
I can't say that behind our front door normality descended, by other people's standards. Things got pretty wild (in a good way). There was a lot of joshing and banter; slightly less enthusiastic if a family priest was present, more enthusiastic if Lou's best pals popped over from the back fields or arrived from the bus stop at the bottom of the road at weekends.

A telephone, which Lou instructed me on how to use, was crucial to make plans.

Chaotic breakfasts and snuggles with Lou and all the items that appeared in Enid Blyton's The Magic Faraway Tree, including a frying pan and Scuba Diving Barbie, were the most comforting of times!

I had her attention then, otherwise she was keeping a journal or with her tribe from Parklands Girls School. They would meet in the fields out back or in the patrolled parks in Seacroft and Roundhay in the early 1960s.

Free from strict school codes of conduct and the chance of making terrifying mistakes like going down the school corridor on the wrong side or being on the wrong side of the prefects, the girl gang had endless fun in the fields, biking, sledging in the snow, swapping stories and laughing at each other's observations and use of their own lexicon.



Bus trips to Croggy (Crossgates) and listening in to the titbits of gossip and wisecracks, walking from Holbeck Park to Elland Road with Dad

Lou and the gang were often in competition with the local boys, exchanging gentle rebukes should they be passing them on their way home.

A persona was definitely developing for Lou to feel that, despite the candy striped school summer dress, home knitted cardy, white ankle socks and beret with the school badge on it, she could on the surface, appear to be a certain type of person, whilst she could actually be a different person who would be able to make things work on her terms. Or try at least!

Bus trips to Croggy (Crossgates) and listening in to the titbits of gossip and wise cracks, walking from Holbeck Park to Elland Road with Dad (for Lou to watch Billy Bremner) and use football tactics as metaphors to describe situations Lou found herself in with lairy or bossy individuals; these moments gave Lou the vocabulary and sense of timing and emotional intelligence to use humour to retrieve a situation. It was almost a moral sensibility, picked up on by Louise from the previous generation of family from 'New Seacroft' and East End Park who had borne their trials as cheerfully as they could.

It must've taken imagination and plenty of preparation... even before 'Mod' became a fashion trend, for Lou and her besties to look the part and have the confidence to participate in the back and forth of the wit (or not) of their peers in Seacroft.

Years later, after becoming a successful author and performer, Lou would return to Elland Road with a boyfriend with side burns and a long fringe from Brighton.

"Ey up..." comments a Leeds fan, "it's D'Artagnan, come for a visit!" who, as it happens was one of Three Musketeers portrayed in the film of the same name, which starred my father's favourite actor Errol Flynn.

This got the blood coursing for both Lou, and her boyfriend from the South, with all genuinely enjoying the humorous verbal challenge.

Sophie Severs
Louise Rennison's sister

With thanks to Sophie and her family for sharing images for this article.



The National Poetry Centre: a new landmark for Leeds

When Simon Armitage was appointed UK Poet Laureate in 2019, he announced a series of initiatives that he hoped would be lasting legacies of his laureateship.

He donated his annual laureate stipend as a prize pot to create a new Laurel Prize for environmental and nature poetry, raising awareness of the climate crisis.

He imagined a nationwide Young Poet Laureate programme, working with school students across England to raise the profile of poetry among young people.

And most ambitiously, Simon called for the creation of a new UK headquarters for poetry. He proposed creating an organisation to champion great poets on an international stage, and to bring poetry back into the heart of everyday life in Britain. Simon spoke with the government, Arts Council England, the University of Leeds and West Yorkshire mayor Tracy Brabin. Everyone agreed that the new National Poetry Centre



Illustration of proposed Centre



should be located in Leeds. And they all agreed that a building could be opened by 2029, before the end of Simon's tenure as Poet Laureate.

This has always felt like a project with enthusiastic support from poets, politicians and the public alike. Now, seven years after Simon's idea first hatched, the project is moving towards fruition. A site has been chosen, funds are being raised and the process of turning an old church building into a fully accessible cultural centre fit for 21st century use has begun.

Trinity St David's, Woodhouse Lane

After an appraisal of a dozen potential sites in Leeds, the former church on Woodhouse Lane, Trinity St David's, was selected.

In 2024, we commissioned historic buildings specialist Dr James Moir to conduct a survey of the structure. His in-depth report revealed rich information about the building's history both as a church and community centre, including a Grade 2 listing in 1976. Constructed in 1901 and inaugurated as the nonconformist Trinity Congregational church in 1902, the building was a vibrant community hub for decades before it was eventually deconsecrated and put up for sale.

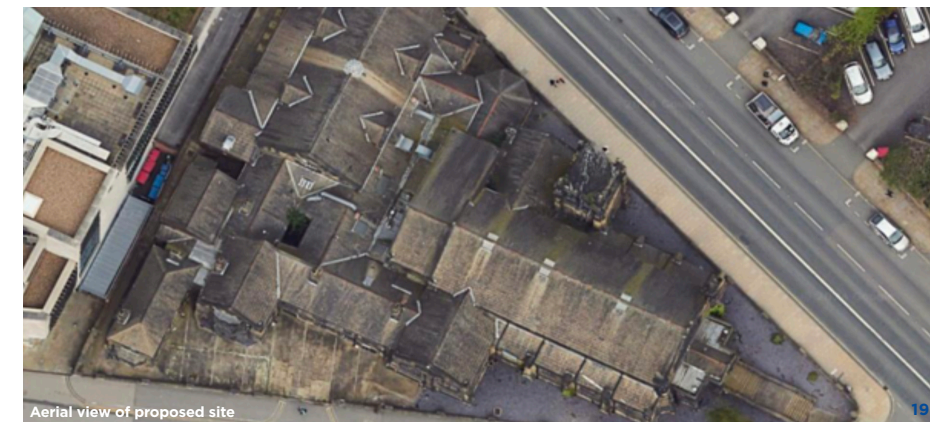
Moir's report throws up fascinating details about the building's history – not least that its designer, Leeds-based architect George Francis Danby, worked in close consultation with the congregation. The design process was unusually democratic, resulting in the inclusion of a large community hall alongside the church nave. Alongside the church's use as a space for religion, the community hall became a focus for a host of different activities,

including public lectures, theatre performances and dance classes. In 1936 it even became the venue for finals of the Leeds and District Badminton League open handicap tournament.

By the turn of the 21st century, the building began a second life as a nightclub, with Halo occupying the larger church hall, and the Quilted Llama based in the community hall. In 2019, the clubbing came to an abrupt halt as the university took back control of the building. It has been looking for a new long-term use ever since.

A National Poetry Centre in Leeds

Can a former church be successfully converted into a national cultural organisation? With support from the University of Leeds and the National Lottery Heritage Fund, we consulted widely around the city and around Yorkshire, and confirmed that poetry plays an important role in the 'intangible heritage' of people's lives. Poetry tells stories about who we are, where we come from and how we feel. If the definition of poetry includes song lyrics, nursery rhymes, prayers, everyday sayings and expressions, then poetry is all around us, much more part of our everyday lives than people might think. It's even at the heart of this summer's blockbuster



Aerial view of proposed site

movie, in Christopher Nolan's adaptation of Homer's The Odyssey.

For many years, Yorkshire people have had a special relationship with poetry. Ever since Caedmon (a humble cowherd who tended the animals that belonged to Whitby Abbey in the 7th century, and is said to have written the first poem in Old English), Yorkshire has used poetry as a way of passing on stories. Before the rise of internationally famous Yorkshire poets, such as the Brontës, WH Auden, Ted Hughes, Tony Harrison, Ian McMillan, Malika Booker, Jason Allen-Paisant and Simon Armitage, the people of this region were great lovers of poems. In fact, Yorkshire enjoyed a greater volume of dialect poetry than any other county in England. In the 18th and 19th centuries, poems like the Lyke-Wake Dirge and Coom, don on thy bonnet an' shawl, would have been familiar to many ordinary Yorkshire people.

Poetry also has a rich history at the University of Leeds, where Simon Armitage is a Professor of Poetry alongside two other professors and acclaimed poets, John Whale and Kimberly Campanello.

All of that rich history and vibrant contemporary practice will be represented in the National Poetry Centre building, which will house a world-leading theatre for spoken word performance as well as spaces for reading, listening to and creating poetry.

By the time Simon steps down as Poet Laureate in 2029, Leeds will boast a building that is a beacon for poetry and spoken word across Yorkshire, across the UK and across the world. The National Poetry Centre will turn a disused and decaying building into a major landmark for the city: an international visitor attraction, a cultural icon and above all a space for the community.

Professor Nick Barley
Director of the National Poetry Centre

Harehills Middle School

Khadijah Ibrahiim

Young hearts shake hands across cultures,
feet masquerade in time to heartbeats;
Lisa, Yasmin and show-off kids like me
danced the bump, played jacks and skipped
in the playground of Harehills Middle School.
But the real boastful kids were those in
Mrs Senior's dance class,
the stars of Grey trophy high jump, long jump,
the netball and football team;
their triumphs at tournaments mapped ideas
of what we could be.

In lessons at old wood desks
with redundant, stained inkwells
(used by Uncle Douglas fifteen years before
when it was still a boys' school),
we read history books about William the Conqueror,
1066, the Tudors and Victorians;
fractions and algebra were never fully grasped,
though Math's classes were slipper strict
in the hands of Mr Adkin.
High-tempered Mr Richmond
of the hairy face taught English,
threw words and pupils round the room.
Miss Taylor taught our hands
to curve, to mould clay pots
- another ashtray to take home.

Sometimes we earned merits for excellence,
more often detention or the cane.

Excitement rippled one morning assembly
when Mr Bramwell was due to announce
who'd won the brand new chopper bike
with a bell and tassels,

Did you know?

**'Mrs Senior' in line seven
is Nadine Senior.**

Leeds Civic Trust were honoured to unveil its 200th plaque in honour of Nadine Senior MBE (1939-2016), Nadine was a Scarborough-born visionary dance teacher and educationist, and the founding principal of Northern School of Contemporary Dance (NSCD). Nadine lobbied to prove the need for professional dance education in Leeds, both whilst deputy headmistress of Harehills Middle School in Leeds, and later as principal of NSCD, which she founded in 1985 and which to this day remains the only provider of conservatoire-level professional dance training outside London.

but first we had to say the Lord's prayer
and sing Kumbayah, My Lord, Kumbayah,
before Colleen Green and her brother Silas
were announced the winners.

Jammed with working-class families
with very little, we kids
stirred crazy to collect old newspapers,
did sponsored runs and walked to a frenzy
to add to the school funds -
all to gain house points
and win the trophy
for Red or Blue, Yellow or Green.

We were happy for halfpenny sweets
in a paper bag, Dainty toffees,
savory vinegar crisps, Spanish and sherbet fountains
from the school tuck shop;
happy for youth clubs, seven inch vinyl
played on the Bush player with a tin pan sound;
we danced to Abba, Bay City Rollers and Michael Jackson,
wore Afros, flares, crocheted hats and plaits.

Sunday's top twenty on the radio brought anxious
youth to guess who's at number one
- before Thursday's Top of the Pops, Smash Hits
and Jackie magazine.
Remember when Third World's
Now that we found love
What are we gonna do with it?
got to number one?

And when BBC2 came to make
documentary at the school,
they used the Third World hit
as the theme tune for the show -
Orlando Weekes at home and at school,
a family affair. And when we saw In the City,
film of the dance production Paradise Lost,
documentary of Harehill's crumpled streets
on our TVs, we saw nothing then to regret.
For us kids nothing mattered but
the friends we made and the games we played.



Khadijah Ibrahiim

Meet the Poet: Khadijah Ibrahiim

Khadijah Ibrahiim is a multi-disciplinary artist, poet, and literary activist of Jamaican heritage born in Leeds. A Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature and an Honorary Doctor of Letters (University of Leeds), she bridges the page and the stage through a diasporic, futurist lens. Founder of Leeds Young Authors and Executive Producer of We Are Poets, she has championed marginalised voices for over twenty years. Her collection 'Another Crossing', published by Peepal Tree Press, explores heritage, migration, and imagined futures. She lectures, mentors, curates exhibitions, and performs internationally, recently serving as librettist for Sing, Dance, Leap with the Royal Ballet and Opera for Bradford 2025.

KHADIJAH'S REFLECTIONS ON THE POEM: The poem 'Harehills Middle School' captures the energy and diversity of a close-knit community shaped by shared childhood memories. School life in the 1970s was marked by strict teachers, traditional classrooms, and discipline that shaped students' growth and resilience. Beyond education, music, dance, sports, fundraising, and creative activities play a part in shaping cultural identity, friendship, and a sense of belonging. Despite economic challenges, pupils found joy in simple pleasures and formed lasting memories that continued to shape their sense of community.

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Your support will help...

Fund plaques for worthy nominees who lack financial backing

Preserve and restore historic plaques across the city

Develop educational resources, including walking maps and digital guides

Create a lasting endowment to protect our plaques for generations



SCAN THE QR CODE TO FIND OUT MORE AND JOIN TODAY!