



Ambassador's Activities

2014

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Toast by HE Bernard Emié,
French Ambassador to the United Kingdom

during a Lunch at
University College Birmingham's Atrium Restaurant

21 March 2014

Lord Mayor, Lady Mayoress, ladies and gentlemen,

- I'm **delighted to be able to meet the most senior authorities of the city of Birmingham**, the second-largest city in the United Kingdom. I wanted to **discover this thriving metropolis which is looking towards the future**, with ever more significant investments in infrastructure and quality of life. This afternoon I'll have the pleasure of visiting the Library of Birmingham, recently inaugurated in the presence of Ed Vaizey, the Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Culture, Communications and Creative Industries.
- This visit is an opportunity to **tell you how important it is for the Franco-British relationship not to be solely a relationship between our two capitals**. This is both fair and necessary, because **each of our two countries has developed local governance in its own way** through devolution or decentralization. Furthermore, this **decentralized cooperation is a reality on the cultural and human levels**, as shown by the strong French student community at your universities and the long-standing and ever-deeper twinning arrangement with the city of Lyon in France.
- **You've managed to make a success of the partnership with Lyon, created in 1951**, thus demonstrating the advantages of the international relations which European countries' great cities can and must maintain. **Birmingham and Lyon have established dialogue on the experience of urban regeneration**, inhabitants' participation in decision-making and citizens' management of their residential environment. Since 2002, **Lyon and Birmingham have together been involved, through a number of European consortia**, in work financed by the European Commission: the PACEREL project to support entrepreneurship and the REGENETA and URBAMECO projects to improve the quality of life in underprivileged districts.
- Exchanges between Birmingham and Lyon extend beyond the institutional framework too, stretching as far as the football pitch: **the French and international football manager, Gérard Houllier, left his job as coach at Olympique Lyonnais – Lyon's football team – to manage Aston Villa in 2010 and 2011**.

- I also want to highlight the long-standing, historic relations between Birmingham and France, which have also been marked by the remarkable Allied war effort provided by the inhabitants of this city and region. Indeed, during the First World War, whose centenary we are commemorating, the **Royal Warwickshire Regiment** raised 30 battalions, including **three made up of volunteers from the city of Birmingham**. These units – **The Birmingham Pals** – were deployed in France on 21 September 1914. Redeployed in Italy in 1915, they returned to France to take part in operations against the major German offensives of April 1918. During the Second World War, the Royal Warwickshire Regiment, part of the British Expeditionary Force, was deployed in France in September 1939 and defended the Ypres-Comines Canal, in order to slow down the German forces' advance. Consequently, it **ensured the safe evacuation of the Franco-British forces from Dunkirk**. Courageous soldiers from Birmingham and the Midlands distinguished themselves again when the regiment landed in Normandy on 6 June 1944, the 70th anniversary of which we will celebrate this year in the presence of Queen Elizabeth II, who will be paying a state visit to France at that time.
- Finally, being a Frenchman, and with lunchtime approaching, I should like to underline the gastronomic ties forged between Birmingham and France. Not only was it **a team from a Birmingham restaurant, Simpsons** (whose head chef we are pleased to have here with us), who **represented the UK** at the “**Bocuse d’Or**” culinary competition **in 2013 in Lyon** (your sister city, which also knows how to lay on a very warm welcome), but the British Culinary Federation also enjoys a close partnership with *Les Toques blanches lyonnaises*, once again enabling there to be exchanges at the highest level. I think these initiatives provide further examples of Birmingham’s spirit of openness, particularly towards France.

For all these reasons, thank you for welcoming us to your fine city!/.