

Birmingham Civic Society Speech, July 9th 2015

Joe Godwin

Thank you very much to the Birmingham Civic Society for inviting me this evening.

I've been reading about the Society's history and realise that the BBC, the society and me have quite a lot in common. This, as I'm sure you all know, is what the Earl of Plymouth said at the inauguration of the Society in 1918. Its intention was to

“bring public interest to bear upon all proposals put forward by public bodies and private owners for building, upon the laying out of open spaces and parks, and generally upon all matters concerned with the outward amenities of the city and district. It will insist that taste is a thing that matters, and if any offence against taste is challenged at the outset, great good will be done and converting of mean and unlovely parts of the City will follow.”

I've two credentials that connect me to the Society – I am a proud native of Warwickshire, which as you all know Birmingham was largely within until the 1970s. And I am by training an historian.

So it seems fitting, to paraphrase the Earl of Plymouth, that you bring your interest to bear on the proposals put forward by this public body, the BBC, as it's our intention that great good will be done. And whilst I can't promise that the BBC can convert any mean or unlovely parts of the City, I am confident we are, and will be, a Birmingham institution the City should be proud of.

The BBC has been part of Birmingham, and Birmingham part of the BBC, since 1922. The first regional radio service was broadcast from here. Some of you may know that before I took up this role, I was head of Children's Programmes at the BBC for many years – and the first ever BBC children's programme was broadcast from Birmingham in 1922.

And we've been here ever since. But one of our challenges is a perception that our commitment and our activity has disappeared, and the BBC doesn't do much in Birmingham or play it's part in the City.

I understand those perceptions. In 2004, for many very good reasons, we moved from the very famous Pebble Mill to the Mailbox in the City centre. The idea was, as well as moving from a crumbling 60s building into a more modern space, we were moving into the heart of the city, where licence fee payers could see us, visit us, and feel part of the BBC.

However, the move from our famous home into a place that was ironically less visible from the street, plus the move of much of our factual TV production to Bristol – again for what were very sensible reasons – made Birmingham feel the BBC had fallen out of love with the City.

That is changing and will continue to change, but so has the world in which we operate. So I'd like to tell you about what we've been doing, what we plan to do, and why I think its good for Birmingham and for the BBC.

I'm Director of the BBC Academy, our training and new talent division, with a worldwide reputation for skills development in journalism, production technology and leadership. But I'm also director of BBC Birmingham – and I think I'm the first person to have the honour of that title for a while.

I applied for this job because as a Midlander, whose first step through the BBC's door happened at Pebble Mill, I really want us to have a presence and a reputation here that both the BBC and the City can be proud of.

The BBC makes lots of content in Birmingham and the Midlands; in production this week alone, we've got Radios 2's Listen to the Band and The Organist Entertains, Radio 4's Archers and Home Front, Midlands Today, Radio WM, Inside Out, the BBC's English Regions news websites, BBC Asian Network, BBC One's Doctors – which has just filmed its 3000th episode - a new series of BBC One's Father Brown, produced,

like Doctors from our drama village in Selly Oak, and in production for the BBC in Dudley, Lenny Henry's new BBC1 drama, Danny and the Human Zoo! And that's just this week. And series 3 of Peaky Blinders will be along before too long, with even more filmed in Birmingham.

The key changes that have happened in media production since the 1970s are that we don't make all our content ourselves – other producers make about half the BBC's content - and that drama is not filmed in TV studios any more, but on location. That's why the move from Pebble Mill to the Mailbox made sense in 2004 and still makes sense now.

But the idea that we don't make stuff here is wrong, and unfair to the people who create some of the BBC's most popular programmes in Birmingham.

Our plan for BBC Birmingham is threefold; tell this story better to get the credit we deserve for all the stuff we already do; make BBC Birmingham a more vibrant, creative place, which will encourage even more BBC business; and thirdly, to play our part in the City – as a cultural organisation, as partner, and as a place local people can visit, engage with – and hopefully even get jobs. We need to work even harder to be the BBC a great city like this deserves to have.

And that's why I'm here – that's why, as well as moving an additional 300 jobs here, the post of Director BBC Birmingham has been created, and why over the past year, we've redoubled our efforts to be active in the cultural life of the city.

We've also committed to increasing our investment here – by next year, I'm confident it will be well in excess of £125 million, which is more than 50% up on where we were a couple of years ago.

But our story won't and can't be all about BBC production; because production methods have changed, as independent producers make a bigger chunk of our output, and as digital production democratises storytelling – unlike the 70s, you don't need to be the BBC or ITV to make your own dramas and

broadcast them any more, since YouTube arrived. As I said earlier, the world in which we operate has changed dramatically since the 1970s.

The BBC, like all media organisations, needs to be on the front foot when it comes to online and digital – both in terms of the skills our staff need, and the way we talk to younger more digitally-savvy audiences. If we can't tell the stories young, diverse audiences want, and tell those stories on the platforms they're using, the whole idea of the BBC – paid for by everyone, something for everyone – will be hard to justify.

And the BBC Academy will be at the forefront of this – both bringing BBC staff and freelancers the new skills they need, but also creating the opportunities, through apprenticeships and traineeships, for young people to bring their skills into the BBC.

And what better place to do that than Birmingham - the youngest, most diverse and digital city in Europe.

There's no shortage of talent on our doorstep. It's no coincidence then that we're moving the BBC's specialist HR teams to Birmingham alongside the Academy.

This year the BBC's focus is our UK Wide 'Make It Digital' initiative, launched by the BBC Director General Tony Hall in March.

In the 1980s, the BBC Micro introduced many people to computing for the first time. And now, Make it Digital is a BBC initiative to inspire a new generation to get creative with coding, programming and digital technology. It will help all audiences see how Britain has helped shape the digital world, why digital skills matter and their growing importance to our future.

For younger audiences, Make it Digital will help them discover the world of digital, see their creative potential in it and inspire them to take their first steps in computing and digital skills.

The UK as a whole is facing a significant skills shortage with an estimated 1.4m digital professionals needed over the next five years. Birmingham, with its youthful population is well placed to make the most of the opportunities digital has to offer.

Digital is one of the reasons why the BBC Academy is such a vital piece of the BBC Birmingham jigsaw - just as important as our programme-making teams in building it up.

And this isn't just all talk - one of the very real opportunities of Make It Digital is the UK-wide Digital Traineeship scheme, which will help up to 5,000 young, unemployed people boost their digital skills and get a foot on the career ladder. And we've piloted it right here in the Midlands, where eventually hundreds of our digital trainees will be based.

It'll be the largest traineeship of its kind thanks to a major partnership between the BBC, the Department for Work and Pensions, and the Skills Funding Agency, and supported locally by a range of Birmingham organisations.

It's just a taste of some of the groundbreaking work of the Academy and the expertise it brings to our BBC Birmingham operation. It's also a sign of how organisations like the BBC must develop future skills and find new talent – by working in partnership with like-minded organisations.

I'm confident that BBC Birmingham has a vital role to play in a BBC that is re-shaping itself before our very eyes. Its already well on the way to becoming, once again, a strong, vibrant and sustainable base for the BBC.

Incidentally, I mentioned that Birmingham was the birthplace of BBC children's programmes – but the connection between Birmingham, the BBC, children's programmes and me goes a bit deeper; in the 1920s the BBC formed listener clubs called Radio Circles in different regions of the UK.

Having all started here in Birmingham with the first Children's Hour, it was only appropriate that the clubs badges – a forerunner of today's Blue Peter Badge - were all made here in Birmingham. Innovation, media and creativity were part of the BBC Birmingham story even in the 1920s.

Like the Society, I am concerned with Birmingham's future, and the role the BBC should and will play in that. And like the Society, I am mindful of both the City and the Corporation's proud and innovative past.

Thank you.