

# bw

## BUSINESSWORK

Autumn 2018

### CAR BOOT TO CATERING KING

Breakfast, lunch and dinner - Chris Harrison has it covered

### BRANCHING OUT

Meet the owners of Hull's DoubleTree by Hilton

### HOW ART TRANSFORMS LIVES

Culture guru Elaine Burke on the power of creativity

# Bringing it home

Alan Johnson on why the Viola should be at the heart of city's heritage



# SOUTH GEORGIA ON HIS MIND

Former home secretary **Alan Johnson** tells *Phil Ascough* why, 100 years on, a Hull trawler that played a vital role in the Great War should be brought back home.

**A**djacent listings in the index to his third book, *The Long and Winding Road*, illustrate the depth and breadth of Alan Johnson's duties during 20 years as the MP for Hull West and Hessle.

At the bottom of page 328 you'll find "bin Laden, Osama"; immediately above is the listing, "Bilocca, Lillian, trawler safety campaign".

Flick to the relevant passages and you can enjoy Alan's account of the political discussions and activity that followed the Twin Towers attack in 1999, and of the

commitment he made in to help to secure recognition and recompense for the Hull fishing families who lost thousands of men at sea.

Speaking a little over a year after stepping down as an MP and government minister, Alan reveals that front-line politics has all but gone from his busy schedule, but the support for Hull's fishing heritage remains.

Among the roles he now holds is patron of the Viola Trust, the charity leading a campaign to bring a historic steam trawler back to the Humber. As the author of a

memoir stretching across three acclaimed books, and with a fourth on this way this month, he knows a good story when he sees one.

Other tasks now occupying the former home secretary include chancellor of Hull Children's University, patron of the Ron Dearing UTC and independent chairman of Citycare and Shared Agenda, which provides advice, investment, development and estate management services to bodies including the NHS, local authorities, emergency services and private organisations. ▶





But chatting at the Holiday Inn Hull Marina, and in the company of a Viola campaign team member and an unobtrusive photographer, the conversation is dominated by the old ship, the new book and a little bit of politics.

The location was selected for convenience and relevance. The Viola, built in Beverley in 1906, operated from Humber Dock – now Hull Marina – as part of the Hellyer fleet of boxing trawlers. She was requisitioned to defend the UK in the Great War and left Hull for the last time in 1918 on a career that took her to Norway, Africa and Argentina, catching fish, hunting whales and elephant seals and supporting expeditions in the South Atlantic.

Her stories are of Hull men sailing to the most distant areas of the North Sea and working in perilous conditions for weeks on end, transferring their catches by rowing boat to fast steam cutters that fed the nation's growing appetite for fish and chips.

When the First World War broke out, Viola and her Hull crew were on the front line of the maritime conflict, steaming thousands of miles on patrol across seas infested with mines and U-boats. Viola had numerous encounters with the enemy, being involved in the sinking of two submarines. More than 3,000 fishing vessels and their crews saw active service during the Great War and today Viola is almost the only survivor.

In the 1970s, Viola was mothballed after the closure of the whaling station at Grytviken, South Georgia. Sitting on the beach, where she remains, the old trawler was the target in 1982 of scrap metal merchants from Argentina. But when they landed they ran up the Argentine flag, an action that led to the Falklands War.

That history and its significance to Hull's fishing community and their long fight for compensation is irresistible to Alan and the Viola trustees, who are working to raise more than £3m to bring the Viola back to

feature in Hull City Council's new maritime heritage project.

Alan said: "Could we bring the Viola back with her romantic story? We can't bring the men back but if we could move the ship back it would symbolise their courage and fortitude.

"We've had interest from film companies but they have to know Viola is going to come home. They were struck by the wonderful story – the link with the First World War, the distinguished military service, and the fishing links as part of the boxing fleet.

"Hull had the biggest number of ships and was the biggest distant water port in the world. This city was built on fish and it is still the heartbeat."

In *The Long and Winding Road*, he tells how he met a delegation from the British Fishermen's Association within days of arriving in Hull in 1997 to explore his prospective constituency.

"I listened, barely able to comprehend what I was hearing... in 150 years of distant-water trawling, 900 Hull ships had been lost. In the last ninety-two-year period of its history between completion of the newest fish dock and the collapse of the industry, 8,000 men were lost from Hull alone."

Now, 100 years after Viola left Hull, Alan observes the time is right for people, businesses and other organisations to work together and bring her back to sit alongside the Arctic Corsair.

He said: "Throughout the long campaign for compensation, the men and their families were bemoaning the fact that we didn't have any real fishing heritage centrepiece. There should be more to show for everything they went through.

"A survey has shown the ship to be in good condition – they built them to last in those days. Her engines are intact. She couldn't possibly get here under her own steam but we have the permissions we need and she could be brought back – everything is in place except the money.

"We can't get any help from Heritage Lottery until we get her back into British waters, but everybody we speak to sees the benefit and is enthusiastic. We need a lot of help from businesses, and the important



“I had a lot of offers of jobs that would have kept me politically involved but I didn't want to do that – 20 years as an MP was enough.”

message to them is there's no doubt that if the money comes in, Viola will come back."

Alan's empathy with the fishing families and his determination to help them has its origins in the difficult childhood described in his first book, *This Boy*, and the progression into trade unionism that emerges from the second, *Please Mister Postman*. Publication of *The Long and Winding Road* in 2016 extended an immensely enjoyable collection and an inspirational story of a boy who had next to nothing but who, through his own perseverance and the remarkable courage of his sister, developed and exploited talents as a communicator, advocate, writer and even musician.

The trilogy also trumpets his passion for music, and particularly the songs of the Beatles. Any suggestion that he might have seized the opportunity of "retirement" to spend time in his (octopus's?) garden is banished by declarations in his books of an aversion to anything related to DIY, and by the imminent publication of *In My Life*, with more to come.

He said: "The main thing now is writing books, with a bit of TV and radio. The fourth book is now complete, and next I will start writing fiction. The ideas are there and the publisher is very keen. It's a

challenge but it's always good to have a challenge. Fiction is much harder. You have to develop the plot and the characters.

"The big political memoirs don't interest me. Some of them sell maybe 1,000. *This Boy* is up to half a million. Up to the age of 18 there's no politics in it but it won an Orwell prize for political writing. God knows why!"

In *My Life* continues the Alan Johnson story against a backdrop of his favourite songs. Promotional duties include speaking at internationally renowned book fairs and at a forthcoming literary lunch in Hull. As he gave this interview he was preparing for a lecturing slot on a cruise from Stockholm to Saint Petersburg.

But the man who led the Labour In campaign and who was tipped by many as a leader – and even prime minister – in waiting, knows he will never escape questions about politics, and he has his answers to hand.

He said: "I had a lot of offers of jobs that would have kept me politically involved but I didn't want to do that – 20 years as an MP was enough.

"I comment on politics a lot on the TV show. It's about the most miserable, awful time I can remember. It's the biggest peace-time crisis we have had, and entirely self-

inflicted. We are badly served by our two main parties at the moment with the party leadership and it seems more and more as if it will all end badly.

"The referendum was all about immigration, not sovereignty. All the Leave side said was take back control. If you wanted to persuade people to vote remain you had to explain the complications of Europe.

"Crashing out without a deal will undoubtedly be bad. I don't think there's any question of that wherever you stand. People didn't vote to make themselves poorer or lose jobs and if they could stay in the single market while leaving the EU they would, but I don't want another referendum. It's up to Parliament to sort this out."

And on leadership: "I never wanted to be leader of the Labour Party. It's a thankless task and even more to be prime minister. I couldn't be sitting here, talking about good things happening in Hull, if I had 10 armed guards around me." ●

*In My Life* is published by Penguin Random House and is available from September 20.

**For details on how to help to bring the Viola back to Hull, visit [www.violatrawler.net](http://www.violatrawler.net)**