

Mayoral memories that go back to the start



The Malcolm Richards Column

I have attended more mayor making ceremonies than most people have had hot dinners. Well, let's not exaggerate - let's say more than most people have had hot Christmas dinners.

I started in journalism at 16 in Somerset and reported on a couple there; arrived at the Brentford and Chiswick Times in 1960 and covered at least five before Hounslow Council took over; they had ten years in and out of Hounslow town hall and later the Langdon Road Civic Centre.

When I took over as editor in 1976, I witnessed First Citizen crownings in York House during the end of the Tories' reign and during the whole of the Lib Dem era - another 25 give or take.

Then there was the occasional foray into Waddsworth when the Borough News came into my stable and return visits to Hounslow on several occasions, just to keep my finger on the pulse.

So I make that 50 plus. Stand up he or she who can bear that!

I also interviewed countless mayors after their year of office was over and encountered a recurring theme.

Whether they had come from the political right, left or centre, all enthused over their experience and felt they were better educated, more compassionate and wiser human beings

as a result.

They spoke of discovering streets they had never encountered, clubs that they did not know existed, schools and colleges that had only been seen in committee minutes, diligent youth groups functioning in secret backwaters and unknown work places.

All agreed that the input of the voluntary sector to the functioning of local communities was remarkable.

Some found their views on the world changed too.

In the early days of Hounslow Council one mayor elect was a fervent left winger, a proclaimed anti-monarchist who despised the pomp and ceremony which had lingered on in local government.

He was reluctant to don the fur lined "medieval robes" of office which he considered a relic of the class system.

He did not want to be called Mr Mayor, nor have people stand up to greet him.

The mayor's secretary, staunch upholder of tradition who later went on to write a book about the mayoral protocol, was horrified and persuaded him to put a brake on his radicalism.

By the end of his twelve months he was on her side completely and shared her view that tradition mattered.

He admitted it had been a extraordinary experience and he could

see why an impartial figurehead, bechained and becloaked, fulfilled an important social function.

He agreed that residents, particularly children, experienced a sense of occasion when a sleek black limousine pulled up at their function - be it for prize day, school play, football match or long service award.

The fact that this human totem had a hefty gold chain and a badge of office and was addressed with the formal Mr Mayor was not pompous irrelevance but life enhancing.

It was on a par with receiving a member of the Royal family - an institution he also changed his opinion about.

To be visited by someone who was both interesting and interested and who symbolised the best aspects of our democratic system, gave an event a focus, he agreed.

With all this in mind, I was tempted after a gap of four years, to accept an invitation to this year's Richmond upon Thames ceremony at York House where my ward councillor, Mark Cranfield-Adams was to be adorned with the robes and chain.

And on the night I was struck by how little things had changed since 1957, when as a callow youth I sat, blue covered notebook book in clammy hand, in Bridgwater Council

Chamber.

Then as now the macebearer processed in with the new incumbent.

Robes and chains were exchanged, oaths were taken, prayers were read, charitable beneficiaries were announced, kind words were expressed and party politics were forgotten.

This was a ground breaking event of course.

Councillor Cranfield-Adams first referred to himself as being the first gay mayor of Richmond upon Thames - but later modified that to the first "openly gay mayor" which seemed to me rather more accurate.

All were agreed it was a "special" occasion and a historic landmark and reflected how social attitudes had changed dramatically in the last two decades.

Praise was heaped upon last year's incumbent Bill Treble and apart from a minor quibble about opposition representation, it was a short and jolly occasion. At the supper that followed party dogmas was cast aside completely.

Hardly a word was mentioned about the fact that the current mayor had swapped parties only a couple of years ago.

But then, if it was acceptable for Winston Churchill and Roy Jenkins to change their colours, why should it worry anyone in 2007?