My Lord Mayor, Master Harris, Ladies and Gentlemen, it is an honour to join you tonight for your tenth Apprentice of the year awards ceremony.

Tonight we celebrate a decade of these awards, a reminder of how the Freemen’s has led the way in promoting apprenticeships throughout your existence.

Your role as a unique Civic institution championing apprenticeships is a huge part of what makes Coventry a very special place to live and work.

I’m not just saying that to curry favour with the Judges for WMG’s finalist in tonight’s competition! Though Tom, I wish you the very best of luck!

In this room we know the value of apprenticeships. The apprentices here tonight have reminded us of why we are ambassadors for apprenticeships. I am honoured to join you in this work, because it is something I am passionate about. I came to Britain as a graduate apprentice with Lucas Industries. It was a bit of a culture shock. I lived on Dairy Milk for a long time because I missed home cooking.

My apprenticeship gave me connections and showed me that businesses needed academics who understood the real world of work. My apprenticeship shaped my entire career.

At WMG, I’ve sought to give others the same chances. That’s why workplace learning and technical education is at the very core of WMGs purpose. We created our modular learning system so companies could help employees get qualifications at a pace that suits both managers and workers. We built long term partnerships so employers could be sure their staff would learn useful skills, and students would know that technical education at Warwick boosted their career.

For a long time, we, like you, were alone in celebrating apprenticeships.

In the autumn I spoke in the House of Lords about apprenticeships. I’ve spoken many times on the subject. I think they’re finally beginning to get the message!

I told them that Britain neglected apprenticeships and technical education for far too long. That must change.
The Royal Academy of Engineering has shown that the UK will need a million more engineers and technicians by 2020. That will require doubling the number of engineering apprentices every year. Politicians of all parties now talk about the importance of apprenticeships. But we can’t rely on politicians to deliver. To make apprenticeships what they need to be, we need to do it ourselves. Inspired by your example, we should set ourselves an ambitious target.

We should make Coventry Britain’s capital city for apprentices. How could we do this?

First, by embracing technical education across the whole city. That means going beyond University and College and getting into schools and workplaces early. Last Autumn, we at WMG opened our first University Technical College, in partnership with Jaguar Land Rover and other companies. University Technical Colleges create a link between employer, parent and university sadly lacking in much of modern Britain. The response from parents, students and employers has been incredible. We’re having our formal opening in February with Ratan Tata, one of the world’s leading business figures. So great is the response, we’re opening another one in Solihull. Young people at our Academy for Young Engineers will benefit from an outstanding technical education while they build relationships with local employers, big and small. To help students like these after school, we need a clear route for every student after eighteen to further technical education or quality apprenticeships. We mustn’t let a single young person slip through the cracks. Too many do.

Often, we don’t know what school-leavers are doing, or what help they need to get on in life. A few years ago almost a fifth of school leavers in Coventry disappeared from the system when they left school. That’s not exceptional. The statistics suggest this is a national issue. We just don’t know what a lot of young people are doing with their lives. It’s a national problem, but we’ve found a local solution.

Coventry City Council has made a fantastic effort to make sure that every young person is traced after leaving school. It turned out that many of these ‘lost’ young people were not in education, employment or training at all. They were going nowhere fast. It was only by watching out for them that we were able to give them the help they needed to get qualifications and find jobs. If we want to make Coventry Britain’s apprenticeship capital we need to find a place for every single one of our young people. To achieve that we need everyone to know that apprenticeships are educational qualifications of the highest status, worth the years of hard work. But recently, we’ve seen a forty per cent decline in the number of people studying for HNCs, HNDs or foundation degrees. To give apprenticeships more status, I’d like people completing a higher apprenticeships to achieve a recognised status like the German ‘Technical Engineer’.

Why don’t we develop that standard right here in Coventry?
Finally, we have to help Coventry’s smaller businesses offer apprenticeships. The Freemen’s guild are leading the way here, with your award for apprentice of the year in smaller firms. At the moment, only a tenth of small and medium sized companies offer apprenticeships. Imagine if Coventry was the first city in Britain where half of smaller companies offered apprenticeships.

At WMG, we work with many smaller companies. They offer apprenticeships when they are sure the technical education their workers get is worth the sacrifice of absent staff for part of the week. So our task in Universities and Colleges is to make sure every course, every programme is highly sought after by apprentices and firms alike.

The finalists we’ve heard today are truly inspiring. They remind us of success of the apprentices you’ve celebrated for the last decade. They remind us of the value of this guild, and the role of apprentices in rebuilding our city and making it an industrial powerhouse. Let us take their inspiration and your proud history, and make Coventry the capital city for the new generation of Britain’s apprentices.

My Lord Mayor, Master, honoured guests please join me in a toast to the apprentices!