The United Kingdom has been one of the countries most closely associated with Toyota in the past century. I am convinced that this relationship is unlikely to change in the future, and that we must not allow it to change.

The roots of Toyota Motor Corporation of today go back to Toyoda Sakichi, my grandfather. Wanting to turn Japan into a rich country akin to Western nations, Sakichi worked and studied hard and devoted his life to inventing and improving weaving machines; afterwards, he was even called ‘Inventor-king of the world’. One of the books that Sakichi read and re-read many times was Self Help by Samuel Smiles, a famous British polemicist. This book, translated into Japanese by Nakamura Masanao in the Meiji era, was read widely by young people in Japan. I also read Self Help when I was a youngster and was inspired to my own ‘self-help’ efforts.

Sakichi invented a wooden Toyoda hand-loom in 1890 and obtained his first patent on it; later, in 1896, he developed a power loom, the first such machine in Japan. On his study tour to Europe in 1910, he visited Manchester, the industrial centre of the world at that time, and spent a full month there studying a wide variety of machinery. He must have called upon Platt Brothers & Co. Ltd., known as the top textile-machine manufacturer in the world, which was located in Oldham just outside Manchester.
Toyoda Kiichirō, my father, also was invited by Platt Brothers & Co. in 1922 to undertake operational training on textile machines for about a month.

In 1924, about thirty years after Sakichi’s invention of the power loom, Sakichi, together with Kiichirō, completed the Toyoda Type G Automatic Loom, a machine considered by many to produce the best results in the world. The Type G Automatic Loom has been one of the permanent exhibits at London’s Science Museum since June 2000, alongside James Watt’s steam engine and many other machines that epitomized the Industrial Revolution.

Having one’s own invention exhibited at this museum is an honour coveted by every inventor in the world. The patent on the Type G Automatic Loom was later conveyed to Platt Brothers and Co for £100,000 and Kiichiro used part of the proceeds to fund his automobile research and development. That was the beginning of today’s Toyota.

Toyota’s association with the United Kingdom has remained very close to this day. On its sales front, for instance, since its first shipment in 1965 of seventy-five Corona passenger cars to the UK, Toyota has now grown to the point of having about 350 dealerships selling approximately 140,000 Toyota vehicles each year. In addition, we started manufacturing cars in the UK in 1992, enabling us to export our products to the EU markets as well as to Japan. This shows that Toyota is now solidly accepted into British society.

Shirasu Jirō, who was famous in Japan as an ‘English gentleman’, having spent some years of his youth at Cambridge University, lived his life by ‘principles’ he had learnt there. His wisdom and support were immensely valuable and we owe him a great deal. In his Cambridge days, Shirasu was a car-racing aficionado; he drove around in his Bentley and Bugatti at weekends and was an ‘oily boy’ through and through. We benefited greatly from his advice and ideas on ‘car making’ when, in 1981, we introduced our sports specialty model, the Soarer, which we were determined would be the best of its kind in the world.

As our relationship grew stronger, Shirasu was kind enough to introduce me to his close friend Sir Sigmund Warburg, and I was fortunate enough to be able to send my eldest son Akio (currently, an Executive Vice President at Toyota), after he had graduated from Keio University and completed his MBA at Babson, to work for a while at S. G. Warburg, the merchant bank, under the tutelage of Lord Roll, its chairman, and Sir David Scholey, its president.

When I watched the Type G Automatic Loom actually operating in the Science Museum, and it emitted all sorts of noises as if it had just been invented, I was deeply moved and reflected upon the close