

# north east history

Volume 37 2006



George Blessed-The Whippet

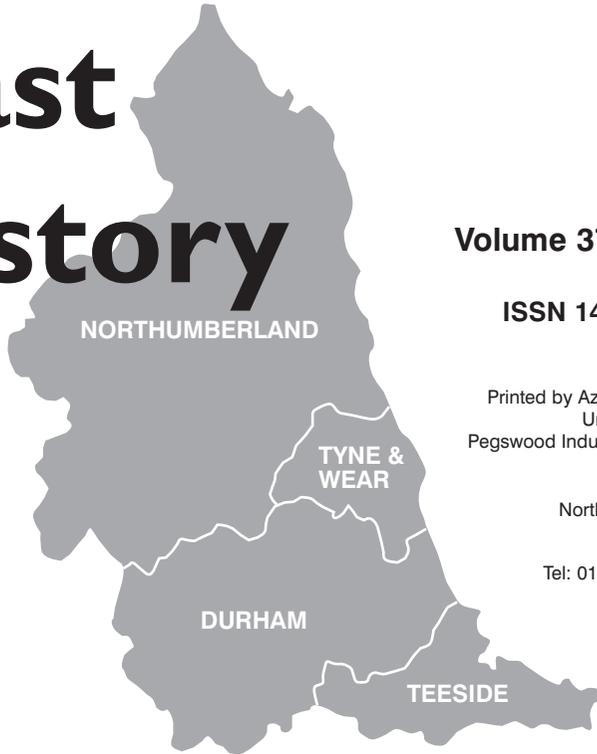
- Pitmen painters: the Ashington Group
- Place, identity, belonging: Northumberland fishing communities
- Hannah: A woman of the Durham Coalfield in the 19th Century
- Pit poetry in the 1984 strike
- plus a Sunderland childhood, Sid Chaplin appreciation, oral history, poetry & reviews

journal of the north east labour history society



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Willie Thompson.

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## **Contents**

**Editorial**  
**Notes on Contributors**  
**Acknowledgements and Permissions**  
**Articles and Essays**

<b>‘An Experiment in Art Appreciation’: The WEA and the Ashington Art Group</b>	
<i>Marie-Therese Mayne</i>	8
<b>Hannah – A Woman of the Durham Coalfield in the 19th Century</b>	
<i>Margaret Headley</i>	39
<b>Mapping the Human Landscape: Knowledge, Skills and Stories in Northumberland Fishing Communities</b>	
<i>Katrina Porteous</i>	68
<b>‘Shoot the Damn Dogs’: The 1734 Dispute at Newbottle Colliery, County Durham</b>	
<i>Dave Ridley</i>	88
<b>(Re)Writing Defeat: Poetry and the End of the Miners’ Strike 1984/5</b>	
<i>Katy Shaw</i>	107
<b>I’ll Tell You a Story..Or, It’s Only a Pipe Dream (Growing Up in Sunderland in the 1930s)</b>	
<i>Eddie Pipe</i>	124
<b>Sid Chaplin</b>	
<i>John Mapplebeck</i>	140
<b>Century of support for the Labour Party</b>	
<i>John Creaby</i>	147

## **Oral History**

<b>Lionel Anwell</b>	157
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## Poetry

*Dave Alton, Keith Armstrong, Nellie Dodsworth, Katrina Porteous* 163

## Reviews, Archives & Sources

### Reviews

- Matt Perry, **The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend** (Lewis Mates) 171
- Response** (Matt Perry) 179
- Rob Colls & Bill Lancaster, **Geordies** (Roger Hall and Sarah Rennie) 183
- Alistair Moffat and Georgie Rosie, **Tyneside: A History of Newcastle and Gateshead from Earliest Times** (*John Charlton*) 191
- Our Friends in the North** (*Sandy Irvine*) 195
- Keith Armstrong (ed), **The People's History: The Town of Old Hexham** (*John Charlton*) 204
- Tony Barrow, **Trafalgar Geordies and The Whaling Trade of North East England** (*Win Stokes*) 205
- Stan Beckensall, **Northumberland – Shadows of the Past** (*Win Stokes*) 206
- Archie Potts, **Headlocks and Handbags: Wrestling at the New St. James's Hall** (*Brian Bennison*) 211
- Andy Croft, **Comrade Laughter**; Keith Armstrong, **Imagined Corners and Angels Playing Football**; Keith Pattison, Katrina Porteous, Robert Soden, 212
- Turning the Tide** (*Liz Forster*) 212

### Archives & Sources

- The Ruth Dodds Diaries and Papers  
*Maureen Callcott* 215

## At the Back...

North East Labour History Society notes; the Sid Chaplin Memorial Trophy; Announcements; Enthusiasms; the WEA.

## Editorial

The articles in this year's issue are linked by several different themes. Firstly and most obviously coal mining and pit communities, the industry and way of life which once helped to define our region. Marie-Therese Mayne gives an account of the Ashington Group of pitmen painters, showing how their art grew out of their work and how their relationship with the cultural establishment was uneasy. Margaret Headley reconstructs the life of her great-grandmother in the Durham coalfield through a fascinating synthesis of family history and labour history. Dave Ridley brings to light the violent but forgotten repression of the Newbottle Colliery dispute of 1734, and Katy Shaw analyses the poetry emerging from the local coalfield communities at the end of the 1984/5 strike. Culture too, links these pieces; the art and poetry above but also the culture of an inter-relationship between work, language and environment which Katrina Porteous traces in the Northumberland fishing communities. In a sense similar links are there in the work of Sid Chaplin, miner, novelist, and a founder member of the North East Labour History Society, who John Mapplebeck celebrates in what would have been the novelist's ninetieth year. 2006 sees the re-issue of two of Sid Chaplin's books by Flambard Press. Struggle, too is present in these articles: the vicious class repression at Newbottle, and the great strike that preceded the end of coal mining in the region; also in the less dramatic struggles of ordinary people to get by and carry on in arduous circumstances.

Finally Eddie Pipe offers a warm and amusing reminiscence about his childhood in a working class area of Sunderland before the war, and provides a human angle that often seems to go missing from conventional history writing.

Some of these articles, and those planned for future issues, grew out of the 'First Tuesday' discussion group that is described in our section of North East Labour History Society news. We hope to see more readers coming along and taking part in the discussions.

As in previous years the Journal offers a poetry section, news about archive deposits, another in the oral history interview series, announcements and of course reviews. This year the reviews include the television series *Our Friends in the North* (now available on DVD/video), and a debate over Matt Perry's recent book on the Jarrow March. It's not easy to include debates, responses and feedback in an annual publication and so we intend to develop opportunities to do this through our website – [www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org). Please let us know what you think about our publication, activities and work generally.

The North East Labour History Society was formed in 1968 and our Journal has been appearing since 1969. This makes us one of the oldest regional labour history societies in the country. We believe that issue 37 of the Journal demonstrates that the research, study and discussion of labour history in the North East of England will continue to be vibrant.

My thanks to the 2006 Editorial Team: John Charlton, Sandy Irvine, Lewis Mates, Ben Sellers, Win Stokes and Willie Thompson.

### **Don Watson**

#### **Joe Clarke 1927-2006**

Joe Clarke died in mid-July just as we were going to press. Joe was a founding member of the North East Labour History Society and the first Secretary. Born in Dublin in a strong republican family he came to Newcastle during the Second World War. He served his time as an engineering draughtsman before studying for a degree. This led to employment in higher education where he was a pioneer in developing the history of science and technology. His great monument is the comprehensive two volume work *Building Ships on the North East Coast* published in 1997. A full appreciation will appear in our next volume.

## Notes on Contributors

**John Creaby** is a retired Senior Trade Union Officer and a member of the Labour Party since 1959.

**Margaret Headley** is Head of Year at Biddick School Sports College, Washington, Tyne and Wear. She is the Chair of Wheatley Hill History Club and Wheatley Hill Heritage Society, and her main interest is the role of women in the East Durham Coalfield during the 19th century.

**John Mapplebeck** is an independent television producer who was formerly Features Editor for the BBC in the North East and Cumbria. Before joining the BBC he was a reporter and feature writer for *The Guardian* in Manchester.

**Marie-Therese Mayne** is Assistant Keeper of Fine and Decorative Art at the Laing Gallery, Newcastle on Tyne. She is interested in the Pre-Raphaelites, women's painting, and the artists of the North East.

**Katrina Porteous** is a poet and historian living in Beadnell, Northumberland. Her work frequently involves collaboration with photographers and musicians. Publications include the poetry collections *The Lost Music* and *The Wund an' the Wetter*; historical work includes *The Bonny Fisher Lad* in the People's History Series. She is currently writing a book on the themes of her article.

**Eddie Pipe** was born in Sunderland in 1929. He worked in local factories before six years' active service in the Coldstream Guards. On leaving the army he moved to Birmingham, where he brought up his family and worked for over thirty years in the car factories, reaching the position of production superintendent. He now lives in Darlington. He has prepared several books of memoirs, all illustrated with his own sketches.

**Dave Ridley** has been a decorator, university administrator, and is currently working as a science technician. A graduate of Durham and Newcastle Universities, he is a past winner of the NELHS Sid Chaplin Prize.

**Katy Shaw** is a Teaching Fellow in the Department of English, University of Lancaster. She is researching a book-length “hidden history” of the 1984-5 Miners’ Strike for publication in 2007/8, and she would welcome contributions on the subject – ks313@yahoo.com

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND PERMISSIONS

The pictures ‘Whippets’ by George Blessed, ‘The Onsetter’ by Jimmy Floyd, and the photograph ‘Week End Course’ are reproduced by kind permission of the Trustees of the Ashington Group.

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The poem ‘Labour Party Meeting’ first appeared in *Nellie Dodsworth: Selected Poems*, privately published by Barbara Whitehead in 1979.



Week End Course: Oliver Kilbourn, Jimmy Floyd, J. R. Dobson

## ARTICLES & ESSAYS

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**‘An Experiment in Art Appreciation’:  
The WEA and the Ashington Art Group**  
*Marie-Therese Mayne*

*The men who, as artists, became known as the Ashington Group first met and began to work together in 1934. They vividly portray life and work in a North East mining community at a time when over 80% of the men of Ashington and the surrounding districts were employed in the mines. They became popularly known as the ‘Pitmen Painters’ because they were precisely that: not professional artists, but a group of working men most, but not all, of whom were involved in working at the colliery, and who were keen to learn about art.*

During the 1930s the North East of England was dominated by the shipbuilding and coal-mining industries. Economic crisis at the beginning of the decade, especially the worldwide effects of the ‘Wall Street Crash’ of October 1929, had led to mass-unemployment and social unrest, resulting in protests and hunger marches such as the famous Jarrow March of 1936. Additionally, there was a strong sense of what could be described as the North/South divide, with the views of writers such as George Orwell being widely held:

“As you travel northward...you begin to encounter the real ugliness of industrialism...when you go to the industrial North you are conscious, quite apart from the unfamiliar scenery, of entering another country.”<sup>1</sup>

Nor did Orwell regard the inhabitants of this strange land as familiar:

“To a Southerner, new to the mining districts, the spectacle of a shift of several hundred miners streaming out of the pit is slightly sinister. Their exhausted faces, with the grime clinging in all the hollows, have a fierce, wild look”

Ashington was one of the mining communities in this ‘other country’, and in 1937 was described as:

“Ashington: Pop. 40,000. Mining town, mostly built in the early part of this century. Dreary rows a mile long. Ashpits and mines down the middle of still unmade streets.”<sup>2</sup>

This rather bleak description was not an exaggeration. The town, on the northern banks of the River Wansbeck, is very much a product of the late Industrial Revolution. It has been described as the world’s largest pit village and, situated on the northern edge of the Great Northern Coalfield, its very purpose was to serve the needs of what would become the Ashington Coal Company, representing several coal owners and all the coal interests in the area. The first major colliery project at Ashington was begun in 1849 by William Dickinson and Partners, on land leased from the Duke of Portland of Bothal Castle, and it rapidly expanded so that in 1858 ninety workers’ cottages had to be erected, doubling the number of houses in the area.

This growth continued, but overcrowding was a problem: in 1891 one street, Cross Row, was reported as having 140 people living in fifteen small, two-bed roomed houses, giving an average occupancy of over nine people per house. The quality of the housing was also lower than that being provided in many other industrial areas. Newer housing especially was very densely packed, with twenty-eight houses to the acre built on a grid system. Colin Niven, the Chairman of Ashington Urban Council, has suggested that this pattern was intended to mirror the mine-workings below the streets:

“The board and pillar method of coal extraction required rail-tracks to be laid into each working place on a grid system. The same system of track with the same two-foot rail gauge was laid on the surface to facilitate the leading of all the bricks and mortar and other materials to the building sites. When the houses were finished the track was used for leading the workmen’s fire coal during the day and taking away the refuse from the middens and earth closets at night – a system that was to continue into the 1930s...It is doubtful if any town of comparable size had such a primitive system of scavenging at this late date. Add to this, earth roads, two standpipes in each street of twenty-five houses...an average of six people per house and we have the ingredients for a poor standard of health and the risk of epidemics of enteric fever, smallpox, scarletina and the like.”<sup>3</sup>

In reality, the main reason for this grid pattern was probably purely to maximise housing density, but at a time when many industrial areas were actively seeking to improve their housing this policy served only to increase the deprivation of the area. However, it was in the midst of this that a remarkable social experiment was to take place, and one largely instigated by the residents themselves.

*The WEA in Ashington*

In 1919, the Workers' Educational Association (WEA) Northern Regional office was established, and that same year the Ashington Co-Operative Society became an affiliated member, for the annual subscription of one guinea. The WEA was a voluntary group, founded in 1903 with the aim of supporting the educational needs of working men and women. There was a great demand for its services and so it grew steadily; in 1926-7 over 70,000 people nationally participated in its lectures and courses. Advertising itself as "*a Federation of over 2,500 Organisations, linking labour with learning*" it proudly declared "*An enquiring mind is sufficient qualification*".<sup>4</sup> Crucially, it was organised largely by the people themselves: very different from previous attempts by largely paternalistic groups to 'educate the masses'. Instead, this was aimed at feeding the hunger and enthusiasm for learning inherent in the working people. Classes offered by the WEA were many and varied, including such diverse topics as Music, Drama or Elocution. The first class held at Ashington was a course in psychology, which ran from 1923-24, but it was a course in 'Experimental Evolution' which would eventually lead to the formation of the Ashington Art Group. This class lasted for about seven years, and included sections on biology and geology. Having exhausted this topic, a conversation between two of the students, Harry Wilson, a dental mechanic, and Oliver Kilbourn, an underground salvage drawer at Ashington Colliery, led to them deciding to try something different: Art Appreciation. In October 1934, a lecturer was sent from Armstrong College in Newcastle (now Newcastle University). This lecturer was Robert Lyon and, being more used to a formal educational setting, he took a typical approach to the teaching of the class, the so-called 'contemplative method'; presenting a series of lectures, illustrated by black and white slides on an old-fashioned lantern, looking at

Classical and Renaissance subjects. This posed a problem: largely unfamiliar with the stories they told, the men of Ashington found these paintings of Greek myths and legends utterly meaningless. The Michelangelos and Masaccios which had so fascinated Lyon whilst a student in Rome held no such emotional sway over this class. He soon realised that a different approach was called for, and indeed that he himself would have to change his perceptions. He explained this insight in the December 1935 issue of the WEA magazine, *The Highway*;

“...it was perfectly obvious that these men had decided views on what they did not want the class to be...They did not want to be told what was the correct thing to look for in a work of Art but to see for themselves why this should be correct; in other words they wanted a way, if possible, of seeing for themselves.”<sup>5</sup>

It was therefore not sufficient for these students to be told what was ‘good art’ – they wanted to understand first why it was considered good, and then decide *for themselves* whether it was good or not! This was unexpected but, after some thought and discussion with the students, Lyon devised an alternative course for the class, which he anticipated would do just that. Grounded firmly on a practical approach, he hoped that by teaching the men how to draw and paint themselves, they would come to understand the motivations behind the production of art, as well as the limitations imposed by the different media, and thus appreciate the creativity of others.

However, for Lyon to teach a wholly practical course potentially posed an obstacle in itself. The course was still run under the auspices of the WEA, and their regulations clearly stated that no

subject could be taught which could conceivably be used for material gain. As Harry Wilson, one of the Group members, explained:

“At the time the WEA was all theory. Nothing which could possibly be interpreted as being of any use for making a living could be taught. Only those things which were cultural, which meant words. Therefore one thing that Robert Lyon had to get over when he conceived what we wanted was to get permission. I don’t know how he got round it, but he did.”<sup>6</sup>

Objections were raised, but Lyon disposed of these by explaining the reasoning behind his ‘experiential’ teaching methods within a *“visual-and-practical approach theory”*. He described the class as *“An Experiment in Art Appreciation”*, and further justified his position in an article of that title published in 1935 in *The Listener*, stating that *“The programme was not in any sense of the word an adaptation of the normal course followed in a School of Art, or that of the training of an artist, but one which, it was hoped, would provide the class with a creative experience, and so would help them to appreciate better the creative experience of others.”*<sup>7</sup> Doubts were still voiced by some, and the tone of the article suggests that perhaps Lyon’s superiors remained unconvinced of the legitimacy of his work. However, the WEA were satisfied, and the course was officially granted a three-year extension from the eighteen sessions originally planned.

### *Cautious Beginnings*

The class, at that time numbering twenty-two students, was therefore set to work. Lyon perceived that these men would feel very self-conscious picking up palette and brush immediately, and decided they would probably feel more comfortable initially with a more physically demanding medium. So, the early classes were

based around producing lino cuts. This was an inspired move: not only were the men quite happy to carve away at blocks of lino with penknives or cutters, but the nature of the material meant that it was impossible to produce gentle gradations of tone or shade. The maker has no choice but to create images which are spontaneous and expressive. Also, when a lino block is printed, there are stark contrasts of black and white. The men were used to such strong contrasts of light and darkness within their working lives at the colliery, and so to reproduce these within their images came naturally. They quickly moved on to carving other materials, trying wood and bakelite, learning the different techniques which each demanded, and the results they produced. These small blocks could also be easily carried in a pocket, to be worked on whenever there were a few minutes spare, and so the work was not confined to the weekly classroom meeting.

Soon the students felt ready to move on to more ambitious work – trying their hand at painting. This could have been a dangerous development: would the Group, particularly the more technically able among them, be seduced by the materials and techniques, developing into little more than an Art Class or Sketching Club? There were also the WEA rules to consider: producing finished paintings and drawings could be seen as a commercial venture rather than a cultural and educational exercise. Lyon had already argued fiercely that this would not happen, and so to ensure the course continued to be viewed favourably he suggested a few basic rules. Most importantly, all of the work produced was to be viewed as an exercise, its quality was not significant, only the experience gained through producing it. Lyon summed this up by stating that “...*exercises in technique were not to be considered as picture making in the permanent or exhibition sense of the words.*”<sup>8</sup> He began by setting weekly

exercises, giving titles for the men to work on, but he eventually conceded that the group wanted to move beyond this. They had their own ideas and influences, and he recognised the need for himself, as their tutor, to be responsive. Titles such as ‘The Deluge’ or ‘The Hermit’, which had obvious religious connotations for Lyon, resulted in images of a flood in an ordinary working street, or a picture of the tramp who lived on the beach at Lynemouth. So, after some resistance, he suggested the men have their own titles, and paint their own experiences. With this freedom, The Ashington Group was born.

Following the principal that these works were not intended to be permanent, and also because they simply could not afford high quality art materials, the men worked with whatever materials came to hand. Rarely would they use canvas: with a typical miner’s practicality they utilised any workable flat surface, including paper, card, hardboard or chipboard, and for paint would often use ordinary household paint or Walpamur, which was available in tubes and could be used as a watercolour. However, the work they produced was far from ordinary. Lyon had told them to utilise their own experiences, and so they did just that: painting the place where they lived and the life they knew. Perhaps the most obvious part of this life was the work they did every day, mining, and this work was shown in all its diverse forms by the men. Jimmy Floyd, for example, was an onsetter at Ashington Colliery for many years, and his knowledge of the job is evident in his 1942 painting *The Onsetter*. **(see back cover)** His job involved moving filled tubs of coal into the lift cage and marshalling the empty ones, and although the painting is in a naïve style, it is also incredibly detailed and accurate, demonstrating how well he knew the task and its equipment. Everything necessary to the job is shown in the picture, and in a way this makes it self-explanatory;

no elaboration is required. Similarly, Leslie Brownrigg, who had left the mines to become a teacher, painted what he remembered of his job, hewing and shifting coal, in *The Miner*. This is one of the earliest paintings produced by the Group, and was featured in Robert Lyon's 1935 *Listener* article. The man's bending form fills the picture space as he continues with his laborious task of shovelling coal into the waiting tubs. His back is to the viewer, and he looms large within the scene, almost too large to be contained within the picture space. However, this colossus is also a very ordinary figure, with his sturdy boots and his flat cap firmly on his head. He is no hero – just an everyday man doing his everyday job of work. The gloom of the mine itself has also been perfectly captured, and the size of the figure adds a sense of restricted movement, as Lyon commented:

“The instinctive use of massive forms in a cramped space is clearly the result of a familiar experience.”<sup>9</sup>

It is perhaps this ‘familiar experience’ with the subject that gives these paintings such impact, especially when compared to many mining paintings by ‘professional’ artists. During the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the fashion was for images of the ‘Heroic Labourer’ or the ‘Rural Idyll’; sanitised, sentimentalised, and bearing little relation to reality. Even the ‘Social Realist’ artists, who sought a more genuine picture, usually fell short of offering the complete truth. The 20<sup>th</sup> century saw a shift in approach by artists: particularly during the Second World War, with the setting up of the War Artists’ Commission, there was an interest in recording the activities of everyday life and industry. However, when artists such as Graham Sutherland or Henry Moore depicted mining the emphasis in their images is placed upon backbreaking labour or the horror of underground confinement. In scenes reminiscent of Dante’s ‘Inferno’, the mines

become diabolical pits, enclosing caves that glow in shades of black and red, seeming about to crush the miners working within them. The miners themselves become small, insect-like denizens of another world, trapped and fearful, sometimes barely recognisable as human beings as they crouch semi-naked within the tomb-like shafts. Of course, all of these works were aimed at an audience who had probably never even seen a working colliery. The Ashington painters were painting for themselves and their families; people they lived and worked with and who knew all too well the realities of mining life, so no such emphasis or sentimentalism was necessary. The difficulty of the work is implicit in the paintings, but not consciously stated, giving them instead a quiet dignity.

Of course, even within the working environment of the mine there were moments of rest. Jimmy Floyd again used a very naïve style of painting for *Bait Time*, but it is a much more personal scene that the viewer sees here: a miner sharing his meal or 'bait' with a pit pony. Framed by the arch of the tunnel, the man proffers a piece of food to the pony who, still confined within the harness and 'limmers' (detachable shafts) of the coal tub, has turned to step across the wagon rails and stretches his neck out eagerly for the treat. A moment of rest and refreshment for both man and horse, and one which both are savouring. It also demonstrates in a gentle but unsentimental way the affection which the miners held for their ponies. Oliver Kilbourne also chose to depict the ponies, but before they began their working life, running free and unbroken in *The Galloway Field at Ashington Colliery*. As he later commented;

“It was a bit of a shame that these ponies, very innocent of the jobs they were to come to below were sporting about and enjoying

life to the full. Down the pit they were held to the hard and fast rule. And they never came up, that was the tragedy of it.”<sup>10</sup>

However, life at the colliery was not all the miners knew, and the Group depicted life outside of work and at home just as much. Oliver Kilbourn’s *Progging the Mat* captures a typical domestic scene in 1938. Three women sit around a frame in a cosy kitchen, working steadily on a rag-rug; a traditional floor covering made by ‘prodding’ or ‘progging’ short strips of waste material through a hessian base. These rugs were often a joint venture for women from several families, and so served an important social function as well as a practical one. Kilbourn has captured the scene with deft observation and a sensitive handling of materials; the strips of cloth which have not yet been used sit piled on the rug, bunched up and loose, contrasting with the smooth texture of those already woven into the pattern. The colours glow almost as brightly as the roaring coal fire behind the women, and the viewer looks down on the scene, which is tilted towards the front of the picture plane as if, like the woman on the opposite side of the rug, we too are standing above watching the work progress. It is a very homely, comforting scene, depicted with fondness and affection. However, notable in the painting is the absence of any men; social recreation was strictly defined by gender, and they had their own gatherings such as at the local social club. Such a scene was captured by Andrew Foreman in *The Bar – Playing Dominoes*. The bar is crowded, but brightly lit, and while some men play darts in the background, the painting is dominated by the foreground group of domino players. They sit hunched over their table: one man, wearing a green cap, leans forward to consider his next move with concentration etched on his face. The player to his left, wearing small round spectacles and a red flower in the buttonhole of his jacket, watches rather nervously;

while the other two players, who sit with their backs to us, wait patiently yet closely for his decision. There is a palpable sense of tension in the air and, like the observer who raises his glass to his lips, the viewer also seems to be standing next to the table, watching the game over the players' shoulders, therefore becoming part of the scene themselves. A similar effect was created by George Blessed when he depicted another popular pastime – whippet racing. *Whippets* (**see front cover**) shows two men kneeling beside their dogs, poised to release them. Both men and animals are tense: leaning forward in their eagerness to race, the dogs push against their owners' restraining hands, but still they wait, all four gazes fixed on an object outside the picture frame. We, the viewers, like the owners, are on the same level as the dogs, we become part of the activity: taking the place of the next man in line with his dog, we too wait with bated breath for the signal. The way Blessed has handled the medium is also important: reducing the forms to quite a basic level, he has created a pattern of colours and shapes, while this simplification means that no obtrusive details detract from capturing the intensity of the training. However, the implication that this is a leisure pursuit remains, as the form of the colliery is visible in the background, a reminder of the work they must return to later.

*A Challenge to the Art Establishment*

Each of the members of the Group brought their individual knowledge and views to bear as inspiration in their work, so Leslie Brownrigg painted what he remembered of his job as a coal hewer; Jimmy Floyd depicted his work and his allotment; Harry Wilson, invalided out of the Great War and now working as a dental technician, chose to illustrate the social conditions of the town; George Blessed looked at everyday life in Ashington; and Oliver

Kilbourn explored his work at the colliery – eventually going on to create a whole series of works depicting a day in the life of an underground miner. The Group was not isolated, however, and were keen to visit galleries and exhibitions to see other art and develop their powers of observation.

These visits included the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle, and, on a specially arranged visit to London, the Royal Academy and the Tate Gallery, where the group were particularly impressed by the works of Cézanne and the modern masters.

The opportunity of the London visit was due to the intervention of Helen Sutherland. Heiress to the Peninsular and Orient Shipping Line, she was an avid collector of modern art, and in late 1935 had been invited by Robert Lyon to visit the Group. Having sat in on one of their classes she became fascinated by the Group and their work, eventually acquiring several pieces for her own private collection. She also frequently invited the Group members to visit her home at Rock Hall, near Alnwick, where they were able to view her collection of Modern art, and also meet and talk with contemporary artists such as David Jones, Christopher Wood and Ben and Winifred Nicholson, friends who regularly came to stay with her. She was a Liberal and, for a while, a Quaker, and this was reflected in her attitudes towards the men and their work. As Harry Wilson described:

“Miss Sutherland expected you to be able to stand up and account for your activities. She would stand in front of a picture with you and ask precisely why this was done this way or why that person was included, and you couldn’t put her off. She was very perceptive and very rarely did you find out how her mind was

working...Some of the pictures were quite acceptable to anyone but I'm afraid other pictures carried a challenge for certain people. I had no particular religious feeling or anything like that and Miss Sutherland was very definite about that sort of thing, so I never got beyond talking about pictures and aesthetic-value-of-pictures. The content, the social content, we didn't talk about."<sup>11</sup>

This social aspect of the Group's pictures, particularly those depicting mining, also posed a problem for Oliver Kilbourn when he tried to discuss them with her:

"It was rather against her grain to think that men were working in such conditions as that, you know. The gulf didn't seem to matter when we were in her presence, though. She always made us at ease and actually during tea she was much more a woman concerned with dishing out the tea: that was another side to her. But when it came to pictures it was very definitely another side."<sup>12</sup>

It was at Helen Sutherland's instigation, and also at her expense, that the whole class plus Robert Lyon visited London for a weekend in February 1936. Apart from George Brown, who had worked in London many years before as a joiner, it was for the class members their first visit to the capital, and for several men it was their first time south of the River Tyne. Their main aim was to visit the Winter Exhibition of Chinese Art at the Royal Academy, but their itinerary was crammed with as many visits as possible during their stay: the Tate Gallery, The National Gallery, the home of Jim Ede, which would later become Kettle's Yard Gallery in Cambridge, and the studios of artists Edward Halliday and Alfred Hardiman. There was also a visit to the BBC to attend a radio broadcast of a music-hall programme, and a trip to a modern housing estate, Lark

Hall Rise, the flats and maisonettes of which were considered a marvel of modern architecture and facilities. When they returned, Arthur Whinnom, then Secretary of the Group, wrote a long and enthusiastic account of the weekend, parts of which were later published in the *Morpeth Herald*. It seems that for many of the Group the Chinese art exhibition – their original destination – had a powerful and lasting impact:

“What is to be said about this overwhelming concentration of the personal expression, in beauty of form and colour, over sixteen centuries of time, of a people of famed cultural attainment...there is an affinity between the people who created those studies we looked upon, and ourselves; there is nothing suggesting a tortuous mentality, but rather, a lofty, poetic, yet simple expression of the sublimity of nature and the beneficence of religion...”<sup>13</sup>

Oliver Kilbourn in particular was deeply moved by the artwork he saw, and would later include elements from it in his own work. This can especially be seen within his series *My Life as a Pitman*, which used a long, horizontal format to display its narrative in the same way as examples of Chinese paintings:

“To me it was a terrific experience. The Chinese art: I hadn’t seen anything like it. The thing which impressed me most was *The Flight of the Hundred Geese*, it was a long scroll about thirty feet long, from the source down to the sea and you walked along, kept walking down and reading the scroll as you went, and that seemed to me to be something like the idea of Hogarth and Bewick: sort of an additive painting rather than looking at just one picture. You went along with the thing.”<sup>14</sup>

It was also at this time that the Group began to attract attention to themselves from the art world. *The Morpeth Herald* had headlined their recent trip as an ‘Art Pilgrimage to London’, and when they returned to Ashington they were surprised to be offered several opportunities to publicly exhibit their work. Their first exhibition was held at the Hatton Gallery, Armstrong College, in November 1936. At the opening ceremony Sir William Marris, the College Principal, said “*I think this exhibition must be one of the most remarkable displays that have been shown in this gallery,*” adding that “*the choice of Ashington as a site for this class seems to me to have been a very gallant one.*”<sup>15</sup> In these rather patronising comments we can detect an echo of Orwell’s view, and many newspaper reports of the event took a similar stance. The professional art establishment appears to be congratulating itself for encouraging the working-class amateur. Indeed, it could be argued that this is exactly what Robert Lyon intended when he, not the Group members, selected the works for exhibition. The ninety-seven paintings, together with a number of etchings, were held up as specimens of progress, and described in these terms within the exhibition catalogue. However, when the work of the Group at this time is examined overall, it becomes apparent that Lyon had consistently selected examples which tended towards the naïve. Here was no threat to the professional and, incidentally, here was also the basis for an interesting thesis.

Moreover, within the formal realms of art education the Ashington Group painters were seen as an exciting revelation, a practical example of the pioneering new teaching methods of Marion Richardson extended to adults. Richardson believed that art should not be taught to children by following a formal syllabus, but instead her pupils were encouraged to use their own natural instincts and sensitivities, which in adults usually became dulled and

constrained. The artistic impulse was natural, inborn, and here were adults, apparently uneducated labourers, yet still able to tap into this latent force. These attitudes are echoed in the catalogue introduction for the Group's 1938 exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle. There is an almost grudging acknowledgement that "*as art, some of the works in this Exhibition have arresting value*" but it is stressed that this is not the point of them, and that they must be viewed as, and judged on the basis of being, "*expressions*". By following this course of study, we are told, the men of the Ashington Group have developed their senses and their imaginations, leading to "*an enlargement of spirit which makes, at least in one direction, for better and happier human beings*"; a paternalistic interpretation which seems strangely at odds with the self-help ethos of the WEA. However, it is also an interpretation which places the Group firmly in the 'amateur' category, negating any possible threats to 'professional' artists' pride. This is in marked contrast to the attitude of the Artists' International Association, which in April 1937 had organised the First British Artists' Congress as an anti-Fascist gesture. This exhibition, held in London, was an unprecedented gathering of artists, and the Ashington Group submitted several pictures. Admittedly placed within the 'Working Men's Groups' section, their works nonetheless hung in the same exhibition as paintings by Nicholson, Dali, Picasso, and Magritte.

### *Mass Observation*

The Ashington Group became something of a curiosity. Continuing to exhibit both locally and in London, they and the educationalists came to realise that they were probably unique. Robert Lyon and others had suggested trying to replicate the 'experiment' with other tutorial classes or art groups, but with each attempt it seemed that these other groups slipped into the life drawing and still-life mode of art. Even classes which would

appear to be in the same vein, such as the Sketching Club based at the Spennymoor Settlement in south-west County Durham, were primarily art classes, looking to produce good art. The Ashington Group, however, were concerned only with the experience of the process, not whether the end result was good or bad. It was partly because of this that they attracted the attentions of the 'Mass Observers'; a group of upper-class male intellectuals and self-styled social anthropologists searching for the 'authentic' and 'primitive' in ordinary society (the 'masses') as an escape from bourgeois modernism. Following the Group's 1938 exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery, Janet Adam Smith wrote an extensive article on them for *The Listener*. Having discussed the work with the artists themselves she was sympathetic to their approach, and emphasised the independence and self-direction behind the Group's work, stressing that:

"They don't want to be looked on as curiosities, publicised by dealers as 'Miner Painters' and made a collector's fashion... Their only motive in selling their pictures... is to get money for painting materials and their only reason for exhibiting them now is to stimulate other tutorial classes to try the same experiment."<sup>16</sup>

Tom Harrison, a self-trained anthropologist and adventurer, and key figure among the Mass Observers, read this article and wrote to Robert Lyon, citing the Ashington Group as an ideal unit for observation. However, it would appear that the Observers arrived at Ashington with pre-conceived and ill-judged notions of what they would find. Harrison had previously studied primitive societies, and he probably expected to find something very similar in Ashington. He could not be further from the truth. The Group, many of whom were teetotal, were astonished when he presented

them with a crate of beer, presumably thinking that their goodwill could be bought with gifts. Once it became apparent that these 'primitive' miners were not living up to the Observer's expectations their interest quickly waned and, disappointed, they left to study the slum areas of Newcastle instead.

Nonetheless, the Mass Observers had achieved something by their visit, in that they had once again raised the profile of the Ashington Group, resulting in a widely publicised exhibition 'Unprofessional Painting', held in October 1938. About fifty paintings and a dozen sculptures from the Ashington Group were included, together with examples from the Consett Art Club, the Spennymoor Settlement's Sketching Club, and work by other self-taught artists loaned by the Wertheim Gallery, London. The exhibition was supported by a series of debates held at Bensham Grove Settlement (now Bensham Grove Community Centre) where WEA classes for the area were usually held, and it went on to be shown in London, being widely reported in the newspapers. However, once again the press patronised their work, and it was not viewed in the spirit in which it had been undertaken, as a practical, experiential exercise.

#### *A Self-Directing Group*

1939 saw the onset of the Second World War. Mining was of course a reserved occupation, and therefore the men of the Ashington Group did not really suffer any interruption to their work. However, there was a shift in emphasis of their subject matter to reflect war work and related topics, so we see images of shelters being built and 'Digging for Victory'. In 1941 the Group held their second exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery, organised once again by Robert Lyon. The catalogue introduction this time was written

by the Group's long-time patroness, Helen Sutherland, and there is a marked contrast in its approach. Perhaps not surprisingly, she refers to the impact of the War upon society and its cultural life, but she uses this to emphasise the "*social and artistic importance*" of the Group, praising its natural, sincere methodology and "*rich diversity of accumulated experience commonly shared.*"

"Through this honest work we can look into the very workshop of the loving spirit of wisdom, where the human spirit is making things most in accordance with its own nature and obediently to its most comprehensive and purist insight."<sup>17</sup>

The next few years were to see major changes for the Ashington Group. In 1942 Robert Lyon organised a highly successful exhibition for them at the Lefevre gallery in London; several paintings were sold, including Jimmy Floyd's *My Grandfather's Hobby*, which fetched the considerable sum of £25. However, Lyon's ties with the Group were soon to be broken as later that year, having completed his MA, he moved to Edinburgh to become Principal of Edinburgh College of Art. Lyon had been the Group's tutor and mentor for almost eight years, however, his motives had not been entirely altruistic. His MA thesis, entitled *The Appreciation of Art through the Visual and Practical Approach*, was based upon the 'Ashington Experiment', and it could be suggested that many of the exhibitions he had organised for the Group were structured to support his theories. However, whether through a sense of gratitude or long association, he remained a strong advocate for the Group, and later arranged for the Lefevre exhibition to be shown at The National Gallery of Scotland.

Another problem was to hit the Ashington Group this year – the hut at Longhorsley where they had met since the WEA classes

began had been taken over by the military at the start of the War and had been badly damaged as a result. As a temporary measure the Group had been working in their own homes, but it was not a practical long-term solution. Without the guidance of Robert Lyon, and now without a meeting place, would the Group continue? Fortunately, the men were determined that it would, and found another site in Ashington itself. A plot of land was rented from the Coal Company at 10 shillings a year ground rent, and construction of a new 'hut' began in July 1943. They reused the walls and roof of the old hut and extended it, adding a new storage room, a proper chimney, and even electricity. The final touch was a large sign over the door, proudly declaring it was the home of the 'Ashington Art Group'.

As the Group continued to exhibit their work, they realised that they could no longer call themselves a Tutorial Class. They had moved beyond that, away from art appreciation to become a self-directing group which aimed to *create*. Its existence became self-fulfilling. A new era had begun, and that called for a new approach. So on 5<sup>th</sup> May 1946 a special meeting was called, for both old and new members, at which the Group produced for the first time a rule book, effectively a constitution. This clearly set out the Group's aims and ideals, and most important of these was Article 3:

“The aim of the Group shall be the cultivation and appreciation of the Fine Arts by the following means:

- a) To encourage the creation of works of art by the members;
- b) The periodical exhibition of such work
- c) To associate with bodies having similar aims and objects;
- d) To promote lecture programmes of a broad cultural interest on the Fine Arts;

- e) Arranging visits of contemporary artists;
- f) Building up a well-stocked library of books and reproductions;
- g) Building up a representative and permanent collection of members' works of art (subject to the approval of the artist)."

The emphasis of the Group had clearly shifted. They would continue to paint and exhibit, holding fast to their long-established ideals, but no longer was their work to be regarded as simply exercises, there was to be a Permanent Collection, an aim expressed in Article 3(g) and elaborated in Article 19; *"The Group shall from time to time desire and accept for purposes of acquiring a representative and permanent collection of work done by any of its members."*

New members joined the Group, a prodigious amount of artwork was produced, and they went from strength to strength. January 1947 saw the nationalisation of the coal mines, and the birth of the National Coal Board. Conditions at the colliery improved, with paid holidays, more investment in equipment, the provision of work tools, and improved health and safety regulations. Ashington was estimated to have at least 100 years' worth of coal reserves, and the future seemed secure. The NCB took a greater interest in social conditions than the colliery owners had, including the cultural development of the regions and, prompted by the Arts Council, October 1947 saw the NCB's Manpower and Welfare Department put on an 'Art by the Miner' exhibition. Paintings were included by miners from the Welsh and Yorkshire coalfields, as well as County Durham, but a full third of the exhibition was devoted to The Ashington Group, recognising their unique place within this context. The paintings were mostly from the Permanent Collection, and

confirmed that the Group was still very much an active force. The exhibition toured nine cities, beginning in London, and including venues as far apart as Bristol and Aberdeen. In September 1948 it visited Newcastle, and once again the Laing Art Gallery played host to the Ashington Group, proudly acknowledging in the exhibition catalogue its previous links with this prodigious group of artists.

*Changing fortunes*

During the 1950s the Group fell from the public eye, but they continued to produce work and expand their Permanent Collection. Returning to their original principles of learning through their own efforts, they began experimenting again, exploring new media such as sculpture or the new polymer paints. The Group's membership had changed, and apart from Oliver Kilbourn and Jimmy Floyd, the most productive members now were the newcomers Len Robinson and Fred Laidler. August 1959 saw another exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery; Robert Lyon had accepted an invitation to select the pictures, but did not attend the opening. A surprise and welcome visitor, however, was the elderly Helen Sutherland. Unfortunately the exhibition was not well received, as Scott Dobson wrote in the *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*:

“I feel that there is no doubt about the fact that the Group has lost its initial impact; things are better in Ashington today than when the Group first formed and the protesting expressionism springing from genuine feeling has to a large extent disappeared.”<sup>18</sup>

However, Dobson did praise the work of Oliver Kilbourn, describing rather prosaically how he “*could still paint the soul of Ashington...many of his works have a validity and honesty about them that cannot be matched by the more recipe-minded professional social realist.*”

Despite this, it seemed that the Group was in its twilight years; but there was yet to be a revival in fortunes. Helen Sutherland, staunch ally and friend of the Group, died in 1965, but she was still able to help her old associates.

In 1971, William Feaver, a painter and art critic, was attending the opening of an exhibition at the Laing Art Gallery, *'The Helen Sutherland Collection of Modern Art'*. He was at the time art critic for the Newcastle Journal, and planned to write a piece about the display. However, while there he was introduced to four or five elderly men – members of the Ashington Group, come in honour of their patroness. Feaver had of course heard of them, but was astonished by the enthusiasm and vigour with which they discussed their work. He was invited to visit their Hut the following Monday, and was surprised and delighted as picture after picture was displayed for him. There were only ten members active in the Group at this time, but Feaver felt their enthusiasm was undiminished:

“It would have been easy to see it all as a sort of archive, a small, local episode preserved. But there were too many ideas, too many lively interests, still engaged there. What had been a formal WEA class was obviously now a proud stronghold, first and last of its kind.”<sup>19</sup>

As a result of Feaver's interest new articles about the Group began to appear, and new exhibitions were opened. Summer 1971 saw the BBC film an account of the Group through the eyes of its three remaining founder members; Oliver Kilbourn, Jimmy Floyd and Harry Wilson. Exhibitions now toured not only nationally but internationally, including a year-long tour of the Netherlands in 1978 and, in April 1980, a three-month touring exhibition in the People's Republic of China. The latter was particularly significant,

and shows the far-reaching influence of these extraordinary works. The Ashington Group paintings were the first examples of Western art to be shown in the country after the Cultural Revolution, and the reason for this was partly because of a perceived empathy with the working and peasant classes of China. This was especially true in the mining province of Shansi, where the exhibition visited the city of Taiyuan. Here were Chinese miners and their families looking at the experiences and lives of British miners and their families; a common link, a shared experience, which transcended the cultural divide. However, the irony was that this was the same year that Woodhorn Colliery at Ashington closed and production finished at Lynemouth. The future, which had seemed so secure a few years ago, was now uncertain.

By 1982 the Group's membership had dwindled to only two members: Oliver Kilbourn and Jack Harrison. Also, the Coal Board Estate Management informed them that the annual ground rent for the Hut was to increase from 50p to £14. Added to the quarterly standing charge of £7 for electricity it was too much so the following year, with great reluctance, they decided to formally close the Group. It was perhaps appropriate that the decision fell to these two: Oliver Kilbourn, last of the founding members, and Jack Harrison, one of the most recent. This decision did not, however, signal the end of the Ashington Group's influence or significance. It had existed for almost fifty years, and during that time it had created the most comprehensive sociological record of coal mining and the mining community to be produced by experiential artists. Its size and scope is even more extraordinary when it is realised that probably a large proportion of the Group's output was destroyed, as Oliver Kilbourn's wife Peggy explained:

“Many pictures would be thrown away because of lack of space in small houses. Mining pictures would not be welcomed by wives to hang on walls at home; landscapes would be considered more suitable. The women had enough of mining dominating their lives and frequently, when there were several workers in the house, reducing them to slaves. Many of the women were never able to go to bed except at weekends and just dozed in a chair to fit in with the different shifts.”<sup>20</sup>

The largest part of this invaluable social document, in the form of the Group’s Permanent Collection, had been held in storage for them by the NCB since 1975, but this meant that unless the work was taken out to go in a specific exhibition, it was not available for viewing. This problem was resolved in 1990, when the work was transferred to Woodhorn Colliery Museum to be housed in its own gallery. Currently undergoing a major refurbishment, the Museum plans to reopen in Autumn 2006, when a redisplay of the Ashington Group paintings will take pride of place.

Throughout its existence, the Ashington Group had pushed back the boundaries, challenging convention and striving for understanding. Looking back to its WEA roots, it was a perfect example of what could be achieved within this visionary system of community learning. This was not the superior, paternalistic approach of the intelligentsia handing selected knowledge to the ignorant masses; this was education for all, delivered for and led by the community it served. The earliest Ashington Group classes had been created in direct response to the needs and interests of the students, and from there it had evolved into a unique phenomenon. Although the Group eventually moved away from the tutelage of the WEA, it preserved its guiding principles, and continued to encourage

‘enquiring minds’. Self-directing, self-motivating, its significance was beautifully expressed by William Feaver, who concludes:

“Art, the Ashington Group found, isn’t an exclusive cult, someone else’s possession, and love of art isn’t escapism or false religion. It’s the ability to identify, the ability to see. After the coal has been mined, all the pitheaps have been flattened and the whole purpose of Ashington has gone, their unprofessional paintings will still survive.”<sup>21</sup>

### Notes

1. George Orwell, *The Road to Wigan Pier*, Penguin edition, 1962, p.94, quoted in Norman Page, *The Thirties in Britain* (Macmillan Education Ltd., 1990) p.24.
2. *Shell Guide to Northumberland and Durham*, 1937, quoted in William Feaver, *Pitmen Painters: The Ashington Group 1934-1984* (London, Chatto and Windus, 1988) p.14
3. Colin Niven, ‘Origins of Ashington Pit Village’, quoted in Robert McManners & Gillian Wales, *Shafts of Light: Mining Art in the Great Northern Coalfield* (Gemini Productions, 2002) pp.57-58.
4. WEA brochure, c.1930
5. Robert Lyon, ‘An Approach to Art’, *The Highway*, December 1935, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, pp.17-18.
6. Harry Wilson, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p.18.
7. Robert Lyon, ‘An Experiment in Art Appreciation’, *The Listener*, 29 May 1935, quoted in Robert McManners & Gillian Wales, *op.cit.*, p.62.
8. Robert Lyon, thesis, ‘The Appreciation of Art through the Visual and Practical Approach’, Newcastle, 1942, pp 7-12, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p 22.
9. Robert Lyon, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p.27.
10. Oliver Kilbourn, *My Life as a Pitman* (Ashington, Mid Northumberland Arts Group, 1992) p.11.
11. Harry Wilson, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p.31.

12. Oliver Kilbourn, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p.31.
13. Arthur Whinnom, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p.41
14. Oliver Kilbourn, from an interview with William Feaver, 1971, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p. 43.
15. Sir William Marris, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p.45.
16. Janet Adam Smith, *The Listener*, March 1938, quoted in Robert McManners & Gillian Wales, *op.cit.*, p.66.
17. Helen Sutherland, *Catalogue of the Exhibition of Paintings by Members of The Ashington Group (University Tutorial Class) (City and County of Newcastle upon Tyne, Laing Art Gallery and Museum, 1941)*
18. Scott Dobson, *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 13 August 1959, quoted in William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p154.
19. William Feaver, *op.cit.*, p.160
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*north east history*

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## **WORKERS' EDUCATION ASSOCIATION**

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**Hannah – A Woman of the Durham Coalfield in the  
Nineteenth Century**  
*Margaret Headley*

*This article reconstructs the life of my great- great grandmother, Hannah Hall, using family history techniques. It aligns her life history with wider research into the social, economic and political life of the Durham mining communities and explores how the dynamics of individual lives can throw light on a wider interpretative model of working-class culture in the nineteenth century.*

My great- great grandmother was the daughter, wife and mother of miners in the Durham coalfield and carrying out family history research over the past 20 years has made me aware of how historical issues of the day will have impacted on members of her family. I am striving to demonstrate how the detailed study of the life of a working class woman such as Hannah in the Durham Coalfield between 1820 and 1901, can shed light on aspects of the social and demographic history of nineteenth century industrial County Durham which have remained obscure. No study along these lines has been carried out before and I believe that by focusing on the life-history of one individual it is possible to bring together a whole historical series of studies in a way that allows us to make

new connections and develop new insights in order to create her world. On one level, I have researched her life in order to establish a personal core narrative, although it has been very difficult to find her individual voice due to lack of information from letters, diaries etc which relate to this class of woman. On another level, I have researched the contextual issues of the day that interacted with her life in order to highlight how the two were related.

This study therefore works on the assumption that people in the past need to be ‘read’ as much from an understanding of the specific social conditions that surround and shape them as from a more intimate psychological insight gained from letters, personal diaries and other classic sources that usually underpin biographical studies. It sees self and character, in other words, as socially and culturally constructed rather than some essential pure entity standing outside society. Hannah, the subject of my study was illiterate and has left no written record that provides an insight into her thoughts, feelings and values. Yet even if such records existed, as they do in a limited number of cases from similar working people (e.g. J Burnett – *Useful Toil – Autobiographies from Working People 1820-1920*) they rarely offer a profound insight into the inner workings of the ‘real’ thoughts and feelings but reveal the cultural codes and rituals that individuals learned to use in specific social situations. So rather than looking for any essential ‘self’ capable of original or spontaneous thought and feeling, we are better employed in understanding the social and cultural contexts in which individuals operated and through this, to see the cultivated capital that they could draw upon.

At any one time there were acceptable ways of thinking about sex, death, children and class, or any other life experience just as

there are ideal models by which people were expected to conduct their individual behaviour. Historians have worked with these limited sources to build increasingly complex models of working-class society and culture in the 19th century, but inevitably they have had to talk in general terms. Where individual life histories have been available and usually from 'activists' and social leaders, they have been used to map out individual against broader patterns. The growth of family history however, offers a new set of possibilities, in that it provides a growing number of individual case-histories that, for all their limitations in terms of personal source material, present the bare bones of life experience that can challenge some of our dominant interpretative models.

Hannah's life was no more than an ordinary working-class, 19th-century County Durham life with its fair share of misfortune. Her life was shaped by the industrial landscape in which she lived. It was a life of coal mining and hard work. She lived through a significant period in labour history and women's history and studies of working-class women throughout the period have tended to look at them as a collective group, whether in terms of implicit work experience or domestic role. Oral history has allowed us to explore more individual voices for the twentieth century, but what of working-class women in earlier periods? Is there any way we can 'open out' their individual experience?

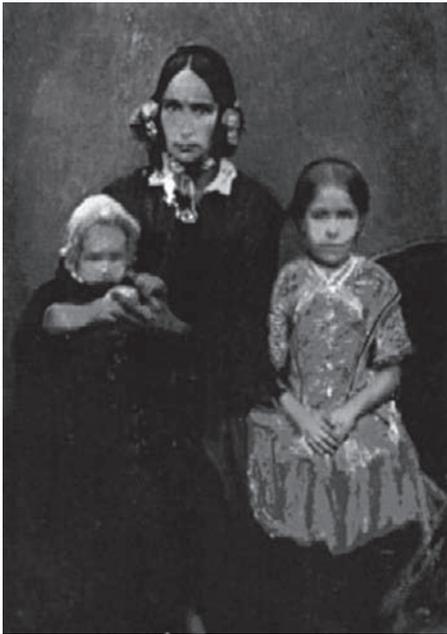
In his biography of Peter Lee (1860 – 1935), miners' leader Jack Lawson describes the lives of women in the colliery villages of County Durham where Lee lived and worked:

'Consider the working class woman, born to nothing, living meagrely, labouring magnificently and leaving nothing. Her lot was

cast in a century so grim for the working masses that no historian worth mentioning has a good word to say for it socially and the best minds in literature became as prophets in their pity and anger”<sup>1</sup>

What is known about the lives of women in colliery villages during Hannah’s time (1820 – 1901) is derived from hearsay or the findings of social surveys and it is rare to come across first-hand reminiscences. In this sense Hannah was typical of her sex, status and generation. Hannah could not have kept a diary or written her own biography; because she remained illiterate all her life. In addition there is very little written evidence about her. But her story *can* be told, even if mainly through the unwitting testimony of masculine

records. Her background can be chronicled from information given in census materials and parish records.



Ambrotype circa 1858: Hannah with daughters Sarah and Susannah

A brief narrative of Hannah’s history follows. Thereafter the remaining study will focus on some of the key historiographical themes to emerge from her life.

In all the historical silences that surround her life, this image reminds us that Hannah was a real woman living in the rich

complexity of self, family and community and this work seeks to recapture some of that lost reality and complexity.

She was born in 1820 in the village of Great Lumley near Chester-le-Street in the Durham coalfield. Her father was a miner and she was the second child of her family, being the eldest daughter. By 1837 we find Hannah's family living in Thornley Colliery although her brother and one of her sisters remained behind in the Chester-le-Street area. Thornley Colliery in East Durham was sunk in the mid 1830's by Messrs Chaytor, Wood, Gully and Burrell. The colliery was sunk at a time of inland expansion in the Durham coalfield and whilst it was a very productive colliery, working conditions for the miners were not easy.<sup>2</sup> The village of Thornley is 8 miles south-east from Durham City on the road from Durham and five miles from Easington.<sup>3</sup>

In 1840 Hannah became pregnant. She was 20 years old and still single. Her pregnancy warrants our curiosity mainly because it did not lead to marriage. The father of the child as stated on the birth certificate was Henry Winship, an unmarried miner who was the same age as Hannah. Henry was a miner at Thornley Colliery and we can find him on the 1841 census living as a lodger with his relatives in the village.

In 1843 however Hannah married John Porter, a 33- year -old coal miner at St Helen's Church, Kelloe. The marriage was as the result of another pregnancy conceived out of wedlock. Both John and Hannah signed the parish register with a cross. John Porter was born in Fatfield in 1810 and was living as a boarder with his uncle's family in Thornley at the time of his marriage. As a result of his single status he was not eligible for tied colliery housing until

he married. At the time of his marriage to Hannah therefore John took on the responsibility of another man's child (Ann was 2 years old at this time) and Hannah gave birth to a son, named Ralph in December 1843. Another child, Sarah was born in 1846.

At some time after<sup>4</sup> 1846 and before 1849 John and Hannah moved to Sherburn Hill, a large and populous village about half-a-mile north west of Shadforth and consisting chiefly of rows of pit houses occupied by the Earl of Durham's colliers. Accommodation for single miners was always difficult, and despite having five children, Hannah and John took in a lodger to help supplement the family budget. During their time in Sherburn Hill, Hannah gave birth to a further two daughters; Mary Ann in 1849 and, following the death of Sarah in 1850, another daughter, Sarah, born in 1852 and a son, William, in 1854. The youngest child, William also died whilst living in Sherburn Hill, he and Sarah succumbed to phthisis or tuberculosis often referred to as consumption.

By July 1857, John Porter and his family had moved from their colliery house in Sherburn Hill into Paradise Cottages, Shadforth, an agricultural village only half a mile from Sherburn Hill. Their accommodation was a cottage belonging to Hill House Farm and this is where my great grandmother, Susannah was born. It is likely that the Porter's left the colliery village and moved into agricultural<sup>5</sup> accommodation in preparation for leaving this country in order to find work abroad. Many miners in the region were travelling to Australia and the US to find work there at his time. However Hannah's pregnancy at the end of 1856 meant that John made the trip alone, leaving Hannah and the children in Shadforth. In return for their accommodation, Hannah was expected to do cooking, mending and dressmaking for the farmer and his wife

as well as occasional work in the fields. There are three seemingly inconsequential memories that have been passed on through family members which relate to Hannah's time in this agricultural accommodation. The first and second of these concerns the cooking she was required to do on behalf of the farmer to help with catering for the local hunt ball. Her speciality dish for this occasion was a three-tier jam tart which was apparently well admired. The third is her involvement in an accident whilst harvesting turnips at the farm, through which she sustained a head injury. Set against what we might see as the major events of her life (illegitimate birth, deaths of children, emigration of husband), these seem relatively trivial incidents yet they also alert us to the way in which working people constructed their own life narratives and how family and community privileged certain stories over others.

By the time of the 1861 census Hannah and her children were living in a privately rented cottage in Shadforth village. Mary Ann, died in 1860 whilst the family were living in Shadforth and whilst her father was away from home. She was also a victim to the same consumptive condition as her brother and sister.

John Porter returned to England between 1862 and 1866 as the family were then living in Ludworth Colliery Houses. Ludworth is a village half a mile east from Shadforth. Messrs Walton & Gowland of London purchased Thornley and Ludworth Collieries on behalf of the London Steam Colliery and Coal Company Ltd in 1864, and they took possession early in 1865.<sup>6</sup>

In February 1866 Hannah lost her fourth child, to consumption. Sarah died in that year, aged 14. She was a Sunday Scholar at Ludworth and a printed verse survives to her memory. According

to the 1871 census, John, Hannah and their daughter Susannah were still living in Ludworth colliery houses, although John is registered as an unemployed coal hewer. The census in 1871 was taken on 2 April and the *Durham Chronicle* reports on 17 March “*The whole of the miners employed by the Thornley Company ceased work on Monday morning 13 March ... in a disagreement over the Bond*”. The same newspaper reports on 21 April “*The strike at this place is now at an end and the men have resumed work*”. John Porter’s status was almost certainly unemployed due to the strike rather than through any permanent loss of employment.

In November 1874 John Porter died as the result of an accident in Ludworth Colliery. An inquest was held on Saturday 14 November at The Ludworth Inn and a report of the inquest appeared in *The Durham Chronicle*.<sup>7</sup> John had tried to get into the cage at the shaft bottom and his leg became trapped between the cage and its fixings. The outcome of the Inquest was a verdict of ‘accidental death’.

Hannah erected a head stone to John’s memory in St Cuthbert’s Parish Church, Shadforth and the stone also contained the names of her four dead children – Sarah, Mary-Ann, William and Sarah. Mingled amongst all the other headstones, it can easily be overlooked, but the depth of personal loss it represents, both in personal and economic terms is almost incalculable.

After John’s death, Hannah continued to live in the village of Ludworth with her daughter, Susannah, now training as a dressmaker, and after Susannah’s marriage to Jacob Jopling in 1884, Hannah herself re-married in 1885 at the late age of 64 years (although an age of 61 is recorded on her marriage certificate). Her

husband was John Archer, a widower from Ludworth and a deputy at the colliery.

The marriage however did not last. By the time of the 1891 census Hannah was back in private rented accommodation in No 5 Margaret Street, Ludworth with two paying lodgers and where she is also running a hardware shop from her front room. Her second husband was living apart from her in Sunnyside, Ludworth with his 18 year- old daughter.

Hannah died in 1901 aged 81 of dementia, an illness that seems peculiarly unfitting for a woman who had displayed a remarkable level of independence and strength throughout her life. She died in the home of her first-born daughter, Ann, at Trimdon, in accommodation over a newsagents shop owned by her grandson, Henry Baldwin. She was buried alongside John Porter, her first husband, and their children. Noted on the head stone are the words “*and also Hannah, beloved wife of the above*”.

This then is a brief overview of Hannah’s life. The following work will draw out some of the core themes that run through the narrative, and each examines how Hannah’s story throws light on our understanding of working-class society and culture in nineteenth-century mining communities.

### *Home and Housing*

As a result of the rapid rise in population in coal mining areas and their isolated geographical location, coal companies were often responsible for providing accommodation for their workers.<sup>8</sup> The stereotype of traditional nineteenth century mining settlements was one of dreariness and depression. Remote villages built on

grid-iron patterns with endless rows of insanitary, colliery-owned terraces, a few shops, many pubs, a chapel and sometimes a school, all dependent on the local pit.<sup>9</sup> Hannah grew up in Thornley and in many ways the village fits this stereotype. According to Edward Rymmer, a resident of the village at the end of the 1830's:

“Alas what I heard and saw in Thornley was almost beyond belief. An awfully black and dismal place with people depending on its plant and workings. A huge, fiery heap ran nearly the length of the village. The smoke and stench from this fiery mountain was often unbearable”.<sup>10</sup>

Benson describes the village in the 1830's as “*A small, isolated, featureless single industry wilderness that a stereotyped community was based on*”.<sup>11</sup>

The population of Thornley in 1831 was only 50<sup>12</sup>, its agricultural identity just on the point of being eroded with the opening of the coalmine in the mid 1830's. The Thornley Coal Company started sinking operations through the magnesian limestone at a cost of £200,000<sup>13</sup> during this decade and by 1841 the population had increased dramatically to 2,019<sup>14</sup>.

The colliery houses in Thornley were built of locally available magnesian limestone<sup>15</sup> which was porous and made the houses very damp. They were hastily built in back to back parallel rows near to the pithead by Thomas Dunlop, at a cost £69 each and provided free of charge to the miners as part of their employment. The same plans were used for the building of colliery housing by the Hetton Coal Company in 1860,<sup>16</sup> a village approximately 7

miles from Thornley. The houses were notorious for their smoking chimneys and damp walls.<sup>17</sup> The rooms in the cottages were very small, damp, insanitary and inconvenient. There were no made-up roads or footpaths between the streets and therefore the cottages were accessed directly from dirt tracks – entry through the front door would lead straight into the parlour/bedroom. Most families however would use the rear door through the small back yard which gave access to the kitchen/living room. Entry to the floor above was gained from this room, by a ladder opposite the back door. Marked as a bedroom on the plan above, this room was often unusable due to it being open to the rafters – therefore being too hot in the summer and too cold in the winter.

At the time of the 1841 Census in Thornley, 47 families lived in Cross Row including Hannah and her family, and the average size of families was 5.65 people, ranging from 14 in one household to 2 in another.

In a similar cottage to that occupied by Hannah's family, Edward Rymmer remembers his own colliery dwelling in Thornley:

“My house in Quarry Row had two rooms on the ground floor with a loft above reached by a ladder. The tiles were bare and daylight, rain, wind, sleet or snow came in through the crevices. The room was about 14' square and had to serve the purpose of bedroom, kitchen, cookhouse, wash-house and coal-house. It was with difficulty that the ordinary decencies of life could be observed”.<sup>18</sup>

Whellan observed in 1856 that the furniture possessed by pitmen in the Durham coalfield was generally better than the dwellings in which they lived.<sup>19</sup> Leifchild pointed out the contrast

between the external and internal appearance of colliery houses in the 1840's. He described the interiors as 'comparatively showy and costly', many included an '*eight-day clock*', a good chest of drawers and a fine four-post bedstead<sup>20</sup>. My grandmother remembers the mahogany four-post bed which her mother inherited from Hannah as almost filling the front room in their colliery cottage in 1907, and being hung with red drapes, the two steps leading up to it being carpeted in red.

Inevitably we must work within the meagre evidence that is available to us in our efforts to reconstruct the domestic life of working people, and there is always a danger that we over-generalise from very scanty evidence. That said, there are several significant points that emerge from these surviving descriptions. Firstly, it is clear that people judged families in terms of their ability to create and maintain comfortable and attractive interiors. The cheery fireside was always a reassuring sight, and women like Hannah were key players in the making or breaking of this idea. Secondly, all the accounts stress the poor quality housing provided by the mining companies and often contrast this with the brave attempts by working people – mainly working-class women, to create homely interiors. Thirdly, we glimpse the individuality and idiosyncrasy of many interiors – the flashiness that Leifchild noted or the grandiose four-post bed complete with red -carpeted steps that Hannah created. Whatever else we may say of it, there is no doubt that this private domestic space carried powerful cultural connotations for both working people and middle-class observers.

The streets in Thornley during the 1840's were unpaved and undrained. Water had to be carried from a well at Gore Hill Farm approximately half-a-mile away from the colliery houses.

Alternatively at a cost of 1d for two buckets, the farmer would deliver the water – a luxury affordable by only a few.<sup>21</sup> Rymmer remembers:

“Thornley had a wretched and filthy water supply. One Saturday morning, Mr James Wilson, the manager of Thornley pit employed a gang of us to clean Quarry Row and we dug up from between 2 to 4 feet of cinders, coal and filth through the whole length of the street”<sup>22</sup>

The sanitation of the colliery houses, like the water supply, was the responsibility of the employers and it was discharged just as poorly, with improvements being made only when existing facilities broke down altogether<sup>23</sup>. Rymmer remembers: “In one colliery row I counted nine huge heaps of filth lying near and around the pit hovels”.<sup>24</sup>

These then are the social conditions in which Hannah spent her formative years. We have no written record of her feelings about them and must use the contrasting examples provided from primary sources. On the one hand we have Neddy Rymmer, a trade union activist, whose description paints a picture of unrelieved bleakness which formed part of his criticism of mineowners. On the other hand, Peter Lee fondly remembers his childhood home in Littletown:

“the large fire threw its gleams on red ochred or whitewashed walls, floors sanded or reddened or scrub-stoned, fancy markings showing the housewife’s art. There were rugs on the floor made from old clothes dyed various colours, dipped and worked into canvas by Mrs Lee and the family”.<sup>25</sup>

Lee describes his house as a cosy, homely place where he was obviously happy. No doubt the appearance and contrasting accounts of the cottage interiors depended very much on the type of woman who was in charge of its organisation and was always a sure indication of her skills and home-making, but the contrasting descriptions also alert us to the complex feelings that were often wrapped up in working-class home life where close moments of intimacy and happiness could be contrived against a back cloth of poverty and squalor. Dickens famous description of the Cratchitt Christmas dinner catches some feeling of this sentimental tension.

Overcrowding in the pit cottages was not entirely due to the size of the miners' families but also to the lack of space available in his living accommodation. It is therefore surprising to find that when John and Hannah moved to Sherburn Hill, a mining village very similar to Thornley, the 1851 census recorded a lodger living with them. Many miners' families chose to share their accommodation with a lodger, and sometimes this was a financial necessity; the lodger's rent would help with the family budget and in return he could expect bed, food, washing and mending<sup>26</sup>. The taking in of a lodger suggests that it was an effective way of eking out the family budget. John Wilson, living in Sherburn Hill during the 1850's describes his first impressions of the family who offered him lodgings: "*When I saw the sweetness of the lady's face, the comfort of the home, it was equal to an offer from Paradise*"<sup>27</sup> He further describes his feelings upon leaving the house and moving to a different area: "*I left as sweet a home as ever boy or man lived in. I care not whether he lived in palace or cottage.*"<sup>28</sup> Here too, as landladies of lodgers like John Wilson, the women of the mining communities were called upon to play key roles in contributing to family budgets as well as servicing the wider workforce.

After the breakdown of her second marriage, Hannah moved back to Ludworth but was not be eligible for colliery housing and managed to secure rented accommodation from a private landlord at no 5 Margaret Street. Margaret Street was built in 1885 and contained 12 terraced houses each with two rooms downstairs and three bedrooms. This row provided the largest collection of private housing in the village. The houses were built opposite the colliery rows. The majority of available housing in Ludworth was poor quality colliery cottages built in the 1860's. There were 107 colliery dwellings at Ludworth and 27 miners employed at Ludworth Colliery were also housed at nearby Haswell Plough.<sup>29</sup> However the rent for the Margaret Street properties would be prohibitive to mine workers but as Hannah was not eligible for tied accommodation if she wished to maintain her independence, she would need to be resourceful once again in order to afford rented housing. With the spacious accommodation available, Hannah was able to take in two lodgers and open a hardware shop in her front room thereby ensure her independence in a practical way.

It should be apparent from this analysis of Hannah's home life that she was obliged to change houses many times during her life. This was a typical experience of the Durham coalfield. As the coalfield developed in terms of roads, wagon ways and eventually railways, the villages became more easily accessible<sup>30</sup> and the Durham coalfield in particular sustained high levels of local immigration during the 1830's and 40's with a large number of miners from north Durham travelling to the new collieries of south Durham.<sup>31</sup> Migration was very common within the coalfields. Many colliers moved house every year<sup>32</sup>. Peter Lee remembers his childhood in 1860's County Durham; *"my early days are of moving from village to village, viewing our English lanes from the top of a wagon-load*

*of furniture*".<sup>33</sup> He goes on to say "*in 22 years the furniture was sold 21 times moving between Durham and Lancashire*".<sup>34</sup> In Durham, where the annual Bond was still in operation, it was the responsibility of the new owner to move the furniture of incoming workers free of charge<sup>35</sup>. Neddy Rymmer remembers:

"Those miners who were dissatisfied with one colliery would get bound at another, so that shifting chattels and family became necessary. In this way many thousands of families would change districts annually and in April and May the whole mining district were alive from side to centre with loaded vehicles from big wagons to cuddy carts".<sup>36</sup>

### *Work*

Most girls and women in the pit villages of County Durham worked at home – the key principle of female schooling was to teach girls to be good wives and mothers<sup>37</sup>. The rigid sexual division of labour was a prominent feature of the coal industry during the 1830's and 40's.<sup>38</sup> Elizabeth Roberts states that there were considerable geographic variations in the patterns of women's work, and whilst many women worked on the pit brows of the Lancashire coalfield, this was not the case in County Durham. Early Victorian government expressed horror over reports of the moral degradation consequent upon women's work in mixed environments<sup>39</sup> and this horror eventually led to the 1842 Mines Act prohibiting women from underground work at collieries. However women had not been employed below-ground in the northern coalfield since 1780 and at a later date on the surface, but for most of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women were not a feature of the Durham pit workforce.<sup>40</sup>

Although there were hardly any job opportunities for women in the mining industry itself, Hannah's life history does reveal a range of occupations open to a woman in Durham mining communities. She trained as a dressmaker as a young girl living in Thornley. Dressmaking was a necessity to most women in the colliery villages since clothes were a vivid and visible sign of status even among the working classes.<sup>41</sup> Peter Lee remembers his own mother, Hannah:

“with her own hands she made all the underclothes for husband and family. She never bought a shirt; they were cut and stitched with her own fingers. Suits of the older boys were cut down for the younger”.<sup>42</sup>

It was seen as a ‘natural’ profession for women where previous education was not necessary and a job that virtually all women had the necessary experience for. Sewing was sedentary and passive. It was traditionally done by women only for the care and maintenance of the family and home. Needless to say most dressmakers and milliners were daughters of the poor<sup>43</sup>. The census for 1841 showed that nationally 22,174 girls under the age of 20 were employed as dressmakers,<sup>44</sup> but most of these were concentrated in places where there was a strong middle and upper-class population which would create a high demand for their services and skills. In mining communities, however, where the population was almost exclusively working class and where women were expected to do the sewing and clothes-making for their families, it is hard to see where a ‘professional’ dressmaker like Hannah would find her customers. There is a period during the 1850's when Hannah lives in tied agricultural accommodation, that the accommodation was provided in payment for a number of tasks including dressmaking.

Peter Lee describes his then girlfriend in the 1870's: "*Alice Thompson was a young dressmaker living at Thornley and one in her line of business was no ordinary person in the colliery village*".<sup>45</sup>

It was traditional amongst mining families for women and girls to stay at home until marriage and after marriage it was even more difficult for women to find work outside the home. However, unwaged women were not necessarily economically inactive; miners' wives commonly took in lodgers, did washing/ironing, made mats, quilts, carried out decorating etc all of which provided an important source of additional income. At several points in her life, Hannah took in lodgers to supplement the family income and towards the end of her life she ran a hardware shop from the front room of her own home. During her stay in Shadforth she undertook agricultural work and earned some money from catering for the local hunt ball. Needless to say the census fails to record any of these 'informal' economic activities.

THORNLEY CENSUS DATA 1841 FEMALES			FEMALE EMPLOYMENT	
Under 1 years	36	) 43 employed women - girls between 10 and ) 19 years	Servants	38
1 – 9 years	294		School Teachers	2
10 – 71 years	640		Dressmaker & apprentice dressmaker	
Over 71 years	3		Bonnet Maker	1
			<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>43</b>

### *Personal Relationships*

For most women throughout the 19th century, illegitimacy was a social and economic catastrophe.<sup>46</sup> The 1834 Poor Law discouraged payments for single mothers and for the first time in English history, the bastardy clauses of the New Poor Law made single women legally and economically responsible for illegitimate

children.<sup>47</sup> Hannah and her illegitimate daughter, Ann, lived with Hannah's parents and the baby was referred to as 'Hall' according to the 1841 census, despite being registered in the name of her birth father. According to Alan MacFarlane we do not know whether the bearing of a bastard child carried a stigma for women in this country at the time of Hannah's first pregnancy. However MacFarlane goes on to speculate that it would seem likely that once a woman had given birth to an illegitimate child, her marriage chances would be significantly lower than for others in the same class and background.<sup>48</sup>

There may have been any number of reasons why Hannah did not marry the father of her baby. He may have shirked his responsibilities towards her or perhaps she may have rejected him or her parents may not have approved of the relationship. Whatever the reason, there was a heavy economic and social price to pay. Henry Winship, was a single miner working at Thornley Colliery and living as a boarder with his relatives in the village. His parents lived in Hetton, a village seven miles from Thornley, and they were publicans. Given what we know of the pub-chapel divide in many mining communities, this may be one of the reasons Hannah did not marry him. *"Early women temperance workers in the 1830's were advising female supporters, to reject marriage proposals from men who were not teetotal"*.<sup>49</sup> It is hard however, to see Hannah and her parents risking the social stigma of an illegitimate birth simply to avoid social contact within a family involved in the drinks trade. Whatever the circumstances, we might have expected an abortion to have taken place, for although abortion was against the law and punishable by transportation or imprisonment, illegal abortion practices were still carried out in working-class communities on a regular basis. If Hannah ever considered abortion however, she did

not follow it up. Whatever the circumstances of the conception, the pregnancy proceeded and in January 1841 Hannah gave birth to an illegitimate daughter, Ann. The baby, named after her grandmother, appears on the 1841 Thornley Census as five-months-old, the Census having been taken on 6 June.

Family reputation was a vital working-class asset, particularly amongst the more 'respectable' members of the local mining community.<sup>50</sup> There was little shame associated with a pregnancy before marriage, provided matrimony ensued fairly rapidly once her pregnancy became known. In normal circumstances, Hannah's imminent marriage to Henry Winship would have been expected. Despite the attempt of most communities to establish strict rules surrounding courtship so that brides should arrive at their marriage ceremonies as virgins, approximately one-third of first-born legitimate children in England and Wales were conceived out of wedlock<sup>51</sup>. Without a much deeper examination into colliery village life with particular emphasis on sexual activity and the structure of kinship and marriage, Macfarlane feels it unlikely that we will begin to understand the reasons for the changes in the incidence of bastardy and attitudes towards it. However he puts forward three hypotheses: that bastardy in England was a reaction to sexual frustration brought about by the comparatively late age at marriage; where male and female servants lodged together in outhouses high levels of illegitimacy occurred; that lack of social control by kin was to blame for a girl producing an illegitimate child.

It is hard however, to see any of these three hypotheses accounting for Hannah's pregnancy and illegitimate birth. Age at marriage in mining communities was relatively low. Detailed research carried out by Lucinda Fowler into marriage patterns of

miners between 1837 and 1876 in the parish of Easington (which included Thornley); found that in these expanding parts of the coalfield 76% of miners were sons of miners, 73% of whom married the daughters of miners.<sup>52</sup> Redmayne suggests that North East miners married between the ages of 20 and 23 years or even later whilst the average of first marriages for all English bachelors was between 25.2 and 26.6 years.<sup>53</sup> John Porter was a 33 year- old bachelor when he married Hannah. Neither Hannah or Henry were servants crowded together in communal outhouses and Hannah's parents do not give the impression of exercising a lax control of their daughter unless we take their economic and emotional support of mother and child as evidence of a lax tolerance. Sexual ignorance, of course may well have been a factor.

Hannah's father, John, being able-bodied, assumed responsibility for her and the baby. As a coal hewer at Thornley colliery, he was earning 30s per fortnight (plus house and coal) and was not only able but willing to support Hannah and the baby. His wife was a dressmaker and they had only one other daughter living at home – Anne aged 10 years old – so such support was possible in monetary terms, but Hannah's family were not the only ones to accept her illegitimate child. John Porter married her two years later and seems to have become a new 'father' to Ann, managing her transition from childhood into adulthood. We can assume that he was successful because when Ann married, and had a son, she named him John, almost certainly after John Porter. It is also worth noting that Ann named her second son Henry, possibly after her birth father.

From stories passed on to my grandmother by her mother, John Porter was described as "*a good man*". This meant in effect that

he could be relied upon to bring home his fortnightly pay intact without stopping off at the pub or any of the gambling schools that prospered in mining communities. It also meant that he did not abuse his wife or children in any way. With a husband like John, if the wife were a skilful financial manager, then the family stood a chance of avoiding the indignities of debt and hunger. It was recognised that the wife was the central point around which family and household rotated:

“The common custom of husbands and adult children ‘tipping up’ their wages indicates that it was she who organised consumption and negotiated credit, often desperately trying to tie spending to resources”,<sup>54</sup> and with no rent or fuel to pay for, most of Hannah and John’s combined income would be spent on food, candles, cleaning materials and probably a small insurance policy.

Hannah lost a child aged 4 in 1850, and a further three children aged 1, 10 and 14 in 1856, 1860 and 1866. All died of consumption. In February 1857 *The Times* announced that out of 1209 deaths recorded across the country during the previous week, 146 had been due the disease.<sup>55</sup> In Chadwick’s Report on *The Sanitary Condition of the Labouring Population of Great Britain*, it was found that in 1840 1 child in 17 died under the age of 5, 1 in 22 between the age of 5 and 10; 1 in 43 between 10 and 15 and 1 in 34 between 15 and 20.<sup>56</sup>

It is relatively easy to chart the depressing pattern of infant and child mortality during the nineteenth century, but it is a much harder task to gauge the emotional impact of such loss. Apart from the poignant tombstone recording the deaths of her first husband and four children, there is little evidence of how Hannah felt about

such terrible losses. However, *Verses on the Death of Sarah Porter* was composed, printed and distributed in 1866 and at least one copy has survived (57). It came from one of the leaders of the local Methodist Church in Ludworth where Hannah's daughter had been a regular 'Sunday Scholar', and was printed in handbill format to be distributed amongst the congregation. What immediately strikes one is the collective and individual sense of loss at the girl's death. Whilst infant and child mortality were high during this period, the death of a young girl of fourteen clearly shocked the local community. Here is a public and collective expression of grief and support for Hannah and her family. Conventional expressions of religious faith dominate the twenty verses, but among images of a 'heavenly world' there are recurring references to 'home' both in the real and heavenly sense. A young girl's life is publicly valued and her individual memory celebrated. It is a rare document that takes us past the statistics of infant and child mortality to the emotional experience of death at both the personal and community level. It also highlights the key role that the Methodist Church played in mining communities, not least in Hannah's life.

### *Conclusions*

This work has tried to combine the methods of family history with the wider themes and methods of academic historical debate. Whilst the work predominantly features the life of one working class woman during the 19<sup>th</sup> century her story is typical of many, in that few personal records have survived. Along with the majority of her class she was illiterate, so inevitably there are no personal letters or journals that can provide an in-depth insight into her thoughts, feelings and values; her position as a working-class woman means that she rarely, if ever, appeared in more public sources such as newspapers or government records. But what little information

is known of her life have been pieced together from the sources available to family historians – parish registers, census enumerators’ records, memorial inscriptions, family photographs, oral history memories and newspaper articles. Yet the story that emerges does have significance for wider historical debate.

An analysis of her experiences shows for example, that home life demanded tremendous resources and commitment from working women. In once sense, this is hardly a new observation, but the bringing together of local source material on general housing conditions with specific insights into Hannah’s different houses and homes, highlights the often heroic efforts by working women to create attractive, healthy and happy homes in appalling social conditions. It also highlights how these conditions changed constantly throughout a single life, and how, through glimpses of specific interiors, we can sometimes capture the individuality of working women. It is simply not enough to say that women were ‘confined to the home’. More and more work has been undertaken over the last two decades on the crucial role that women played as household managers, and this study has shown that a woman like Hannah used her houses and homes at many different levels – as places of shelter, feeding and sometimes catering, places of romantic and familial love, as a shop, a lodging house and also as a signifier of class status.

Women’s work is often seen as marginal in mining communities, particularly after the 1840’s when legislation made their employment underground illegal. This study has shown however, that a woman like Hannah undertook a complex range of occupations during her lifetime. We know from this analysis that Hannah earned money as a dressmaker, took in lodgers, worked in a range of agricultural jobs, catered the local social gatherings and ran a hardware shop in her

front room. She may have engaged in other economic activities that have escaped the historical record altogether. By the same token, we can see women in nineteenth-century mining communities taking a more active role in public life than was once thought to be the case. The analysis of Chartist, trade union and religious movements all show women like Hannah taking an active role in their wider community life.

Perhaps most revealing of all is the exploration of Hannah's personal relationships. Her dramatic transformation from what is often described as a 'rough' to 'respectable' lifestyle challenges many of our static interpretative models. There is no doubt that mining communities were often described in 'rough' and 'respectable' terms, with social life polarising between pub and chapel, but the reconstruction of one woman's life shows that individuals did not sit neatly within these broad conceptual categories. Hannah was illiterate, engaged in at least two pre-marital sexual relationships and had at least one illegitimate child. Her second marriage appears to have been unsuccessful and she lived apart from her husband. By any reckoning these facts are symptomatic of a 'rough' lifestyle. Yet she was also a stalwart of the local Methodist Church, a loving wife and mother, a fiercely independent woman who worked tirelessly all her life to provide for her family, as well as someone who worked to improve the educational and social resources of her community. Her decision making often went against the prevailing social values and expectations and her behaviour over time was not consistent with the expectations of her class or conformity within it or indeed with many of the dominant interpretations of historians.

During John Porter's five-year absence Hannah gave birth to their youngest daughter Susannah in 1857, arranged eldest

daughter Ann's wedding in 1859 and buried daughter Mary Ann in 1862 as well as arranging a move for her family into alternative accommodation in the village of Shadforth. It is not clear how much family support Hannah had at this time. Eldest daughter Ann continued to live in the area after marriage and son Ralph, born in 1843 was old enough to work at the local pit. Hannah's parents were dead but the community spirit in the colliery villages was very strong and if a woman was in need then the community would support her. Nonetheless, we again see a working-class woman acting in an independent fashion without any obvious support from male relatives.

Through marriage, widowhood, re-marriage, keeping lodgers and without an official education Hannah survived most of her life without working in the formal labour market. She was involved in the informal economy which existed throughout the colliery villages. Improving her educational opportunities was impossible as there was no time to devote to it; no opportunity to attend 'self help' tuition and the basic skill of reading was always missing. Yet despite her lack of education, Hannah led a surprisingly independent life compared to many of her counterparts.

The use of family history methods to reconstruct the lives of ordinary working people in the past does open out new historical possibilities. It allows us to see the astonishing complexity and richness of individual lives, and through this greater attention to personal detail, to rethink some of our broad historical assumptions of working men and women in the past.

*(This article is taken from a dissertation produced for an MA in History submitted to Teesside University during 2005)*

Notes

1. Lawson, J, *Peter Lee*, (London, Hodder and Stoughton 1936 p99)
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**Mapping the Human Landscape: Knowledge, Skills and  
Stories in Northumberland Fishing Communities**  
*Katrina Porteous*

*I am a poet and historian living in the Northumberland fishing village of Beadnell. Between 1989 and 1996 I spent thousands of hours recording the knowledge of the generation of fishermen then in their 70s and 80s, in Beadnell and the other coastal villages from Holy Island to Amble. These villages were changing rapidly. From around 60 fishermen at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Beadnell had only about 12 in 1969 and eight in 1989. Now, in 2005, only two men from the village make their living from the sea. As the industry declines, the old knowledge and skills are in danger of vanishing altogether. I aim to show in this article that the fishermen's skills and stories are of enormous importance: because they contribute to a sense of place, identity and belonging; and because they embody beliefs and values which serve to emphasise that human culture is inseparable from the natural environment.*

Much of my research centred on the knowledge of a small group of individuals, who quickly became close friends. They included Charlie Douglas and his sister-in-law May in Beadnell, Bill Smailes in Craster, and Newbiggin-born Redford Armstrong of Amble. Each of these individuals was a key memory-holder within

his or her community, and it was only through their friendship, and their understanding of the urgent, reciprocal relationship of giving and receiving information that would not otherwise be passed on, that I was accepted into a community that did not readily welcome outsiders.

I did not originally intend to gather specific information about the environment. It was the fishermen's culture that interested me. But it immediately became apparent that the human history could not be separated from the natural, for the simple reason that the fishermen's livelihood, and often their very lives, depended upon sensitivity to their environment. The generation of fishermen with whom I worked relied upon their own observations, and upon knowledge and skills which were handed down. Bigger boats, more powerful engines, and technological advances such as radar, echo-sounders and Decca and satellite navigation, meant that some of this environmental sensitivity had already been lost to the younger generation of fishermen.

### *Knowledge and Skills*

I asked coble fisherman Charlie Douglas of Beadnell what he thought made a good fisherman. 'Brains', he replied. By this he meant two things: observation, and memory. His father's generation had grown up relying on two staple kinds of fishing, both of which had disappeared in Charlie's lifetime: herring drift-netting and long-lining for white fish. Herring fishing depended largely upon skills of observation. The signs the men looked for when trying to identify a rising shoal at nightfall, before the invention of the echo-sounder, included diving gannets, blowing whales, and the memorable sight of 'fire' or phosphorescence on the water. Long-lining similarly involved skills of observation, but also, to a much

greater degree, those of memory – of being able to remember and visualise the ground inch by inch in order not only to catch fish but to avoid snagging the 1,200 hooks on obstacles such as rocks or shipwrecks.

Every small boat fisherman carries in his head a unique map of his own fishing ground, which he knows intimately. He learns the best places for lobsters, crabs or whatever he catches, and he guards this information jealously. This knowledge was especially detailed among men who had worked the long-lines, who had, over time, almost literally come into contact with the sea-bed fathom by fathom.

How could a fisherman connect the map in his head with what lies beneath the surface of the sea? He would navigate by watch and compass, and take bearings from landmarks, lining up distinctive features on the land, each with its own local name – places such as Hebron Hill, Heiferlaw and Staggart (the Kyloe hills), buildings such as the castles of Bamburgh or Dunstanburgh, farmhouses, churches, silos and groups of trees. Thus a quick tour around Beadnell Bay would give you such places as Faggot's Rock at 'Hebron on the high sandhill and the Farne (Inner Farne) on Beadnell Point end.' Roughly north-east of Faggot's Rock is a group of rocks known as 'the Barnyards'. These lie at 'Hebron on the two silos (Tuggal Hall) and the Point ends on' (Seahouses and Beadnell Points lined up). 'Hebron on Robin Wood's Rock and the Church on the in-end of the pier' gives you a rock called 'the Bus of the Burn'. 'The Herd's House (Shepherd's Cottage) plantation on Old Weir's hut' marks hard ground, and 'the Church about the huts' gives you the north end of a piece of hard ground known as 'the Shad'.

Redford Armstrong of Amble told me a story from when echo-sounders were first introduced. A man asked him: 'Do ye have a meter in your boat?' 'No,' he replied. 'How come I'm on soft ground here and ye're right aside on us, and ye're on rock, pulling up any amount of lobsters?' 'Whae,' says Redford, 'Ye have Billy fast to the castle wall and I have Billy open the castle wall.' The old men's knowledge could be just as reliable as modern technology.

But there was more to this than geography. The men's knowledge encompassed memories of who caught what, where, when; what the weather was like, which way the wind was blowing, the condition of the tide, and other variable circumstances. While echo-sounders and navigational aids might tell you about the present, knowing the history gives you another dimension. This was a knowledge which could not be reproduced by technology. It was not just a geographical map but a map of stories.

Several of the fishermen were willing, when I asked them, to commit at least some of this knowledge to paper in the form of actual maps. The most remarkable of these, crammed with extraordinary detail, were drawn for me by Craster fisherman Bill Smailes. They record names, places, marks, kinds of ground, hazards such as shipwrecks, usual and unusual catches, tides, directions for shooting pots and nets, and stories. Here are some examples:

At a place called 'The Castle Hole' two miles off Craster, Bill writes: 'Father fished for turbot a lot on this ground and occasionally got a big lobster in his bratt nets there. It was a favourite place for herring spawning.' Four miles off he marks a place with the note: 'We shot 5,000 mussel-baited hooks straight out...and got 133 stones of haddocks the day Jimmy Stephenson's Mam and Dad

were married.’ At nearby Sunderland Point Hole, also four miles off, he writes: ‘Nothing but crawling buckies here.’ On the shore beneath Dunstanburgh Castle, at a place called ‘Cusha’, he remarks: ‘Plenty big winkles under the big stones. I used to pick them as a boy – 9d a stone.’ South along the shore at the ‘Channelly Hole’ he marks a shipwreck, ‘Orda, 1898,’ and observes that granite ballast from the wreck still lies there. A mile out to sea he marks another wreck: ‘This boat was carrying linseed oil. Hit rocks off Newton and was being towed when she sank here on a Sunday morning in the 1950s...The fulmars fed on that oil for years. You always knew where you were in the fog by the oil stream.’

The deep empirical and historical knowledge exemplified by Bill’s maps, and carried to some extent in the heads of all small-boat fishermen, derived in part from direct experience, and in part from the fact that families tended to remain in the same village, or at least within the same area, for generations, and to pass their knowledge down. For this reason, Charlie Douglas could tell me that, in his great-grandfather’s generation (mid-19<sup>th</sup> century), grey seals, now considered by fishermen to be a great nuisance because of their numbers, were relatively uncommon. ‘Herring whales’, on the other hand – mostly pilot and minke whales, which were now a rare sight – had then been a reliable method of locating herring shoals. Similarly, in Charlie’s grandfather’s generation (later 19<sup>th</sup> century), lobsters, a staple catch for most of Charlie’s life, had been in very short supply.

Changes to what was considered normal in the old men’s youth were often remarked upon: before World War II it was usual to catch large quantities of ‘great muckle haddocks’ on the Middle Bank at New Year. Now there were none. Similarly, birds like the

corncrake and cuckoo had disappeared from the fields adjoining the shore, and it was often said that there were fewer sea-anemones in the rock-pools than there had been in the men's youth. I heard anxious comments in Craster that the amount of seaweed coming ashore at the harbour had diminished from a depth of about five foot to almost nothing in a single lifetime. Though it made boat launching easier, this was thought to denote 'something wrong with the sea'. The Beadnell men, too, watched the weed and looked for seasonal variations. They spoke of the extra quantities of weed washed ashore in spring and early summer as 'the May Tops', and remembered local farmers gathering it for the fields. They also remembered certain visitors regularly gathering a green, silky weed, although they could not recall its purpose.

Stories of unusual finds, such as albino lobsters, light blue lobsters and unusual species of birds and fish – including a sunfish off Craster in the 1950s – were remembered and handed down. Charlie Douglas recalled that his father had found a 'ribbon fish' ('red, with a tassel on his heed') in Beadnell Haven. Charlie himself remembered catching a shark (probably a basking shark) in a drift net off Dunstanburgh Castle, and knew of another – specifically identified as a basking shark – which had been caught and killed in the salmon 'heuk nets' (1) on Beadnell beach. Memories of record-sized fish and unusually large catches were particularly cherished. It was said that (probably towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) 'Old Weir' Fawcus had caught a 62 pound salmon in Beadnell Bay; and that, probably early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, 'Baxter' had caught a 22 stone skate on the great-lines. Other unusual events were noted. Charlie remembered his grandfather's story of the 'sea-cat breeze', in which large numbers of catfish were washed ashore at Beadnell in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

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north east history

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Men and women who had worked with long-lines had particular memories. Women's work baiting the long-lines was vital. May Douglas could tell you the best places to gather mussels and limpets locally, and the merits of different kinds of shellfish. Limpets from the North Rock at Beadnell, for example, were better than others, because they could be picked more easily. Men who had fished the lines spoke nostalgically of catching 'little Christmas trees' four or five inches high on certain areas of 'easy ground'; when these were brought indoors their phosphorescence glowed in the dark. They also remembered catching brilliant red 'cocks' combs' at a particular place five or six miles out from Dunstanburgh Castle Point. They had not seen these creatures since the long-line fishing ended, and I have been unable to identify them.

For men who had fished under sail or from small, open cobbles with low-powered engines, knowledge of particular weather conditions and the ability to read weather 'signs' could be crucial. These 'signs' were many, and some were more grounded in science than others. Sometimes predictable astronomical occurrences could be interpreted as 'signs'. A half moon 'lying on her back', for example, was thought to be a threat of wind and stormy weather. Atmospheric conditions might be more reliable indicators. A ring or 'bruff' around the moon was considered to be a sign of rain. A 'weathergaa', or isolated spot of rainbow, indicated wind from its direction. Movements of birds were also significant. 'Little roaches' (auks) on the sea foretold a hard winter, which in turn suggested that crabs would be caught close in.

Whether shooting long-lines, drift-netting for herring or salmon, hauling pots, or simply navigating through the narrow channels between the Farne Islands, knowledge of the idiosyncrasies of local

tides was essential. These varied with the lie of the land, and even with the strength and direction of the wind. Each fisherman knew what to expect in his own area. Although on the east coast the ebb tide basically runs north and the flood tide south, at spring tide and when the tides were increasing or 'puttin' up', it was said that fish worked south-west in; and that at neep or 'dead' tides and when the tides were decreasing or 'takin' off', they worked north-east out. It was important to know this when line fishing or drift-netting. The merits of fixed-net salmon berths also varied according to the tides: at Beadnell, 'Featherblaa' was considered best in a dead tide; 'the Cundy' 'alright in a spring tide;' and 'Kill Corner' best in big tides. When hauling pots in certain places, such as 'Megstone (on) the Haven' and 'Longstone (on) the Crumstone', the north end of your fleet could be in ebb tide while the south end was in flood. After high water ashore you would find no tide there at all. But farther south, at 'Heiferlaw (on) the Castle', you would find a flood tide two hours after high water ashore. This was known as a 'true tide' – a north and south- running tide, unaffected by islands, rocks or the lie of the land.

Besides this wealth of environmental knowledge, fishermen possessed a great armoury of manual skills, such as making cane eyes for pots, fastening particular knots, or spinning 'graites' for snoods; all these were inevitably disappearing with the kinds of fishing that required them. Almost vanished from living memory within the last quarter century are the age-old skills involved in rigging and sailing a coble. The skills involved in building these boats are vanishing just as quickly. Skills required for making and maintaining gear have followed changing fishing practices, such as the developments in technology from 'trunks' to 'creeves', the innovation of the 'parlour' or 'trap' creeve for lobsters in the 1950s,

and the recent innovation of pots with soft, wide entrances. Practical skills have changed especially with the increasing use of man-made materials, which mean that it is no longer necessary to bark and tar ropes, or to cut and bend ash sticks for pots. This also means that, when lost gear washes up on the shore, plastic pot-bows and nylon nets cause much more intrusive and long-lasting litter.

Practical skills varied from village to village, sometimes according to personal preference, but also reflecting particular conditions of place. During the long-line fishing, different ways of fastening the hook to the snood and the snood to the line depended on local conditions. In Seahouses, hooks were fastened much less freely than in Amble, due to the stronger tides around the Farne Islands. The Amble men thought the Seahouses men's hooks 'numb'. Holy Island men preferred horsehair to cotton for their snoods, for greater strength in stronger tides. Also adapting to local conditions when fishing for salmon on the beach, Boulmer and Amble men work a 'T-net' with a flood-tide and ebb-tide trap; whereas Beadnell men, fishing some distance from a river mouth, in a bay with a prevalent ebb tide, work a distinctly different 'heuk net', with only an ebb-tide trap.

The particularity of all these skills represents the practical application of the fishermen's intimate knowledge of local conditions. It is in the detail and texture of this local knowledge that its value lies.

### *Stories*

It is obvious from what I have said about Bill Smailes's maps that the fishermen's knowledge of the sea-bed is inseparable from the stories which they told. There is no room here to explore these

stories in depth, but it is worth noting that many of them are in themselves scientifically or historically interesting. Charlie Douglas, for example, maintained that, in his grandfather's day, fishermen from Beadnell sailed their cobbles up the east coast and through the Caledonian canal to the Clyde to join the herring fleet, sleeping under their sails as they travelled. Although oral testimony can be notoriously fallible, it is perhaps less so when gathered from people who depended upon memory for their livelihood. Confirmation from written records such as newspaper reports and lifeboat logbooks show a high degree of reliability in the fishermen's stories. It would be interesting to look for independent corroboration of Charlie's recollection that crabs tagged at Beadnell were once recovered at Crail in Scotland. Charlie's grandfather had himself collaborated with scientists, and his relatives had worked with the Dove Marine Laboratory from its inception in the early years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Stories suggested themselves through connections: by time of year (although actual dates were hazy), by particular characters, and most of all, by place. A large number of the men's stories were directly connected to features in the landscape, beneath the sea or beside it. Charlie's brother Tom Douglas showed me troughs cut in the rocks at Beadnell Haven, physical reminders of how bratt (turbot) were stored in the days before railways, when they were transported live to market in sloops with internal wells. The fish were prevented from escaping from these troughs or 'bratt holes' at high water by lids. Charlie and Tom connected another story to these holes. A piece of easy ground seven or eight miles east of Beadnell used to be called 'the Bratting Ground' because turbot were caught there. The marks for it were 'Hebron on Beadnell Trees and Staggart on the Farne House Tower'. This name has now

almost slipped beyond memory; today the place is known as ‘the Off Bank’. Yet to men like Charlie and Tom, the Bratting Ground was of great significance. Their father, uncle and grandfather almost lost their lives there when they were caught in a sudden blizzard while line-fishing from their 21ft coble, the Jane Douglas, in February 1895.

Stories matter: even the seemingly inconsequential stories – those about characters who were long-dead, but who were spoken of as if they were still alive. An example might be the story of old Hannah from Beadnell who could not read and write, but who, in her youth, had ‘travelled the fishings’, and who asked during World War I, ‘Is Yarmouth on wor side?’ Another is that of the scavenger who combed the shore for dead bodies. He was given his come-uppance by a fisherman who pretended to be dead and then, as the scavenger peered into his mouth for gold teeth, bit him. ‘Deed man bite!’ Charlie would laugh, telling the story for the hundredth time. Such shared stories are important because they helped bind together the social fabric of the village. They also give an insight into the way that people lived and thought.

Even misleading information can be interesting. Superstitions and old wives’ tales, though not always founded in fact, can give valuable insights into the way people think. Why did some Beadnell fishermen maintain that a ‘frone’ (starfish) always carried a stone to drop into the mouth of a clam? What gave the fishermen of Holy Island their belief that barnacle geese bring plague? Why did fishermen in Beadnell – and elsewhere, all across Europe – believe that someone born with a ‘caul’ or membrane over his face would not drown? Why is it unlucky to say the word ‘rat’ in Beadnell (say ‘caaldie’ or ‘lang-tail’), ‘rabbit’ in Craster (say ‘conie’), and – worst

and most widely-hated, from Northumberland, across Europe and beyond – the word ‘p-i-g’ (‘guffie’, ‘grunt’, ‘article’)? How old are these stories? They are a window back into the distant past.

*Dialect and Communication*

Joanna Stockill of the Dove Marine Laboratory has remarked that fishermen’s expertise has not been sufficiently valued by policy-makers (2). This may be partly because it is difficult to separate hard information from stories; but it is more to do with the fact that fishermen’s knowledge is extremely local – a fact which is also, of course, its strength. The tendency to undervalue it is also largely due to a lack of communication between fishermen on the one hand and scientists and policy-makers on the other. This has led in turn to severe repercussions: to regulations which, not always effective or practical, have been perceived by fishermen as interference. Day after day, I saw the anger and frustration of men in Seahouses and Amble who, obliged to throw overboard the bigger part of their catch of perfectly good cod and whiting because it was under-size or over quota, felt that they simply were not heard. They wanted the policy-makers to know: for them, the regulations were not working. The fish they threw back were dead. Such poor communication has increased suspicion of the scientific community among fishermen. Charlie would shake his head at the so-called ‘experts’, who would tell him what he could and could not do, but who were unable to tell a hen crab from a cock crab in the hand.

One of the great problems of tapping into fishermen’s expertise is that of language. Local dialect can be so impenetrable that it causes, at least, difficulties in communication, and at worst an assumption of ignorance on either side. Would you know, for example, if you encountered a ‘paddle-hush’? (a lumpsucker).

Could you forget a confrontation with a ‘fether-lasher’ (gurnard) or a ‘swatter’ (jellyfish)?

Extreme local variations of dialect add to the confusion. A porpoise may be a ‘skeldy’ or a ‘plasher’, a whale a ‘finner’ or a ‘piker’, usage and precise definitions varying according to place. Spider crabs, once found in abundance on Sandlem Bus off Beadnell in cold weather, are known to Beadnell men as ‘pipers’, but to Seahouses men as ‘tyeds’. Squat lobsters are ‘goudies’ or ‘tailiers’ on Holy Island, ‘sixpenny men’ at Seahouses, ‘nancies’ at Beadnell and ‘wiggies’ at Blyth. Coal fish may be ‘baggies’, ‘haa’f waxties’, ‘podlers’ or ‘blackjack’, depending on their size. Distinctions between species are not always clear: while a ‘whulk’ is a winkle rather than a whelk, and a whelk is a ‘buckie’, a hermit crab occupying a whelk shell is distinguished simply as a ‘craalin’ buckie’ rather than a ‘slavery buckie’.

The expressive dimension of dialect is rich and invaluable: who could fail to distinguish the dark, cumbersome flight of the ‘gormer’ (cormorant) from the deft, quick ‘pickie’ (tern)? But what is a ‘pickie’ at Beadnell is a ‘teeram’ at Seahouses, and a ‘tarree’ at Craster. It is all very confusing. Within a few miles, a crab pot may be a ‘creel’ (Holy Island), a ‘creeve’ (Seahouses and Beadnell) or a ‘net’ (Craster). When Newbiggin fisherman Redford Armstrong first visited Holy Island before World War II, he maintained that he could hardly understand a word.

The north Northumberland coastal dialect may be impenetrable to an outsider, but what it does reveal is something very interesting about its speakers’ relation to their environment. The expressiveness of the fishermen’s dialect is more than ornament or curiosity. The

ability of the words to convey meaning through sound and rhythm – the connection already alluded to between the lightness of the word ‘pickie’ and the deftness of the bird which it describes; or that between the ferocity of the adjective ‘gurrelly’ and the roughness of the sea to which it refers – is not accidental. There are hundreds of similar instances in the fishermen’s speech. What they reveal, I would suggest, is a deep and ancient connection between language and environment. Words do not merely refer to things: they evoke them. Perhaps the taboo words, ‘rat’ and ‘p-i-g’ and their acceptable dialect alternatives, reflect the remnants of a not-quite-lost belief in the power of language, not only to evoke the environment, but to influence it.

At the same time, fishermen’s speech abounds in metaphors which draw on the natural environment to express abstract thoughts and feelings. Rather than describe someone as ‘clever’



Launching a coble the traditional way, using greased sticks and plenty of effort.

The Golden Gate, BK 221, Beadnell, 1992.

or 'sharp', Charlie would say: 'There's no much wetter gans ower his heed'. Rather than say outright that a person was sly, he would say: 'He's like the fox that gans about among the sheep'. Like the expressive sound of the fishermen's dialect, this constant use of picture-language drawing on the natural world both indicates and affirms the closeness of their relationship to their environment.

*Facts and Values*

It might be possible to pass on some of the factual content of the fishermen's knowledge, or indeed any factual subject; but I would also argue that, as fishing declines, without its application in daily life, the fishermen's factual and practical knowledge is in danger of becoming a dead language, of interest only to scientists or historians. What matters even more is to pass on their values.

The small boat fishermen of the generation with whom I worked were by nature conservationists. This is not a romantic assertion. It is true that they wanted to make money; and that, lacking the technological advantages of the generations which followed, they were simply unable to fish as intensively; but they were also all aware to a remarkable degree of what was going wrong. Exposed as they are in small, open boats, fishermen's lives depend upon their respect for the sea, and upon working with nature, not against it. As Charlie Douglas always said, 'the sea's the boss'. This gives them a particular perspective, which was augmented in Charlie's generation by a sense of time and place that extended beyond the individual. These men had relied for most of their lives upon traditions which were handed down, and they wanted to hand them on in turn. They wanted the fish to be there for their sons and grandsons. This meant that they had to be conservationists in the most practical sense.

One clear example of this is the story, preserved by Beadnell fishermen, of their grandfathers' battle with fishermen from a neighbouring village over 'berried hen' (gravid) lobsters. When lobsters became scarce in the 19th century, the Beadnell men agreed amongst themselves to a voluntary restriction on landing berried hens. The neighbouring fishermen refused to comply, so the Beadnell men cut the dans off their pots. Continuing tensions contributed to the eventual formation of the Northumberland Sea Fisheries Committee, and to proper regulation of the industry.

What that story exemplifies is that the Beadnell fishermen thought of themselves within a wider environmental and historical context. Taken as a whole, all the skills and stories touched upon in this paper support this. These shared memories built up, like landmarks, into a network which gave each community a clear sense of its own identity. This in itself was important: a strong defence against the sameness which now, increasingly, engulfs us. But it mattered in another way, too. The shared memories, and the language in which they were expressed, served as a map of the community's values – of the things that mattered to people.

What the fishermen's language and stories crucially embodied was their understanding of where they stood in relation to one another, to the past and future of their community, and to their environment. From them I learnt that the great skill of a fisherman, like that of a poet, and possibly also of a scientist, is to learn to be still – to look, and to listen – and to remember. More important even than the great library of knowledge in their heads were the skills of observation and memory which garnered that knowledge in the first place. It is these skills that I believe we need to revive and disseminate – to empower children and adults alike to discover

the world at their feet, and to value and possess it through their own stories. Only then can the fishermen's inestimable knowledge remain a living tradition.

*This article is a shortened and slightly altered version of a paper given at ENSUS 2005 (third international conference), organised by the School of Marine Science and Technology, University of Newcastle upon Tyne. The original article was published in the extracted papers of ENSUS 2005.*

### *Notes*

1. 'Heuk nets' are a local variation of fixed nets used to fish for salmon and sea trout close to the shore. They resemble one half of the classic Northumberland 'T-net' rather than the older 'J-net' with which they somewhat confusingly share their name. Osler, Adrian (2004), 'The Salmon's Kingdom: net fisheries of Northumbria', *Maritime Life and Traditions*, Winter 2004, Number 25, p.35.
2. Stockill, Joanna, 'The Value of Fishers' Knowledge as a Rapid Appraisal Technique to Assess the Abundance and Distribution of Cetaceans in the North Sea', *ENSUS 2005, Extracted Papers*, University of Newcastle upon Tyne 2005, pp. 47-60.

### *Glossary*

*Bratt* – turbot

*Covers* – net covers for crab and lobster pots

*Creeves* – crab and lobster pots

*Crawling (or craalin') buckies* – hermit crabs

*Dan* – buoy used to mark pots

*Easy ground* – soft sea-floor; mud, sand and pebbles

*north east history*

*Fleet* – a string of pots

*Graithes* – lengths of spun horsehair used on Holy Island as part of snoods for long-lines

*Herring whales* – probably mostly pilot and minke whales

*Heuk nets* – fixed trap-nets used to fish for salmon and sea trout on Beadnell beach

*Lippers* – waves which break on the surface

*Long-lines* – lines carrying 1,200 hooks, baited with mussels and limpets and traditionally shot in winter time for white fish. Long-line fishing ended in north Northumberland soon after World War II.

*Salmon berths* – places where fixed trap-nets could be anchored

*Snoods* – lengths of twine used to fasten hooks onto long-lines

*Travel the fishings* – to follow herring shoals down the east coast as fisher lassies did from Shetland to Yarmouth

*Traveller* – iron ring used to attach sail to mast

**Shoot the Damn Dogs:  
The 1734 Dispute at Newbottle Colliery, County Durham**  
*Dave Ridley*

*Until the advent of public education in the 1800s, the illiteracy of unschooled labourers like the Tyne and Wear pitmen meant they could never commit their concerns to writing. Despite a vibrant spoken tradition the stories of their lives and labour generally died with them, with the consequence that only chance insights into their experience tend to survive. Yet a written account of one episode has long been overlooked: a 'Report on the Pitmen's Strike at Newbottle, in 1734' was published in 1858 by the Newcastle Society of Antiquaries, featuring detailed first-hand testimony by the pitmen in their own words. (1) Despite this long availability it remains little noticed, but is cited here at length to describe the 1734 dispute in the authentic voice of the Newbottle pitmen themselves.*

Newbottle Colliery comprised at least three pits by 1727, operated by the Earl of Scarborough's Lumley estates. Located a mile north of Houghton-le-Spring, seasale coal was taken by horse-drawn wagon way to staithe on the River Wear for bulk shipment to the lucrative London market. But the practical extent of wagon ways limited wider expansion, and the coalfield faced a crisis as

shallow seams neared exhaustion. The Newcomen pumping engine however solved the problem of deep mine drainage, enabling the coalfield to develop by sinking existing shafts to deeper coal seams. But it seems this was an expense too far for Lord Lumley, and when the lease from the Prebend of Durham expired in 1734 the Newbottle leasehold changed hands. Wear coal fitter (shipping agent) John Nesham and partner John Hilton of Hylton Hall assumed ownership, paying almost £6,000 for equipment, coal stocks, keelboats, a pumping engine, and shares in 33 collier brigs in the sea-borne trade to London. (2)

From the 1720s, the ‘Grand Allies’ of coal owners shipping from the River Tyne colluded with their Wear counterparts in restricting output with the aim of raising coal prices on the London market. Labour was their biggest operating cost however, and after 1700 the annual contract or ‘pitmen’s bond’ of employment was progressively introduced as a managerial tool to control wages. But efforts to cut wage costs provoked a reaction at Newbottle in February 1734 when the pitmen complained that their bond stipulated ‘they were to work only with a fourteen peck corf, but upon measuring some of the corves they were found considerably bigger’. (3) The corf (a hazel basket) carried coal from the working face to the mine surface. Upon purchasing the colliery, Hilton and Nesham had evidently acted to raise profitability by enlarging the corves without increasing wages.

John Nesham was the more active of the Newbottle partners but was away in London on business, and it was his colliery viewer (manager) Matthew Hobson who rejected the pitmen’s complaint on 6th February 1734. In response the pitmen *‘began to mutiny and desist from working, and assembled in great bodies after a very disorderly*

manner, and continued so for several days, threatening to pull down the engine and drown the colliery'. Engineman John Potter said that when he went to the engine on 7<sup>th</sup> February, he

‘...found it stopped by the pitmen, who, in number about 100, threatned to murder him and pull down the engine if he set her to work again. Two or three days afterwards went again to set her to work, but was opposed by about 100 pitmen, who forced him to get speedily away, and told him that when... [Nesham] came from London they would tear him limb from limb..’

Potter was able to restart the engine a few days later, otherwise *‘the colliery must have been drowned’*. But when Hobson persuaded five men to resume work *‘at Southeron’s pitt’* on 14<sup>th</sup> February, the striking men had other ideas:

‘...One hundred persons or thereabouts went to the pitt, set the gin a main, threw the pitt ropes down the pitt, and broke the gin, and would not suffer the pitmen in the pitt to be drawn out for several hours after the usual time of leaving work, and swore that if they had them above ground they would beat them to death, for working there without their leave... [Hobson] at length thinking he had appeased their anger, desired he might draw them above ground, which he caused to be done, when several of the riotous persons fell upon the workmen and beat them violently. They run away, and thereby escaped further damage. They hindered other workmen from sinking in another pitt, and threatned to pull up the waggon way, destroy the fire engine, drown the colliery, and demolish... [Nesham’s] dwelling house at Houghton...’

Upon Nesham's return from London on 23<sup>rd</sup> February, the pitmen demanded a guinea each 'for lying idle' which Hobson said '*would have amounted to near £300*', placing the workforce at around 280 men. Unless paid, the pitmen threatened to '*set fire to the coal heaps, and if he [Nesham] came to the works, they would kill him*'. But such threats could scarcely have been credible as Hobson duly arranged for the pitmen to meet Nesham at Lumley Castle on 26<sup>th</sup> February '*to see if they could agree*'. On the day of the meeting however,

'...about 100 pitmen told... [Hobson] they would not meet there, for fear... [Nesham] might get them taken into custody... [Hobson] proposed Lumley Park gate, but they swore "D\_\_\_ them, if they would meet him at any place but at the pitts"...'.

Such a reaction probably sprang from an incident three years earlier in 1731, when 200 Tyne pitmen went to meet coalowners the Liddells at Ravensworth Castle, only to be threatened with '*the Kings Proclamation against Rioters*'. The Riot Act had been introduced in 1715 to disperse groups of twelve or more persons by threatening lethal force or arrest, and the Ravensworth incident was followed within days by a reading of the Act at Urpeth. (4) Lord Lumley was no longer the Newbottle owner, but it seems that the parallels with the incident at Ravensworth Castle raised the pitmen's suspicions, and the meeting was instead rescheduled for the next day at the viewer's house at Newbottle.

Ahead of the rearranged meeting on 27<sup>th</sup> February, Nesham sent two keelmen to the Newbottle engine house with 'four guns to defend the engine... in a ballast waggon and not on horseback, lest the pitmen should see them and take them'. On the day, Nesham and his servant James Wilson made their way on horseback to

Newbottle. Both carried firearms and were accompanied by Richard Bryan and Thomas Starn, two gentlemen friends they had met on the road. Houghton parish constable Avery Robinson and Newbottle magistrate Ralph Bates were also enlisted en route. At viewer Matthew Hobson's house they joined a small party of petty officials, including Edmund Bourn and Joseph Bolton, who were probably overmen; engineman John Potter; staitnman Samuel Anderson; the keelmen Thomas Bartram and John Maddison; others named Dean, Roper, and Brown; and the local serjeant and drummer, both armed with pistols. (5)

*'At a gate leading to Southeron's pitt'* Nesham's party claimed to encounter *'hundreds of the pitmen and their wives with great clubbs'*. Nesham's account was that there were 'near 300 persons with great clubbs':

'...As soon as they saw him, a great number of them threw of[f] their cloths and violently assaulted him and the persons with him without provocation... [Nesham] spoke in a mild manner, intreating them to declare the reason of their being so disorderly, promising that if any of them had been injured he would do all in his power to redress them; not withstanding which they grew more outrageous, and assaulted and almost killed several of those who came with him, and endeavoured to knock [Nesham] off his horse... '

Nesham's story was that surrounded by pitmen, he 'retreated upon a pitheap'. His viewer Hobson *'endeavoured to keep them from going up the same, till they overpowered him by numbers and got upon the heap, and beat... [Nesham] and his horse off the heap'*. As the pitmen 'barbarously beat others almost to death', Hobson told the constable Robinson *'to read the proclamation for dispersing rioters'*. Robinson however said

*'be durst not do it... if he did they would kill him and pull down his house'.*  
Magistrate Ralph Bates was also intimidated: after Nesham had

‘...got clear of the pitmen, he rode towards the engine, where he met the said Mr. Bates, whom he desired to read the proclamation, but they would not suffer him, and swore if they did not get hold of him then, they would catch him at Newbottle, if he read it... ‘

It thus appears that the Riot Act was not read by the magistrate as required by law, or indeed by any of Nesham’s men. Among others of Nesham’s party, his friends Bryan and Starn *‘had no weapons, nor intermeddled in the affray, but sate on horseback at a distance as spectators’*. Dean however was seen *‘coming from among the pitmen sore beaten, and with several wounds in his head, and all blood’*, while overman Joseph Bolton was knocked down by the pitmen

‘...with their clubbs and staves... and afterwards several of the pitmen took him by the head and heels and carried him to a pitt’s mouth, and swore they would throw him down, but some of the women perswaded them from it. They then began again to beat him. Got upon his feet, and in a weak condition made toward Hobson’s house. The pitmen beat him all the way thither. A little time after a great number of them came to the house, and bid the people turn... [him] out or they would pull down the house, and did break the windows and went away, but about an hour afterwards returned in a greater body, and swore they would murder him, and that if the people in the house did not turn him out some of them should dye in his room. Was forced to come down stairs where he had been hid to avoid their fury, and was struck at through the windows which they had broke. Begging in the most submissive manner, they did at last agree to spare his life...’

Further damage to Hobson's house was averted *'by giving them ale'*. At the engine house, upon seeing the pitmen approaching *'in a great body and furious manner'*, the overman Bourn and keelmen Maddison and Bartram *'made off with all speed'*. The pitmen subsequently *'forced'* Hobson *'to go to Newbottle Town to see... [Nesham] and tell him again that if he did not send them a guinea, &c'*. They were heard to *'curse and swear that [Nesham] might thank God he had a good horse to carry him off, otherwise he should not have escaped with his life, for that they would have beat him to death.'*

Of greatest significance however were the pistol shots fired by Nesham's party, one of which hit pitman John Grey of Lumley who died from a wound in his right thigh four days later on 1<sup>st</sup> March. For his part Nesham insisted that *'no firearms were discharged till they had been very severely beaten, and their lives were in danger'*, complaining that Grey was *'very active amongst the pitmen'*. He had *'struck several times'* at Nesham's company *'who endeavoured to defend themselves, and in the scuffle Grey received a wound of which he after dyed'*. Whilst the shooting of Grey by Nesham's party was thus acknowledged, it was conveniently declared that *'by whom the wound was given is not known'*.

The foregoing account is drawn from affidavits and depositions sworn by Nesham and his party in seeking to explain Grey's death, and on such evidence the pitmen's unprovoked threats, intimidation and assaults appear inexcusable. But a rather different story emerges from the pitmen's statements which, critically, were supported by dissenting voices from Nesham's party. These included staithman Samuel Anderson, a petty official who oversaw the loading of keels at the colliery staithes. The day before the shooting Anderson was in company with Nesham *'and asked him if he had agreed with his*

*pitmen*'. Nesham answered that he had not, '*but intended to be with them in a day or two, and would make it the worst day to them they ever saw in their lives, and used several other angry and passionate expressions against them*'.

With the strike disrupting cash flow from his expensive new investment, Nesham had 6,000 sterling reasons to be angry and passionate. The staithman Anderson declared that '*The first acts of violence which he observed was the discharging two fire arms upon or amongst the pitmen... [Nesham] discharged one of his pistols*'. Parish constable Avery Robinson also affirmed that Nesham had ordered the shots. Nesham had earlier insisted that Robinson '*must go with him to his colliery, for he had something for him to do when he came there*' - evidently the reading of the Riot Act, which said much for Nesham's intentions. Robinson's parish constable post was subject to approval by Houghton ratepayers who were Nesham's social peers, whilst staithman Anderson was a direct employee. In differing ways both were therefore beholden to Nesham for their livelihood, but both nevertheless testified against him.

One of the pitmen delegated to meet Nesham at Newbottle was George Clarke, who said that he had waited with other delegates at

'...a gate not farr distant from Hobson's house... [Nesham] and three or four other people on horseback came, and... asked them what they came there for, and bid them go home and be civil; and they replied that they were come to make an agreement with him, and intended to use no incivility to him... '

Isabell Currey was among several pitmen's wives who witnessed the exchange from their nearby houses, and said Nesham's actual words to the men were

...“D\_\_\_ you, dogs, what do you want?” The pitmen, after they pulled of[f] their hats in a very humble manner, answered that they were come thither by his viewer’s appointment to meet him, and make an agreement about the size of their corves, which were much bigger than they ought to be by the contract. He replied he would not speak to them, for if they got anything of him it should be by fair means...’

Nesham’s ‘fair means’ apparently did not include a hearing of grievances. Parish constable Avery Robinson said Nesham told the men *‘he would not agree with them unless they would work with the same corves, otherwise take what follows’*.

Staithman Samuel Anderson said that when Nesham arrived at Hobson’s house, *‘there was a serjeant and a drummer, armed with pistols and a sword, and one Brown with a gun, and... [Nesham] had a pair of pistols. There was also six or seven other persons not armed.’* The constable said that among these others were a Mr Roper and a ‘new recruit’, all of whom returned with Nesham *‘to the place where he had left the colliers’*. With the four guns previously sent, at least six firearms were therefore available to the party, plus any sundry pieces they had brought themselves. The staithman Anderson said that Nesham then

‘...ordered both the armed and unarmed men to go with him, which they did, to a gate called Curry’s Gate, about forty or fifty yards distant from the pitheap where Grey was afterwards shot... [Anderson] refused to go further than the gate, at which... [Nesham] was very angry, and desired him to go with him, but... [Anderson] telling him he saw no reason nor occasion for it... [Nesham] said “D\_\_\_ you, go along with me.” On the other side of the gate

about forty or fifty pitmen were assembled, who, upon... [Nesham] appearing, put off their hats in a quiet and civil manner, and about four or five of them told him they were come there according to his viewer's appointment... [Nesham] was then in a great rage and passion, and bidd them be gone... ‘

Nesham *‘went first through the said gate, and the armed men, and the others without arms, after him, upon which the pitmen retired towards the said pitheap’*. Among the pitmen at the gate, Richard Oyston, Anthony Allen, Thomas Curry, Thomas Galley and Robert Thompson affirmed that Nesham returned

‘...with a serjeant, drummer, and a new raised man, all armed, who came on foot, but... [Nesham] continued on horseback. Before they came to the gate... the pitmen perceiving and believing that... [Nesham] had some mischievous and desperate designs against them, all run away towards Collier Row, where most of them lived, but, before they could get so far... [Nesham] overtook them, and bid them stand, and desired two or three of them would come to him and speak with him. Wm. Walker and two or three more of them, and, at the said Hobson's request, one John Walton also went to [Nesham] to speak to him, but, before they were got up to... [Nesham] he fired a pistol among them, and, after that, fired one or two more pistols, and, immediately afterwards, the serjeant and a new raised man fired, and one other person in... [Nesham's] company, by which firing John Grey received a wound of which he dyed...’

By the pitmen's account an initial five or six shots were thus fired, including two or three by Nesham himself. Other witnesses added further detail. Pitman George Clarke said that at the approach of Nesham's party he

‘...drew off towards a pitheap, where more pitmen were assembled, whither... [Nesham] followed them, and swore he would shoot them all, and accordingly fired a pistol or gun amongst them, and bid the other persons fire likewise, which they did...’

Isabell Currey saw Nesham on horseback, accompanied by the serjeant and drummer, overtake some pitmen near a hedge, but *‘before they could get over the hedge into the lane where their habitations were... [Nesham] fired a pistol among them, and drove them into a ditch.’* John Walton, one of the pitmen who had stepped forward at Nesham’s request, said Nesham *‘overtook him as he was going along the heap, presented a pistol to him, and threatned that if he went not immediately off the heap he would shoot him’*. Margaret Thompson recalled that Nesham said

‘...it should be the blackest day that they ever saw, and immediately rode up to the pitheap. Saw him fire among the pitmen, and ordered a serjeant to fire or else he would him, upon which she heard several guns or pistols fired...’

Robinson the constable said that *‘After some words had passed... [he] heard some one, but who he cannot tell, but verily believes it was... [Nesham], say, “Shoot! D\_\_\_ you, why don’t you shoot?” Upon which he heard some guns or pistols shot off’*. Isabell Currey said this was Nesham urging the serjeant to open fire; he called

...“Come up, serjeant,” three times, and said, “D\_\_\_ you, serjeant, if you don’t shoot, I will shoot you.” The serjeant fired and drew his broad sword, and was going to cleave the head of William Walker. Was prevented by other pitmen putting their sticks over his head and receiving the blow. Immediately after heard several guns fired, by which John Grey received a wound and dyed...’

The constable *‘particularly saw the serjeant and another person fire their pieces, after which the said other person ran to... [Nesham] and desired him to take him up behind him [on his horse], which [Nesham’s] servant did; and after the person was got up behind the servant, heard him say, “D\_\_\_ it, I have shot one man, if not two”*’. It may be that Robinson was personally unwilling to condemn this individual or even that he was an invention to deflect attention, but Nesham’s party subsequently proved incapable of identifying this *‘other person’*. Irrespective of this however, the wider testimony demonstrated beyond reasonable doubt that the Riot Act was not read, and that Nesham was personally responsible for ordering the shots fired against unarmed men.

The altercation culminated when the sound of gunfire caused ‘a great number’ of pitmen to assemble, who warned Nesham that *‘unless he would leave off[] firing, they would defend themselves as well as they could, for they had rather dye like men than be killed like dogs’*. Ultimately the men, *‘being much enraged, beat... [Nesham] and the persons with him from the pitheap’*. Pitman’s wife Margaret Thompson noted that as he rode off, Nesham aimed a pistol over his right arm and fired a parting shot at her.

The pitmen’s statements were recorded during legal proceedings presumably brought against Nesham by the family of the deceased Grey, by whose death they had lost their livelihood. Affidavits supporting Nesham from his gentlemen friends Starn and Bryan were conspicuous by their absence, and witnesses against him significantly included his own staithman and the parish constable. Confronted by damning testimony, it was imperative that Nesham avoid a jury trial where conviction could bring a capital sentence. But his only means of taking any verdict out of the hands of a

Durham Assize jury was by petitioning the King for a royal pardon, which carried a calculated risk in acknowledging responsibility for the shooting. It was a tribute to the determination of Grey's family that Nesham was indeed ultimately compelled to submit a petition to the King, but the counterpoint to this was that a successful petition would circumvent due process and enable him to escape conviction.

In June 1735 Nesham's petition and the witness statements were submitted to the Lord Privy Seal's Office in Whitehall to be assessed by Attorney-General John Willes. Willes was *'politically an unscrupulous intriguer'* and his subsequent career illustrated his outlook; as Lord Chief Justice of the Common Pleas in 1737 his severity left his court short of business; in 1749 he insisted upon execution despite dubious testimony against alleged rioter Bosavern Penlez and fourteen others; and in 1756 he saw that rioters at Leicester *'were taken to Warwick Gaol on Friday, convicted on Saturday, and. executed on Monday'*. (6)

On the substance of the petition, Willes advised King George II that because the pitmen's statements omitted any discussion of the strike, they were *'drawn in such a way as plainly shews that they do not discover the whole truth of the case'*. By contrast, he emphasized that the statements of Nesham's party

*'..all agree in one very material circumstance, that whatever was done... was done in defence of the colliery and themselves, and that no fire arms were discharged till they had been very severely beaten, and their lives were in danger. I am humbly of opinion that the petitioner has done nothing but what was absolutely necessary for the defence of his colliery, and that if he had been the unfortunate*

person who had given the wound of which John Grey died (which does not appear), yet he would have been at least excusable, if not strictly justifiable. In cases of homicide where there is anything of malice, I shall never advise his Majesty to interpose, but... there does not appear to have been the least malice in the present case. I cannot think that any jury could find the petitioner guilty of murder, and I think there is not a sufficient foundation to convict him even of manslaughter, but, as he will be liable to very severe penalties if he should be found guilty of manslaughter, and as I think he deserves no punishment at all, I am therefore of opinion that the petitioner is a very proper object of his Majesty's great goodness and compassion, and that it may be very fit for his Majesty to grant to the petitioner his most gracious pardon...'

A note that Nesham's counsel '*May indict all our witnesses*' hinted that if the petition failed and a jury trial became unavoidable, the pitmen may have faced prosecution for affray to discredit subsequent testimony by them against Nesham. For Willes therefore the pitmen were ripe for prosecution, whereas the shooting of Grey was '*excusable, if not strictly justifiable*', and deserved 'no punishment at all' but moreover a pardon. Such an outlook from the office of Attorney-General held out scant prospect of justice for Grey's family.

Until Victorian times riot and wrecking was a normal feature of popular expression, and disturbances over food shortages or high prices often brought conciliatory responses as gentry recognised the legitimacy of grievances. But Nesham was far from conciliatory here and by comparison the pitmen were measured and proportionate, selectively applying force and deference in their pursuit of a fair hearing; when Hobson rejected their initial complaint, the pitmen

stopped the engine; when strike breakers were set to work, the pithead gear was disabled; and only when Nesham fired upon them did the pitmen attack his party. The fact that the pitmen were seeking a hearing was at also odds with Nesham's claim that the violence on the day occurred 'without provocation', underlining the likelihood that the real cause was his reckless conduct. And if the pitmen's responses were crude, they only highlighted the limited choices open to labourers with no say in their destiny, frustrated by the injustices which enriched scornful men like Nesham.

In July 1735 Nesham was duly granted *'His Majesty's most gracious pardon... of murder and manslaughter for and concerning the death and killing of John Gray of Lumley, in the said county, pitman, and of all indictments, convictions, pains, penalties, and forfeitures, incurred by reason thereof'*. (7) But despite this financial immunity it seems unlikely that Nesham could have avoided compensating Grey's family, if only to appease the ratepayers required to support them with parish poor relief. This aside however the pardon deprived the family of seeing Nesham answer their charges in a court of law, and showed that the masters were to be judged by a standard not available to their servants. As for the dead man himself, burial registers show that the only Lumley man interred at this juncture was not John Grey but Ralph Gray. Though probably a simple discrepancy, this error was perhaps a final indignity for the deceased man. (8)

The petition and pardon were singular events in the annals of the Tyne and Wear coal trade, and corroborate Nesham's culpability for Grey's death. Nesham had cause to reflect upon his escape in 1736 when a Captain John Porteous ordered Edinburgh's city guard to fire on a crowd without having read the Riot Act. Three people died, and when a death sentence against Porteous was reprieved

by the King, a crowd broke into Edinburgh gaol and hanged him themselves. (9) The Porteous case was national news, but by contrast Nesham's exploits in a rural Durham backwater attracted little attention. Aged forty-three at the time of the shooting, John Nesham lived and prospered as head of the wealthy Houghton coal owning family for a further thirty-five years. His seafaring grandson rose to the rank of Admiral and married into the aristocracy, and in 1819 the Nesham collieries were sold for £70,000 to their neighbours the Lambtons, soon to be the Earls of Durham. Centuries later Nesham Place remains Houghton-le-Spring's original Quality Hill, but with the 1734 episode long since faded from folk memory, no local stigma attaches to the Nesham name. (10)

The outcome of the pitmen's dispute at Newbottle is unknown. Like the story of Nesham's crime, it went to the grave with the participants to be lost from the spoken tradition. That any record of the episode survives is due to the diligence many years later of Durham chemist and insurance agent William Trueman, an antiquarian collector who discovered a copy of Nesham's petition and saw it to publication in 1858. Originally addressed to 'Samuel Gowland att Durham', the petition and other court briefs in Trueman's possession indicate that his source was probably the papers of Durham attorney Ralph Gowland and his son Samuel, who was evidently Nesham's attorney in 1734-35. (11) One hundred and twenty-four years and five generations thus elapsed before a permanent public record of the episode was established for posterity. Without the chance emergence of the papers and Trueman's readiness to publish, Nesham's crime would have been consigned to oblivion, just another of the untold injustices faced by generations of Tyne and Wear pitmen.

Notes

- (1) 'Report on the Pitmen's Strike at Newbottle, in 1734', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, New Series, Vol.II (Newcastle upon Tyne Society of Antiquaries, 1858), pp.111-17. Until the change to the Gregorian Calendar in 1752, the Julian Calendar commenced each year on 25<sup>th</sup> March.
- (2) T.W.Beastall, *A North Country Estate. The Lumleys and Saundersons as Landowners, 1600-1900* (London and Chichester, Phillimore, 1975), pp.10,17,22.
- (3) D. Levine and K. Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society. Whickham 1560-1765* (Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1991), pp.399-403. The authors date most bindings as late autumn but the 'Report' states that the 1733 Newbottle binding was in July: Beastall, *A North Country Estate...* pp.20,22.
- (4) Levine and Wrightson, *The Making of an Industrial Society...* pp.402,403.
- (5) 'Serjeanty' was a feudal relic, a menial form of knight service performed in return for a grant of land tenure. It might be expressed by domestic, estate or military duties, in this case by the rendering of a sword and drum. *The New Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol.10, 15th Edn. (Chicago, 1992), p.648.
- (6) For Sir John Willes (1685-1761) see Sir L. Stephen and Sir S. Lee (eds), *Dictionary of National Biography*, Vol.XXI (London, Smith, Elder & Co, 1909), pp.287-8: R. Paulson, *The Life of Henry Fielding: A Critical Biography*, (Malden, Mass., Blackwell, 2000), p.270: T.S. Ashton and J. Sykes, *The Coal Industry of the Eighteenth Century* (Manchester University Press, 1929), p.123, citing SP Dom. Geo. II, 1756, 135/66.
- (7) F.W. Dendy, 'Extracts from the Privy Seal Dockets, relating principally to the North of England', *Archaeologia Aeliana*, New Series, Vol. XXIV (Newcastle upon Tyne Society of Antiquaries, 1903), p.228.
- (8) Chester-le-Street St Mary Parish Burial Register, 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1733/34, Durham County Record Office, EP/CS 1/23, p.57. This Julian date suggests the dispute occurred in February 1733, which was apparently transcribed in the 'Report' as the Gregorian equivalent of February 1734.
- (9) See for example T. Hayter, *The Army and the Crowd in mid-Georgian England*

- (Totowa, New Jersey, Rowman and Littlefield, 1978): R. Vogler, *Reading the Riot Act: the Magistracy, the Police, and the Army in Civil Disorder* (Milton Keynes, Open University, 1991): The story is also told in the Walter Scott novel *The heart of Mid-Lothian* (D. Hewitt & A. Lumsden, eds., Edinburgh University Press, 2000).
- (10) John, son of Robert Neasham of Chester-le-Street, born 1691, baptised 5<sup>th</sup> September 1693, died 1769. See R. Surtees, *The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham*, Vol.I (London, J.B. Nichols and Son, 1816), p.151: W. Fordyce, *The History and Antiquities of the County Palatine of Durham*, Vol.2 (London, A. Fullerton, 1857), p.565.
- (11) Trueman was a member of the Tyneside Naturalists' Field Club and joined the Newcastle Antiquarian Society in 1857. *Archaeologia Aeliana*, 3rd Series, Vol.X (Newcastle upon Tyne Society of Antiquaries, 1913), pp.251-2. For the Gowland connection in other papers contributed by Trueman see *Archaeologia Aeliana*, New Series, Vol.II, 1858, pp.109,110,136,165,171,216: Surtees notes that among fifty MSS folios collected by barrister James Mickleton were three which 'pass under the name of Gowland's MSS... The volumes in question consist chiefly of extracts from the Rolls in Chancery, copies of private Charters, and of several ancient Parochial and Forest Boundaries, with some strange personal anecdotes of Lord Crewe, which should, perhaps, be attributed to Ralph Gowland, an Attorney, contemporary with the younger Mickleton'. Surtees, *History of Durham*, Vol. I, Introduction, pp.6-7.



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**Ray Moody**  
Branch Secretary

**Dave Walden**  
Branch Chair

Gateshead Local Government Branch  
6 Ellison Street  
Gateshead  
NE8 1AY

Tel: 0191 4776638

Fax: 0191 4776613

Email: [info@gatesheadunison.co.uk](mailto:info@gatesheadunison.co.uk)

**(Re) Writing Defeat: Poetry and the  
End of the Miners' Strike 1984-5**  
*Katy Shaw*

*The miners' strike was a defining event in the history of industrial conflict in post-war Britain. In 1984, Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government announced it intended to close twenty pits because they had become 'uneconomical'. This implied mass jobs losses since pits had been the primary source of employment in many towns and villages for generations. Fearful of the impact these measures would have in their own areas, miners at other pits began to come out on strike as concern for the future of the industry grew and rumours of further closures spread. On 12<sup>th</sup> March 1984 the leader of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Scargill, called for national strike action from all miners. Despite a national strike being called, miners in the Nottinghamshire coalfields continued to work claiming that the absence of a ballot meant the strike was undemocratic and against union regulations. Famous images from the strike often involve the clashes between pickets and police, which ensued, most famously at Orgreave on June 18<sup>th</sup> 1984. The yearlong conflict, which Arthur Scargill dubbed 'a social and industrial Battle of Britain' officially ended on Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> March 1985, fifty -one weeks after miners had first marched out in protest at government plans for their industry. (1)*

The strike prompted a surge of literary production in the coalfields as miners and their communities realised the importance of authoring their own accounts of the conflict. Coal mining had endured a long history of disputes and strikes had been a regular feature of mining life in Britain for more than two hundred years. However, the miners' strike of 1984-5 was significant in that it was predominantly a struggle for a better way of life linked to communal, rather than individual, needs, a fight for freedom, security and the perceived 'rights' of workers. At the end of the strike, miners had the chance to reflect upon the results of this resistance. But the end of the strike did not bring an end to strikers' writings. In fact, literary output from the weeks and months after the strike would suggest that, for many writers, there was more need to articulate thoughts and feelings in the aftermath than during the strike itself.

Writings from the end of the strike suggest poetry to be a useful means of preserving mining heritage. With the promise of pit closures came the prospect that many communities would cease to exist, causing whole populations to either move elsewhere, abandoning their regional roots, or remain jobless living in a husk of a former industrial centre. In most locations the town relied wholly upon the pit - without the pit there could be no town. As one anonymous contributor to fundraising magazine *Save Easington* claimed, *'Easington without pits is a place without a pulse, with no pulse the heart is dead.'* (2) The mine was a living, breathing force of life and energy for such places, the provider of the drive and finance necessary to create and sustain the community. A good example of this reliance on the pit was the village of Horden in Country Durham. Once the most productive pit in Europe it was, 'self-sufficient. The colliery trained men in the skills needed to extract coal, in every type of engineering, in explosives ventilation,

pumping, pit pony handling. It had shunting yards, coking ovens, a brand new railway station, its own brewery and brickworks. In emergencies it could call on rescue teams, a fire station, an ambulance service, a first-aid clinic, a cottage hospital and a police station with an inspector, a sergeant and several constables. It had its own library, and junior and senior schools. The village had three cinemas, four pub, seventeen clubs, even a Conservative club, though Tories were a rare breed. The 21-acre Welfare Park, financed by the Miners' Welfare Fund, allowed games of cricket, football and rugby to be played simultaneously, each in front of its own spectators. It dealt in more genteel sports too with tennis course, bowling greens and a putting green. Except to go on holiday – to Filey or Skegness or Blackpool – there was no need to leave the village. It had 10 butchers, 10 grocers, six fish and chip shops, haberdashers, ironmongers and fruiterers. All this depended upon the pit.' (3)

This metaphor of the pit as the heart of the organism which is the pit community is central to poems from this period. In effectively murdering this organism by removing its heart, strike writers suggest that the Thatcher government condemned both a place and its people to a certain death. Without a mine structurally underpinning these communities they were likely to become desolate and die out. It was the Conservative's lack of response to this issue which drove many writers to presume that the government wanted this heritage to be conveniently 'lost' as a by-product of mining closures as it did not fit in with their aspirational vision of Britain's future as a technological world leader. Miners confronted this idea in their writings and looked to the future, imaging a world without mining

Hello and welcome to our industrial museum.

On your right there's a slag heap reclaimed...  
a hill...another slag heap...  
that one shaped like a landing pad  
for bird-like hang-gliders.  
Notice the pit wheels perfectly preserved  
where you can buy mementoes  
of the Big Strike and eat authentic cawl  
at an austere soup kitchen.

There mummified miners cough and spit  
at the press of a button  
and you can try their lungs on  
to a tape recording of Idris Davies' poems.

That rubble was a nineteenth century chapel,  
that pile of bricks an industrial estate.  
The terraced houses all adorned  
in red, white and blue as if royalty were visiting.

See how quaint the wax models  
of women are, as they bow in homage  
to polished doorsteps, the stuffed sheep  
at the roadside give off a genuine odour.

The graveyards have been covered over  
and lounge chairs provided for viewing  
gravestones which tell of deaths from cholera  
or pit explosions. I recommend their cafeteria. (4)

Although the term ‘our’ in the opening line of this poem would indicate a continued pride in the mining industry (which has survived despite its growing obscurity) mines themselves have been consigned to the waste bin of time, reduced to chilling and thought provoking exhibits in a museum. The tour guide’s pleasure in the aesthetics of his exhibits is grotesque and just as shocking as the twee, sanitised version of mining history promoted by the museum’s interactive environment. Placing mining heritage behind a glass screen furthers the distancing process of children from their history – a process begun, many writers suggest, by the NCB’s closure programme. In this poem stereotypes and social labels are actualised and pasted neatly into history while whole generations of memories are dismissively lumped together. Blasé descriptions of quaint, regional industries devalue an entire heritage, censoring aspects of history which certain sections of the population would rather forget. This frightening, warped, ‘Disneyland’ of mining culture critiques those individuals who only seek to promote and allow access to certain perspectives on the past. The poetic response to this fate is a firm assertion that history can not be erased, that a way of life should not be ‘lost’ and most significantly, that the working classes will continue to promote and record their own heritage through their writings:

No Dad’s pit boots to follow  
No miner’s lamp to shine  
No pitman’s son will carry on  
Tradition, down the mine.

They’ll never lift a shovel  
To load in tubs, black gold.

Or know the pit face dangers  
Like the stories they've been told.

They'll soon forget the skyline,  
Which shows the pithead wheel.  
The horizon with its pit heaps,  
Which made the colliery real.

Remind them of our heritage  
Speak out to them, with pride.  
Stand tall and sing its praises  
Its not Dad's fault it died. (5)

The emphasis on 'tradition' in this poem relies upon the value of, and regard for, heritage and its place in the nation's history. Such poems remain adamant that progress should not be allowed to steamroller over memories, that the marks of mining which lie upon the landscape are part of our world. Although the image of a sunset in this poem would indicate an acknowledgement that one chapter in the mining industry is closing, its central concern is that reality should not be re-shaped to obliterate memories. In removing visual evidence of the past (such as pit wheels and pit heaps), the writer suggests that the government encourages younger generations to doubt and challenge the significance of mining heritage to their lives. The prospect of an industry and a way of life being eroded over the course of a single generation seems too much for some writers to grasp. In such cases poetry becomes a means by which they can attempt to make sense of a changing world.

They are closing our pit this afternoon,  
The pulley-wheels will disappear from the shaft very soon.  
No market for coal, the signs are really bad,  
Soon children will be asking, 'What was a mine, Dad?'  
'Aye it was just a well you will never know.  
It was never very pleasant down below.'  
Someday I will tell you about Durham Big Meeting,  
From shuggy-boats to black ribbons to politicians bleating.  
The friendship, the camaraderie were second to none,  
It is a pity these qualities are now long gone. (6)

Although some strike writers felt powerless against forces that sought to destroy the physical permanence of their industry, many others became empowered in their ability to ensure its preservation in memory via the pen. It was therefore left to the written word to reassert the authenticity of their historical representations and recollections. As a result, poetry from the end of the strike stresses the importance of actively educating the next generation in working class industrial history, encouraging a sense of ownership and celebration and promoting writing as a method of ensuring its survival. In addition to poetry, several writers propose miners' galas - festivals of mining pride and culture - as unique occasions during which younger generations can be exposed to their regional heritage in an effective and thought provoking manner. Mining banners themselves are traditionally powerful reminders of the past and potent symbols of heritage. These symbols are elevated in poetry as an effective means of keeping memories of mining history alive.

The North East has a heritage  
In that we must rejoice.  
The miner is its symbol,  
Socialism its voice.  
So keep those banners up lads,  
The sun could not be finer.  
Keep that certain 'togetherness'  
Known only to the miner. (7)

Poetry from the end of the strike shows that many writers felt compelled to pass on experiences of working class life to the next generation through their work. Heritage and an awareness of '*who you spring from...who you belong to*' are presented as vital to knowing where '*your roots are firmly embedded*' in these writings. (8) Throughout the strike, literature offered miners a voice in a cultural climate that overwhelmingly demanded their silence, granting their heritage and perspectives on conflict a degree of permanence in an ever-changing world. Poetry produced in the aftermath of the conflict presents itself as a resource for future generations but also as a tool to enable this identification with cultural roots in the face of an unstable future.

The months after the strike also saw a surge in poetry written by miners and people from mining regions addressing the Conservative government's plans for the 'regeneration' of former industrial areas. These poems take a predominantly critical approach to such developments, judging the process of 'regeneration' to be a mask used to obscure the whitewashing of history and heritage. Many writers consider this process of 'whitewashing' industrial heritage with an acceptable, commercial facia the ultimate betrayal. The government's attempts to dress up newly ex-mining areas is

countered in these writings by the belief that you cannot change in essence what a place is and has been.

During the conflict, the majority of poems from mining areas tended to be concerned with the 'bigger picture', the direction and success of the strike and the need to view the miners' movement as an organic whole. However, in the months after the strike, many writers seem to have felt the need to address 'local' problems. These problems are often concerned with issues surrounding the aftermath of the strike and the changing face of the North East region. Although these poems highlight many different regional agendas they are united by their sense of loss and disbelief at the murder of a way of life

A wake for Swan Hunter, a wake for the Tyne,  
Arise wraiths and spectres from shipyard and mine  
And show your disgust and anger inside  
At murder committed against Geordie pride.

Look to the future and enterprise zones.  
Slick business parks and cellular phones  
Work for computers spewing out data.  
Who will employ a welder or plater  
Consigned to life's dustbin, redundant at peak,  
Hands full of skills, no work to seek.  
Weep all you ghost ships, great in your time  
And come to a wake for the death of the Tyne. (9)

Lost in a changed world, Jordison grapples with an existence without anchor, the massacre of major employers and an innate identification with a now bygone age which does not seem to fit

comfortably with the government's new image of a 'progressive' twentieth century Britain. Flat promises of advancement further fuel the author's raw emotion and sense of abject loss at the destruction of an industry and a workforce in its prime.

In Armstrong's poetry, the industrial past of Tyneside has been bulldozed, denied and disguised to encourage and cater to an occupational change from the physical to the financial sector:

There's this dirt from a history of darkness  
And they've decked it in neon and glitz.  
There are traders in penthouse apartments  
On the Quayside where sailors once pissed.

So where are Hughie and Tommy, Kitty?  
The ghosts of Geordies past?  
I don't want to drown you in pity  
But I saw someone fall from the past.

While they bomb the bridges of Belgrade  
They hand us a cluster of culture  
And tame Councillors flock in on a long cavalcade  
To tug open the next civic sculpture

And who can teach you a heritage?  
Who can learn you a poem?  
We're lost in a difficult, frightening age  
And no one can find what was home. (10)

The poem's suggestion that culture is not something that can simply be 'bought into' critiques the meaningless and pointless

pieces of art produced in the name of 'the people', but not by 'the people'. These 'civic sculptures' are not the people's culture but an imposed vision of what the government would like the people's culture to be. The expectation is clearly that 'the people', like the ignorant councillors, will appreciate what they are told to appreciate and passively accept imposed notions of value and the commodification of their culture. The real people's culture, the poem suggests, is more accurately reflected in work produced by the people, for the people. This poem, like many others produced in the wake of the strike, demands a degree of familiarity with regional history, stressing the importance of interacting with local heritage. However, the poem also laments a significant loss, the decline of regionality and the normlessness and anomie created by the removal of a sense of communal belonging. With the systematic destruction of industrial heritage comes migration which in turn leads to the weakening of regional pride as a nomadic workforce is formed. The poem suggests that regional identity and an awareness of local heritage can only come from the stable, participative people of a region and their pride in this sense of permanence. No one but the reader can therefore answer the important questions posed in the final stanzas of the poem regarding cultural and regional identity.

A significant part of the poetic reaction to regeneration was the social problems that began to plague ex-mining communities already rife with unemployment and debt. Interestingly, parody and comedy became popular methods of relating the reality of this post-strike environment through poetry. Overtly this may be seen as a typically Northern, working class attitude, making light of an unfortunate situation, but just beneath this comic veneer laughter is revealed as a last resort, a means of maintaining class solidarity and of assuring others that everyone was in the same situation.

When being working class  
Is a pain in the ass  
And you'd do yourself in  
But they've cut off your gas  
Its pass me the vallium Martha. (11)

With this loss of jobs came the loss of regional identity, of 'belonging' and the beginnings of doubt regarding the 'place' of newly redundant mining communities. This lack of direction sometimes led to anger and frustration that often spilled over into prejudice and violence. The drastic change in communities, which twelve months previously had been tightly knit parochial haunts, was a trauma which many writers felt compelled to explain and discuss in their poetry:

The have robbed us  
And are robbing us  
still  
of the old haunts  
the dark pubs  
the bowling greens  
we courted.

And turning in on ourselves  
we look in the cracks of neighbouring walls  
for reasons  
for black scapegoats and white exits  
from crises  
that say we must pay for  
goods  
and for profits  
and for them. (12)

This piece would seem to suggest that capitalism lies at the root of these problems as a heartless and ruthless destroyer of humanity and social relations. However, it is a sense of shock and the way in which this courses through these writings which is most notable. As one anonymous ex-miner claimed in hindsight, after the strike his *'village was in a state of shock for the best part of a decade.'* (13) Members of mining communities, once proudly self-sufficient, were now forced to rely upon state handouts to survive. This reliance on the state is blamed in many poems for stripping ex-miners of their self-respect and independence. These were men of routine, people used to an intensely structured existence dictated by the mine. The removal of their occupation left a void that in some cases was filled by drink, drugs or depression. Poems tell of once honourable men now trapped and demeaned by the social conditions imposed upon them. Many writers attempt to explain the growing influence of alcohol and drugs in former mining communities in terms of the role played by these substances in numbing the pain brought about by the loss of a world:

On a giro bender, drunk by 8.30  
Score a tab and see your fears  
Confront you in the street. This escape is no  
Man's freedom.

So the shipyards and the pits  
And the shops and the pub all closed down. Big deal.  
Get on your – no sorry – fix  
Your bike and get on it, then go find work, rest  
And play nicely. Oh, the bike  
Is in the river? Well smash something, steal and  
Kill and blame anyone who isn't  
White, or a real man. (14)

This parodying of the Tory response to economic and social disaster (*get on your bike*) implicitly relates the situation faced by the striking miners to the period of the original Jarrow march and the depression of the 1930's. The apparently 'simple' solution of finding work is countered here by the harsh reality experienced by ex-miners. The anger of the speaker spills over into anti-social behaviour, desperation motivating him to escape into a world where blame can be easily apportioned to a race, class or figurehead. Indeed, many miners who were used to spending most of their lives in close quarters with other people now found that their unemployment encouraged isolation, social division and suspicion. One ex-miner Paul Stradling explained that, '*working underground gave a strong sense of discipline, of looking after each other. That's gone.*' (15) The new professions being thrust upon miners did not provide this camaraderie. Instead, new sectors of employment favoured female workers, leaving mining men without an occupation from which to draw their identity. In their poetry many confess to feeling emasculated, undermined and detrimentally wounded by this shift in labour demand. Usurped by women, some miners also lost their financial independence and dominance of the home. As one social commentator claimed of County Durham in 1986,

'The big growth areas are factories and call centres. Girls leaving school often find work more easily than boys and go on to become the main wage earner. To a traditional community that lived off the sweat of its men folk, this is a social revolution, and it can breed humiliation alongside an edge of violent bravado among jobless men' (16)

Miners' responses to calls for their return to employment are articulated effectively for the first time in their poetry. Many felt as

though they had been thrown aside by the government, regarded as spent resources now surplus to requirements. Their writings reveal not only the intimate relationship between occupation and identity, but also the prospect of facing a world which no longer values traditional skills:

Skilled men! Trained women! Thrown onto the dole,  
Thousands and thousands just stripped of their soul.

The North East's workforce, which once was proud  
Has been pushed and crushed and led into thick cloud. (17)

Miners are depicted as battered and bruised in writings from the end of this yearlong conflict, ruthlessly labelled by statistics and policies that failed to reflect their concerns or needs. Suggestions that the government continued to obscure the real employment situation to justify its own ends is a common theme in poetry produced after the strike. The above poem's title '*To Work?*' effectively sums up this argument. With a government and media pushing to bring miners off the dole, no one was willing to recognise that many had nowhere to go, that they did not possess the skills for more modern jobs in the emerging 'technology' and service sectors and, more significantly, were still in deep shock at their strike experiences and the rapid and whole-sale destruction of their industry. According to most strike writers, what the coalfield regeneration programmes failed to address in reality were the most important aspects of their experience – not simply the loss of a job but the loss of roots, of pride, of identity, of community, of culture, of politics - of a way of life. Many profess their horror at the decline of community spirit in favour of a consumer society and crass individualism. It was almost, as one miner's wife from

Durham claimed, as if they had ‘rubbed out a whole way of life. It used to be that if you walked down the road it was hello! Hello! Hello! Now you could walk down the whole road and you’d never see one person or two people that you know – it’s not the same – the community has gone.’ (18) The government may have ‘won’ in 1985 and busied itself imposing regeneration programmes on the places it devastated but it failed to appreciate that, during this process of destruction, the essence of these places, the spirit which had sustained them for hundreds of years, had been ‘shredded, torn up and destroyed’.(19) It is this sense of loss and utter devastation that is chronicled in new and revealing ways in poetry produced by miners and their communities in the wake of the strike.

### Notes

- (1) Editorial, *Morning Star* 28<sup>th</sup> March 1984 p.2
- (2) East Durham Community Arts, *Save Easington: Easing Colliery Past and Present In The Words Of Local People, Young and Old* (Peterlee: Winns Printers, 1985) p.38
- (3) Chris Steele-Perkins, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2004, p.52-3
- (4) Mike Jenkins, ‘Industrial Museum’ in Tony Cutis (Ed): *Coal: An Anthology of Mining* (Bridgend, Seren 1997 p.119-20)
- (5) Betty Elliot, ‘Lost Heritage’ (Miners’ Strike Documents Folder, Library Archive, National Coal Mining Museum, Wakefield)
- (6) Isaac Bonney, ‘The Pits’ (Miners’ Strike Documents Folder, *ibid*)
- (7) Anon, ‘The Miners’ Gala’, *Durham Voices Magazine* no.1 Summer 1983 p.9
- (8) Valerie Smith, ‘Home’ (Miners’ Strike Documents Folder, *op. cit*)
- (9) Lorraine Jordison, ‘A Geordie Wake’ (Miners’ Strike Documents Folder, *op. cit.*)
- (10) Keith Armstrong, ‘An Oubliette for Kitty’ in Andy Croft and Cynthia Fuller (Ed): *North By North East: The Region’s Contemporary Poetry* (Cullercoats, Iron Press 2006)

- (11) Robert Murray, 'Pass Me The Valium Martha' in *Pass Me The Valium Martha* (Liverpool, Community Print Aid, 1985)
- (12) Keith Armstrong, 'Burning Issues' in *Pains of a Class* (Newcastle, Artery Press 1985)
- (13) Anon, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2004 p.55
- (14) Brian Anderson, 'Possession' (Miners' Strike Documents Folder, op. cit.)
- (15) Paul Stradling, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2004 p.58
- (16) Eddie Hardman, *Sunday Times Magazine*, 7<sup>th</sup> November 2004 p.57
- (17) A.P. Creegan, 'To Work' (Miners' Strike Documents Folder, op. cit.)
- (18) Margaret Wegg, in Guthrie Hutton (Ed): *Coal Not Dole: Memories of the 1984-5 Miners' Strike in Durham* (Peterlee, Stanlake Press 2005 p.60
- (19) Neil Valentine, in Hutton (Ed) *ibid* p.60



## I'll tell you a story: Or it's only a Pipe dream? *James Edgar Pipe*

*Although I was born in 1929 my earliest recollections would be when I was about 5 years of age, so I will start from January 1935.*

*I recall being in the kitchen in Margaret Street, in Grangeton, Sunderland, or trying to get into the kitchen, and seeing several of our female neighbours, 'sleeves rolled up and pinnies on', dashing about between the kitchen and our parents bedroom, they kept chasing us youngsters, Stan and I, out of the room and into the back yard. We wanted to know what was going on," mind your own business" would be the reply. "What are you doing to our Mam"? same reply. I can only guess it was when Gordon was making his entry into the world, he was born in January 1935, its normally cold at that time of year, so that must have been the reason for all of the kettles of hot water.*



Another early memory which also concerns Gordon, the baby of the family, was when Stanley and I, we would be about 7 or 8 years old at the time, had to take our little brother for his daily outings in the pram. I'll call them 'Walks', but we only walked the pram and

Gordon as far as the top of Commercial Road, or any other street that had a slope on it; Commercial Road was the best, it was a long, straight, steep road going down past the Paper Mills and towards our school. At the top of this road Stanley or myself or both of us, would sit on the side of the pram, and take Gordon for his 'walks'. The prams were well built in those days, they had to be with the ill-treatment it got off Stanley and I, (well our pram was), and as it happened during many of our 'rides' we had a few trip-ups or mishaps and had to pick Gordon up off the road, dust him down, put him back in the pram and off we would go again.

Our house in Margaret Street was shared by two families, one up and one down, the Browns lived upstairs and us Pipes downstairs. Most of the time the two families got on well together, in those days you could rely on your neighbours to help you out if you had a problem and you very rarely locked your door when you went out. To go back to the Browns, I can recall on at least one occasion when there was some sort of 'fall out', and the heads of the families doing 'battle' in the back yard, man and wife taking on their opposite number, verbally and physically, but the 'fall outs' did not last long. The next night would see them having a drink together in the 'Grange'.

One night Mr. Tommy Brown came home a little worse for wear after a session at the local. He had had a 'skin full' as they used to say, and was having difficulty in getting up the stairs. We could hear Mr. and Mrs. Brown having an argument, albeit a bit one sided, and he fell, or was he pushed down the stairs. Mrs. Nelly Brown shouted "you can stay there you drunken .....", but about an hour later she came down stairs and took off his boots and covered him with a blanket, Some time during the night he must have 'recovered

enough' to make his way upstairs to get into his bed or find a chair to finish off his sleep

The wash-house or brew-house as it was sometimes called was in the back yard, and the two families shared the use of it, the two families had certain days when they had first refusal on using it. In the wash-house, there was a cast iron boiler, a coal fire underneath, and a big wooden wringer (mangle), and a wooden tub (poss-tub) to put the clothes in. You pounded the life out of the clothes, with a wooden 'maid' or 'dolly'. This was a big wooden monstrosity. You bounced it up and down and twisted it on the clothes in the tub.

When we were not at school we had to take turns 'possing', (using the maid) or turning the mangle while Mam fed the wet clothes into the wooden rollers. Somehow I got caught for this job more times than Stanley, (old blue eyes). Then there was a long piece of broom handle that the women used to get the hot clothes out of the boiler. It was called the 'poss stick' and Mam was a dab hand at using this as an 'instrument of correction'. When any of us lads were not behaving ourselves, (some how I got the impression it was always me), and on the rare occasions when we, Stanley and I misbehaved and if Mam was in the wash house or the back yard and saw us misbehaving, and able to get her hands on the 'stick', as you made a dash for the back door at the bottom of the yard. Mam would use it like a boomerang and very rarely missed its target. If she did, she would shout for you to bring it back to her, then when you handed over the 'poss-stick' and were a lot closer, you received your punishment .

With the washing out in the back street the housewife would have to keep an eye on it, not that anyone would steal it, just in

case the Coal Man decided to drop off a load of coal nearby -the housewife would have a few choice words for the Coal Man while she took the washing down, and also the washing line. He would have to wait until she had done so before attempting to unload his coal into the back street. If the kids were not at school a few of us would be hanging around kicking a ball about, and we sometimes followed the coal cart and when he had dropped off the coal , we would ask the housewife if we could load the coal into the 'coal hole', hoping to make a penny or two loading the coal.

When playing football with the back street full of clean washing 'us kids' had to careful not to kick the dirty ball against the washing or knock the 'prop' from under the clothes- line. We would expect, and get, a clip around the 'lugs' if caught doing this. Any of the neighbours' wives would clout you if they caught you at it, no good going home and telling your Mam that Mrs. Jones had clouted you, your Mam would give you another one just for good measure.

When our Mam had done her week's washing and the water in the boiler was not 'too thick' and you made the mistake of walking into the back yard you sometimes had an impromptu bath in the wash- house. Your Mam would strip you down to the bare skin, stand you in the poss tub and throw the hot soapy water over you, and then a rinse down under the cold water tap, well it saved throwing away good soapy water.

The 'toilet' was one down the bottom of the yard next door to the coal house, and used by both families. The toilet, a bit crude by today's standards, had a big wooden seat the full width of the toilet building. When us little ones sat on it our feet were miles

away from the floor. The toilet paper was a newspaper cut up into about 6 inch squares and hung on a nail with string; the newsprint ink came off when you used it, your fingers and your 'rear end' got a bit black at times.

We were fortunate in that Dad who worked at the local paper mills just down the road, was able to get some soft white paper occasionally, and this was used as toilet paper -we were 'posh'. If there was a queue for the toilet, you could try and use next -door's toilet, or if desperate you used the 'guzunder' or commode or the 'potty', it went by several names. If you used the 'guzunder ' you had the job of emptying it when the toilet down the yard was free. In the winter the toilet often froze up, and the men of the house would have the job of un-blocking it, hoping no one had used it while it was frozen over. There was only one water supply to the two families and this was situated in the back yard. Every drop of water that you used had to be carried into the house and that included the Browns upstairs. In the winter it sometimes froze up, and at these times we kept a supply of water in the wash- house or in the house and some of this would be warmed up and used to get the tap unfrozen. Just before the 1939 war we had a sink put in the kitchen, 'all mod-cons' and the out-side supply was only used for the wash- house.

There were only three rooms in our part of the house - kitchen-cum-living room, our parents' bedroom and the front room. The front room was only used on special occasions. All of the best furniture was in there, a piano organ that Mam used to play, the gramophone (which I still have today), a Welsh dresser with the best crockery. Many years later Jacqueline, my daughter, was given the last remaining cup and saucer of the set that Mam had. It was given

to Mam by a lady called Peggy Wilson. This tea service only came out when we had visitors, usually Mam's relations the Burrell's, they would use the front room to play cards in and Dad would make up and light a fire in the front room a few hours before the guests arrived. Us kids were confined to the kitchen, and we would enter the front room at our peril.

In the kitchen the fire-grate-cum-oven was a massive thing, about 6 feet in width and about 5 foot high and all made of cast iron, with oven doors and grates all over the place. Once a week it was allowed to get cold and given its weekly clean down. The dirty job of 'black-leading' the iron work was usually done by one of the boys. When you finished it had to shine like a new penny or you did the job all over again. When you finished your hands were as black as the grate you had just cleaned, and any brass items in the house was also given a polish.

It was many years before we had electricity installed in the house. It was put in at about the same time as the water supply; I think it was just before the war started. The lighting, before electricity, in all the rooms in the house was by a single gas lamp, a gas mantle was fitted over the gas supply on a bracket on the wall just to the right of the fireplace. The mantle was a paper- thin paper cup. Once this cup had been burnt it became very fragile, if you touched it, it fell to pieces, even a big fly could put a hole in it. Occasionally it just fell to pieces with old age, and one of us lads would send out to find a shop open to buy a new one, they cost something like a half-penny or a penny each.

Having no electricity, all of the wirelesses (radios) were powered by accumulators, a glass case type of battery. These had

to be 'charged up' at least once a week, so it was a task Stanley or I had to do. We would walk about a mile up into Grangetown, and in one of the side streets there was a house where the man would exchange your flat accumulator for a fully charged one. It may have cost a penny or two for the service. We had to be very careful carrying the accumulator, besides being glass and breakable if dropped, it was also full of acid, so no running on this errand.

Although Dad had a regular job at the Paper Mill, money was always in short supply, but we were never without a good meal on the table. Dad always had enough for a couple of pints at the weekend. Mam was a very good cook and made meals out of almost anything. On Sundays we always had a roast dinner, followed by a pudding, (dessert/sweet) treacle puddings, bananas and custard, Stotty Cake with treacle, dripping, or the brown jelly at the bottom of the dripping jar was the tastiest. This was available after Mam had done a beef roast for Sunday. Sponge puddings, 'Spotty-Dick', this was a suet pudding filled with plenty of sultanas and raisins, and treacle poured over it. These were boiled in a big pot wrapped in what we called a 'spotty dick' handkerchief, a red cloth with white spots on. This handkerchief was also used to wrap around our Dad's supper which we as lads had to take it into the Paper Mill in the evenings when Dad was working on the two- till -ten shift.

We carried this meal and a can of tea down the street and into the Mill, and whoever was taking it had to be very careful not to spill any of the gravy into the handkerchief. If you did you could expect a clip around the ears. Some years later when I started work in the Mill, (every one of the Pipe brothers worked at the Mill at some time in their working life) I had to carry my 'bait' (lunch) in

a tin box to work with a can of home made tea, usually made the night before. If you were on the early morning shift we would warm this up on the hot cylinders on the paper making machines.

During the week we used to go to the greengrocers and get two-penny or three-penny worth of loose vegetables. This would be a big bag full of what was then called scraps or waste vegetables, damaged or bruised, carrots, turnips, cabbage, parsnips, etc. These all went into the stew pot, together with a few pennies worth of scrag ends (this was scraps of meat from the butchers, which normally would have been thrown away) to make a mouth watering stew. Dad had an allotment so he provided a lot of our vegetables, and we kids used to help out digging up potatoes. Dad often came home with a rabbit, he could strip off the fur in a few seconds, he showed me how to do it and many years later I was able to put this into practice when I bought a fresh rabbit. This was before some disease came along and killed off most of the rabbit population. Sometimes it was a hare and these all went towards keeping us kids well fed. At least once a week Dad would go fishing off the cliffs and nearly always came home with a fresh fish, cod or a 'coalie'; the cliffs were only a couple of hundred yards away from the end of our street.



To supplement our food supply, at certain times of the year we were not adverse to helping ourselves to turnips, swedes, rhubarb from the many fields and allotments along the cliffs. 'Peg-Leg' Johnny Duffy's allotment had the best rhubarb, big thick sticks about 12/15 inches long and not too sour, occasionally we would take some home and then we got a

scolding, or a clout with the 'Poss Stick' off our Mam for 'nicking' Peg Leg Duffy's vegetables, but the ill gotten gains still went into the stew pot or made a 'pudding'.

Friday night was always fish and chip night, fish and chips from the 'Chippy' at the top of Ocean Road, next to the tram terminus. Stanley and I had to take turns fetching the family's supper. We would be given a 'shilling', sufficient money to buy 'FOUR' lots of fish and chips. We ordered the supper by asking for 'four three penny lots' of fish and chips. A 'lot' cost three pennies, and it was a big piece of fish (cod) and a generous helping of chips. We would ask them to put a 'lot of scraps' (pieces of batter) on the chips, and the shilling was enough to buy a meal for the whole family of two grown-ups and four lads.

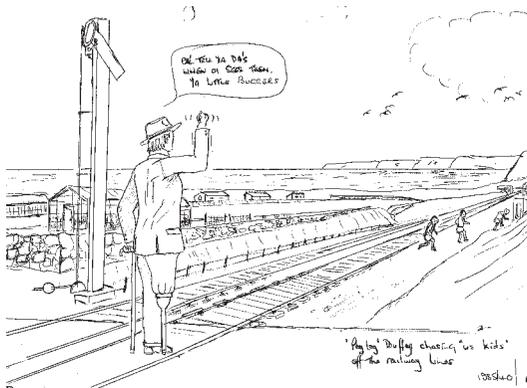
While on about fish, a regular sight alongside the river in Sunderland town centre where the fishing boats would land their catches of fish, crabs and other shell fish and in the fish markets in the town centre were frequently the 'fish-wives'. I think this was the term used to describe the ladies who used to sell their wares around the streets close to the docks and in the market place. They could be seen carrying large baskets full of fish or crabs on their heads. They wore a flat cap which had a roll of paper or cloth in the shape of a ring inside the cap to make it easier to balance the basket on their heads. They also smoked clay pipes, they said the reason for clay pipes, besides being cheap to buy, was if they dropped the pipe while they had a basket on their head, they would not bother to take the basket off their heads as the pipe usually shattered when it hit the cobble stones. When this happened these 'ladies' had a large vocabulary of words when upset, hence the saying 'He could swear like a fish wife'.

Stanley and I would get a silver three-penny (thrupny-bit) piece for our pocket money every Saturday morning. We would at the first opportunity change it into half pennies or pennies, or a few farthings, it seemed you had a lot more money in your pocket. The three pence was to be spent on: one half-penny on the bus or tram to town or Hendon to go to the pictures, one penny to get into the pictures, a penny to spend on sweets, and the last half-penny to get the bus or tram home. We very rarely got the bus or tram to the 'flicks' we would walk there and back, so we had another penny to spend on sweets. The two most popular picture houses that we went to were the 'Villiers' in Hendon or Vilette Road or the Picture House in Sunderland town centre, they were sometimes referred to as the 'Flea Pits', or Ranch.

One of the pranks we got up to when going to the pictures was to let off home made 'stink bombs'. We did let a few off in the street or near to a queue of housewives outside a shop, but this was not as effective as in the 'pictures.' These 'bombs' were made up using photograph negatives, or better still if we found some discarded rolls of film negatives behind the local cinema, we would roll up a couple of frames of these films, wrap some newspaper around the films, tuck in the ends, leaving a small piece protruding out of one end, a sort of fuse, then we would light this tag and as soon as it started to smoke, blow out the flame and 'hey-presto' you had a evil smelling stink bomb. Then we would kick it under some of the seats in the cinema, and it was panic stations to get away from the 'Pong'.

A couple of years before the war started, I can remember going into the town centre of Sunderland to see Tom Mix ride through the town on his horse, a big white one. He was appearing

at the local Empire Theatre. About this time (1937/8) the King and Queen visited the North-East, and all of 'us kids' were taken or marched from our schools to line the streets and cheer on 'our Majesties' as they drove passed Backhouse Park in their open carriage. Other visitors, and a lot more regular, were the trains: 'The Coronation Scott', and 'The Mallard', and the 'King George', etc, big gleaming, brightly painted engines. We would sit on the wall at the top of the bridge in Ocean Road to watch them go under the road bridge and we invariably got enveloped in steam as they passed underneath us. Several other well- known steam trains came along this stretch of railway.

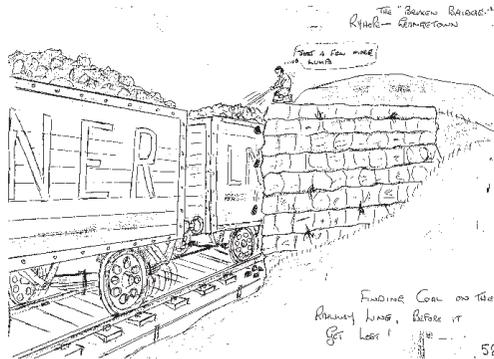


1937 was a year to remember in Sunderland if you were a football supporter. That was the year they won the FA cup at Wembley. Being too young at the time to understand the game other than to play football with a ball made up of newspapers and string, as real leather foot balls were something you dreamt of owning, and the goal posts were our coats or a pile of stones, we were not fanatical supports of the local team like they are today, but I do recall my 'Da' talking about Sunderland winning the 'cup', and such names as Raich Carter, Hugh Gallagher, Manning, Mortisson, etc. 'Da' could

and often did recite the whole team. He took us, (Stanley and I) to see the team drive through the town centre showing off the cup, I think they were on a 'open topped' bus or tram, and the only other times I remember 'Da' going to a football match was when he gave our Mam a 'treat.' She took us to the Brommarsh picture house to see a film called 'God gave him a dog.' It was about a Dalmatian dog in the American Everglade swamplands; on another occasion we were taken to see a play at the Empire Theatre that was called 'No Orchids for Miss Blandish'. These were such a rare treat that I have never forgotten them.

As young lads we got up to all sorts of tricks or mischief. One of the games we played was to go onto the railway lines that ran across the bottom of the street and just before the cliffs, these lines only carried coal wagons from the pits to the docks. There was a house between the two sets of railway lines where the railway-crossing attendant lived, a well known character I've mentioned before called Johnny Duffy. Johnny only had one leg, I heard years later that he had lost it in the First World War. He did not have an artificial leg, only a 'peg leg', so he got the nickname of 'Peg-Leg -Duffy', well that's what the kids called him. Occasionally we would watch 'Peg-Leg' change over one of the signal points which would stop or let through the train to one of the unloading bays in the docks. We would wait until he was a few yards away, run down the railway embankment and change the signal back to stop or go. He could see us doing this and would try and catch us, or one of us, but only having one good leg and a wooden peg on the other, when he got onto the soft gravel between the lines his peg leg would sink in bringing him to a full stop. He would change the signal back to where he wanted it and then wait until the train had gone through before going back to his hut. He would tell our dads about our

'games' when he saw them in the 'Grange' but it all depended on what sort of mood our Dad was in when he got home whether we got a clout or not and told not to do it again. I must mention that there were several other kids involved beside the Pipes.



Some times the train would be stopped by the signals and if we could see that it was loaded with big lumps of coal, and we were on the blind side of 'Peg-Leg', we would decide it was a good chance to help ourselves to some 'free' coal. A few of us would climb up the side of the trucks and help ourselves to a couple of big pieces of coal, or we would wait by the 'Broken Bridge' and knock off a couple of pieces of coal off the wagons using a long pole. When we took the coal home we would tell our Mam that we had found them on the railway lines, which was true, they were on the railway lines after they had fallen off the wagons.

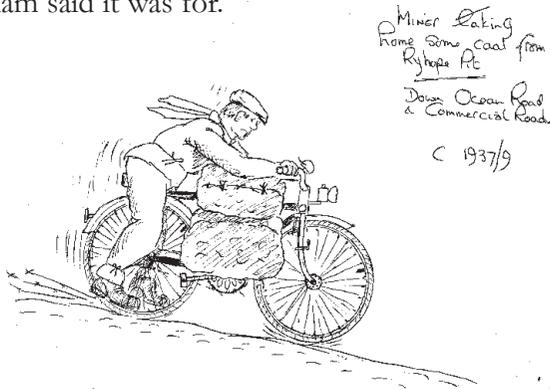
While on about the railway lines and pocket money, one of the 'bright sparks' of the kids of Margaret Street came up with the great idea of making half-pennies into one penny pieces. We would put the half-penny on the railway line, wait for a train to run over it, and hey-presto, we would have a penny. We did think that it would be flat and smooth, but a lot of old pennies, especially those of

Queen Victoria's reign were flat, thin and you could hardly see the imprint of the Queen's head on the one side of it, so we thought we could get away with it, make some easy money. On the first attempts the half-penny was squashed only on the one edge, it must have moved when the first wheel went over it! The half penny was not lost, the distorted side was rubbed on the pavement until it was something like it should be and it went over the sweet shop counter with no trouble. On the next attempt we got some Plasticine, and made a ring with it, stuck this on the line and put 'another ½ D' inside the ring of plaster on the line, then stood back and waited for the next train, keeping one eye on 'Peg- Legs' hut as well. The train and about twenty other trucks full of coal arrived, and went over 'our penny', it was flat and it was round, but about twice the size of a real one- penny piece. So ended our get rich scheme, and a couple of us were minus the cash to buy some sweets. We tried this on the tramlines up by the Terminus at the top of Ocean Road, but again it was a failure.

Another source of free coal, and this time it was not 'acquired', was collecting coal from the beach. After a storm or a strong tide, pieces of coal would be washed up on the shoreline. This came from coal seams exposed to the tides under the sea and it was good burning coal, much sought after, so you had to be the first on the beach as the tide went out to get the best pieces. A small sack full or a couple of buckets of this coal kept the fires going for a couple of days and it saved buying coal off the coal man who came around the streets about twice a week with his horse and cart.

Another good 'pocket money' earner was also concerned with coal and it was when a load of coal had been delivered to the house of someone who worked at the pits. They got coal free or at a

reduced price, and it would be dropped in the back street by their back door. We would ask that person if we could load the coal into their coal house, if yes, it had to be put into the coal house via a small door situated about 4 feet up the back alley wall. This job was always worth a few pennies, depending on how much coal you had to shift. If you got too dirty with the coal dust, you could expect a clip around the ears from your Mam, a wash under the cold tap, and be kept in for the rest of the day. If we had had a good day at earning 'pennies', Mam might relieve us of a couple of pennies, to pay for the soap she was using to keep us clean, well I think that is what our Mam said it was for.



Miners and coal; another common sight those days was seeing miners, faces covered with coal dust, taking coal home after they had finished work at the pits. They would load one or two sacks of 'slack' (small sized coal, then regarded as cheap coal which they could buy or be allowed to take away free, or it may have been 'acquired' at the pit heads) onto the frame of the bike. The miner would then lie on top of the sacks. They could not get their feet anywhere near the pedals, so they pushed or free-wheeled the coal home. Ocean Road and Commercial Road were two sloping streets with a sharp bend in the middle, so it was not an uncommon sight

to see a miner, his bike, and the sacks of coal up against the Paper Mill wall when he failed to get round the corner. He would load up again and have another try to get the coal sacks and himself home in one piece.

Another regular visitor to our street before the war was the hurdy-gurdy man, I think he was Italian. He had this small barrel organ on top of a pole and a monkey perched on his shoulder, and as kids we would try and pull its tail. Several of us who were too slow to get our hands out of the way from its tail got a bite for our troubles. Sometimes a big barrel organ on a cart would visit the street. Then there was the ice cream man, he would ride his bike-cum-ice cream cart around the streets shouting " stop me and buy one". If we were lucky enough to have a half penny to spare we would buy a cornet and ask him to put some 'monkeys- blood' on the cornet. This was the kids' name for a type of strawberry juice flavouring. If we did not have any money to buy a cornet, we would pester a kid who had, to let us have a lick of his ice cream. Fifty odd years later I, with my son and grandchildren went to Roker and I went to buy some ice cream cornets, and the person in the ice cream van asked if I wanted some 'monkeys- blood' on my cornet. I had often told my children, and my wife, about this 'monkeys-blood' but I do not think they believed me, so I took them all back to this ice cream cart so they could see and hear it for themselves.

Please note that there was a time scale of over fifty years from leaving Sunderland and returning with my family.

**Sid Chaplin**  
*John Mapplebeck*

*The aspect of the novel that is so often overlooked is its capacity to interpret the world we have lived through. The Tyneside of the nineteen sixties was a different country. I worked out of John Dobson's lying-in-hospital in New Bridge Street, the BBC's regional headquarters until it moved out to its sboddy pink palace on the edge of Leazes Moor. Next door to it was the Portland public house – Studio Five as it was known to indulgent receptionists anxious to protect producers from unwanted interruptions that had anything to do with work, or imposed in any way on their drinking time. The pub was also opposite the Oxford Galleries, the dance hall, where, in Geordie folklore marriages were made; heaven having absolutely nothing at all to do with it!*

It was there on a Friday night that two worlds collided. The hacks, relaxing after a week on *Voice of the People*, or *Look North*, and the young Tyneside lads smacking their lips over the first of many pints of Scotch before crossing the road to chance their luck at the Oxford Galleries, or was it the Mayfair by then?

Sid Chaplin, the watcher of *The Watcher and the Watched* (1962) caught it exactly. The reflection he created was as true as that in the

mirror of the gents' lavatory where the lads adjusted their quiffs and thin ties before they left the pub for the dance hall:

‘This is Friday night and you want to sweat clean, if you have to sweat, and a pin to a penny you will before the week-end’s over. Then you shave yourself with real precision, using the palm of your hand as micrometer, and brush your teeth, cupping a hand over your mouth, and blowing your breath up just to make sure that the old womanizing breathing is sweet. Then you pull on a clean white shirt and feel your skin tingle pingle tingle knowing that the pants and body shirt are whipped clean and sparkling, and spend half an hour tying an impeccable squinty knot and getting cuffs and cuff links spot on.’

All this had been preceded by:

‘.....a nice high tea, Heinz Soup, half a pound of cooked pork with a little of the crackling for body, a nice sweet tomato, new bread, finishing up with a fancy cake from the baker’s shop at the end of the street.’

What would it be nowadays, as they prepare for that weekly stagger down the Bigg Market to the Quayside? A take-away pizza...man tan...a squirt of after shave and the resolve to believe that the cold wind off the Tyne is nothing more than the balmy breeze of Ibiza.

At first glance the comparison seems to show why, with the exception of a perceptive publisher like Flambard, Sid’s work is no longer common currency. He seems the chronicler of a lost world and because, unlike Catherine Cookson’s it was a real, recognisable

world, it's passing is that much more obvious. But just as *Middlemarch* is no lesser because of the Midlands drift to the cities, or *Hard Times* no less potent because of New Unionism, Sid Chaplin's novels reach beyond the century in which they were created.

Take *The Day of the Sardine* (1961 and recently republished by Flambard.) Arthur Haggerston is the very model working class hero, a character one feels created with Tom Courtenay or Albert Finney in mind, rather than the softer *Likely Lads*. This is Arthur reflecting on what life has in store for the male adolescent:

‘ But I shudder at the thought of 15 to 17 and the slow torture of six dead end jobs. Dead end is right. Everybody down there is heaving coal, running errands, carrying meat, watching a machine, walking about or sitting on his backside. Either dead or dying. Rejects found wanting, defeated before they ever made a start. Education is a sieve as well as a lift.’

Well, however many bottles of beer they had clutched in their fist, no matter how loud the disco beat in the Bigg Market pubs, the products of the bog standard comprehensives would hear and recognize that message. *Education is a sieve as well as a lift.*

I first encountered Sid's work when I was a young radio producer. I decided to do a documentary for the North Region's Home Service based on Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*. The idea was to test the validity of Hoggart's assertion that working class life could, at times, be 'good and comely'. *The Watcher and the Watched* was strong supporting evidence. Although it was published five years after *The Uses of Literacy* it read like Hoggart's inspirational text. The descriptions of the working class rituals of birth, marriage and death temper affection

with unflinching honesty. There is the row upon the stairs of the rival mothers-in-law; the ‘gatherin’ of the works collection, which served for accidents and retirements, as well as wedding presents; the petty snobberies of the posh Scarborough honeymoon hotel; and the stranger at the funeral, come to pay the last respects to the hero of some long forgotten shop floor rebellion.

Given that it was written before the *Lady Chatterley* trial, there is also a surprising honesty about sex. This is Tiger Tim Martin, the Tyneside tearaway, ‘*the lad that licked the Blaydon boys singlehandedly*,’ reflecting on what awaits him in marriage:

‘That would be a different caper from an afternoon in the woods or an hour in the passage. “Ah mean”, he thought to himself in mingled wonder and fear, “This’ll be in bed with a lass,” Suddenly she wasn’t Jean any longer, but a strange woman – an enemy.’

But *The Watcher and the Watched* is not some faded film record of the way we were. The characters inspire us still because although the rules of our rites of passage may have been tinkered with, they continue to demand the courage and humanity of Sid Chaplin’s people. As the grieving widow puts it:

‘ He was a good man and a good husband and he felt for the world like he felt for his family.’

In one of his later novels *Sam in the Morning* (1965) Sid presciently anticipates the times in which his work will fall out of fashion. ‘*Not to care is the mark of the new aristocracy*’ says Sam Rowlands, his hero on the make, down South. But it was not just that Sid cared - (in a notoriously bitchy trade few authors can have inspired quite

so much respect and affection) – it was that he managed to express his concerns in such a uniquely poetic voice.

It was a voice first recognised by John Lehmann when he accepted Sid's earliest work for *New Writing* and then, in a very different age, by the countless viewers of *When the Boat Comes In*. He was, according to an anonymous TLS critic 'a born writer with a poet's eye and a rich sense of language.'

Because Sid was such a patently decent man there has been a tendency to look on his work as if it were that of some optimistic lightweight. Nothing could be further from the truth. All his novels have a dark seam of bleak realism. This is the old miner's verdict on life in *Day of the Sardine*:

'When Ah was a miner, Ah often used to think what it would be if one day Ah broke through into a place full of light. Wouldn't it be a wonderful thing? Well Arthur me lad there's no place full of light and that's a fact'.

In *The Big Room* (1960) he even goes so far as to cast doubt on his calling:

'We are all brought up on love and adventure and such like trash, and we all expect it as our due, and when it doesn't come we grab at something like it for fear of missing it.'

He could be just as blunt about working class history. This is what he wrote in the *Twentieth Century* about the Big Strike out of which, as he put it, the General Strike came as 'a premature death rattle':

'There was no time to think of the bread that sustains the other

life. The chapel never recovered, and that was a pity because it was truer and warmer than the Miners Lodge and the Labour Party, but only so long as the people believed. After that they chucked the Bible for *Tit Bits* and *John Bull*, if they really burned the Bible at Chopwell and read a chapter from *Das Kapital* the gesture was useless.’

Sid’s honesty always prevented him from sentimentalizing the working class, even though to him they were always kith and kin. The touch was never quite so sure when he ventured south of Arkengarthdale, the setting for *The Big Room*. Neither *Sam* in the *Morning*, nor *Mines of Alabaster* (1971) have the confident certainties of his earlier work.

Perhaps like Jack Common, the writer he so much admired, he didn’t travel well. Yet both of them did their bit in contradiction of Tomlinson’s famous myth in the *Guide to Northumberland* that, ‘*the genius of the North is rather practical and mechanical than imaginative and her engineering triumphs far excel her poetic achievements.*’

But what if he was ‘*a regional writer*’ that label which Auden gracelessly hung on him at their first meeting. No worse for that and their subsequent friendship actually suggests that he probably meant it as a compliment. After all it was Auden who wrote of

A poet’s hope: to be  
like some valley cheese,  
local but prized elsewhere

It is surely time for the poet of the Tees, Wear and Tyne valleys to be prized again and get his proper, due recognition.



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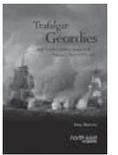
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## **A Century of Support for the Labour Party** *John Creaby*

*The 100 years support for Labour by the people, the voters, of North Durham Constituency (formerly Chester-le-Street Division) was acknowledged as part of a dramatic and significant change beginning in 1906. The two historic parties, Conservatives and Liberals were now faced with a new political force in Parliament that represented working people, the Labour Party. The other parties originated in the seventeenth century in a parliament then dominated by landowners and the wealthy; this new party by contrast was born out of the struggle of working people outside the parliament.*

Chester le Street was part of this fundamental change when the electors voted in January 1906 General Election for the Labour Party Candidate, John Wilkinson Taylor.(1855 -1934), and for this reason a Centenary Celebration Dinner was held on January 2006 in Beamish Hall (by a twist of fate, this was the home of Shafto his Conservative opponent in 1906) to recall and commemorate this achievement.

The comrades at the dinner were advised that there was only one other constituency that could boast the achievement of having

elected a Labour MP continuously since 1906. Dorothy Rand, a local historian, gave an outline on all those MPs elected in that year and all those present were given a copy of a Centenary Souvenir booklet she had produced, commissioned by the Constituency Party. Dorothy Rand's booklet is a major source along with others for what, to remember and honour our Chester-le-Street's first Labour MP.

Born in Wearmouth, 1855, the son of a blacksmith, he went to work at 9 years old employed by a newsagent but was apprenticed in the blacksmith trade when 12 years old. Due to the death of his parents he went, at the age of 14, to live with his married sister and family at Annfield Plain, working at the Bankfoot Colliery as a blacksmith and later as a miner. Mining was the most important employment in County Durham with 157 pits and a strong trade union culture., based very often around the chapel. By then John Taylor had become a staunch Primitive Methodist and remained so all his life. He was described as the father of Primitive Methodism in the area he lived in, and was reputedly an impressive preacher. Having returned to work as a mechanic, he was soon elected first secretary of the Annfield Plain Lodge of the Durham Colliery Mechanics Union.

This was also a period of electoral change. Although the 1832 Reform Act had given the middle class the vote, the labouring masses (not yet really a class) remained outside the franchise until the limited extension in 1867 and the householders' enfranchisement in 1884. The TUC adopted a political stance and appointed a Parliamentary Committee to act as 'a bridge between the labour movement and the traditional parties and opposed anything that would disrupt the relationship built particularly with the Liberal Radicals'.

The first real suggestion of an independent Labour Party was voiced at the Trades Union Congress held in the Town Hall, Newcastle Upon Tyne in 1891. It was the rowdiest TUC of all time. The chair, Thomas Burt MP was the Northumbrian miners' MP. Elected in 1874, he was the first working class MP, and the miners were justifiably proud. He was elected a Liberal MP for Morpeth, part of the Radical caucus and also what became known as the Lib/Labs. However socialism and new unionism was making itself felt at the Congress. Keir Hardie, the Scottish miner and Will Thorne of the gas workers' union were the outspoken advocates. But there was reticence from the leadership and, it must be said, most of the rank and file delegates. Nevertheless there was a substantial socialist and vocal minority. As Burt's biography (written in 1908) shows he responded to the new element that appeared in Congress. He said,

'Let me pay my respects to the party called Socialists. I do not know whether they admit that name'. (Here there were Socialist cheers.) 'I observe they accept it.' He then went on to say that he had socialist tendencies, but he referred to his 'experience ... as to what is practicable and what is not'.

The ILP came into being after Keir Hardie, John Burns and James Havelock Wilson were elected as independent Labour in 1892. The latter two took the Liberal whip. This was the first rank and file membership based political party. The established parties did not have a membership as such, but local Associations.

Meanwhile John Taylor at the age of 27 years was elected to the Executive of the Colliery Mechanics in 1882 and 10 years later General Secretary. He held that office till 1923 except for his

period in Parliament. 1892 was also the year of 'Great Durham Lockout'. A strike by some Durham miners was answered by the whole Durham coalfield suffering a lockout by the employers. Durham miners were alone in this conflict. The severe suffering and deprivation was recounted in the song, written at the time, by the pitman poet Tommy Armstrong (a folk song 'The Durham Strike', still sung in folk clubs today). Clearly this must have had a profound effect on John Taylor.

Taylor was by now politically active, being a founder member of the ILP in County Durham. He cut his political teeth as an Independent Labour Councillor on Durham County Council and a District Councillor (Annfield Plain UDC) alongside Lib/Lab Trade union Councillors (mainly miners) who were putting into practice the 'housing, gas and water socialism' which the Fabian Society intellectuals advocated while the ILP had developed the policies it preached and put into practice. This was the Labour Movement's training ground of socialist politics away from the industrial sectionalist politics of most unions.

For, example the Miners Federation had a fund and a parliamentary committee to assist the return to Parliament of miners as 'working class Liberals to serve the interest (of) the mining community'. The Fabian Society argued for 'permeation'; that is to permeate the Liberal Party with working class ideals and members.

The employers at that time were making a much more obvious class move by the foundation of the National Free Labour Association (1893) to supply blacklegs to take the place of strikers. Also employer federations were being established. For example the Federation of Engineering Employers' national lockout against

the Amalgamated Society of Engineers (1897-8) affected many workers in the North East. Local newspapers particularly referred to the 'strike' at the great Armstrong Factory, Newcastle when it was actually a lockout. As for Parliament, in 1898 an Employers' Parliamentary Council was formed to lobby 'for the interest of employers generally'

The working class, strengthened through the Trade Union Movement was being confronted both the industrially, and also the politically. This was compounded by the restrictions placed on picketing. All this was the nature of the times as the 19th Century ended. At the TUC in 1899 the Society of Railway Servants (ASRS) moved and had carried a motion

....to invite cooperative, socialistic , trade union and *other working class* organisations .....to convene a special conference of representatives.....for securing.....an increased number of Labour members to the next Parliament. (ASRS)

The miners union, however, still firmly wedded to liberalism opposed the motion.

On the Review Body established by the TUC its parliamentary committee, still soaked in Liberalism had two representatives, the ILP, SDF, and Fabians (who now saw the importance of the realisation of a Labour Party) had six representatives between them, who voted as a caucus.. There was, therefore, to be a special Conference in the New Year of the Labour Representation Committee ( LRC).

Ramsey MacDonald, at that time a journalist, was elected Secretary and Frederick Rogers (not a professed socialist: a

bookbinder by trade) elected chair of the ILP. Both of them, along with Kier Hardie were ( like John Taylor) self educated men. Rogers, deemed to be the most moderate in the leadership, attended the Cooperative National Conference in 1900 but was unable to persuade ‘unbending Toryism of the older men and the meek acquiescence of the younger ones in relation to social affairs’. The Cooperative Movement stayed outside.

The LRC Conference was held on 27<sup>th</sup> -28<sup>th</sup> February 1900 is recognised by Labour historians as the date of the birth of the Labour Party, even though it not yet had a naming ceremony ... However the miners and some of the major unions were still outside. Not all the leaders of the trade unions were against the idea (unlike the miners’ ideological and sectarian stance) but slowness of change in both rule books and members had to be taken account of. For example, George Barnes, General Secretary of the Amalgamated. Society of Engineers (ASE) was himself an ILP member and activist but had to wait until 1902 before he could deliver his union to the cause.

The delegates to the Conference were divided into three groups: those in favour of a trade union bloc which was the Lib/Lab line; those who pressed for a party of ‘avowed socialists whose beliefs were ‘ based upon the recognition of the class war’ which was the Marxist Social Democratic Federation line; and the ILP line broadly socialist and trade union based but favouring it be widened to all the working class and those who sympathised with the Labour Movement’s aim of an independent Labour Group in Parliament. This included a number of socialist clubs which also had elements of Marxist doctrine. This ILP line was carried much to the chagrin of the SDF, which left the group to go on their own, though to little avail.

The LRC could claim an affiliated membership of 187,000. There was no individual membership until 1918. Six months later, a General Election was held and the LRC stood 15 candidates only. Kier Hardie was elected under true LRC colours. Another LRC man was elected, Bell of the railway servants but he soon took the Liberal whip. eight Lib Lab trade unionists were also elected. But the following year was a turning point. The House of Lords had in the Taff Vale case, declared the union funds of the Union liable for breach of contract (a strike) and other offences (regarding picketing) of members. Clearly the law threatened trade union existence and the whole movement recognised the class nature of the judgement and the need to have representation in the law making arena. Furthermore the indifferent reaction of the Liberal MPs reduced the belief in their being the radical representation needed to match this offensive. The LRC turned trade union anger into political action. Affiliated membership increased to 350,000 in 1901, 450,000 in 1902 and nearly doubled in 1903 to 850,000.

Certainly the ILP supporter John Taylor must have been caught up in this fervour as the ILP was the engine of change, with the ideological input of the Fabians. Also the 1892 traumatic strike would still have been in his memory. When the LRC conference of 1903 was held in the Cooperative Hall, Newcastle upon Tyne with this large increase in affiliates, all the major unions (except the Miners) had joined. A better election and organisational funding regime was established and they were preparing for a General Election.

Over this next period (with some by-election successes) the LRC consolidated; agreement was reached on payment of LRC MPs from funds rather than individual union payment and at

the 'Big Meeting', the Durham Miners' Gala in 1905, Keir Hardie MP was a guest speaker alongside Will Crook MP and Arthur Henderson MP. The ILP message was given a good airing to support the LRC.

After discussion at the 1905 meeting it was agreed to stand 50 LRC candidates in designated constituencies. The miners continued their national process; however there was dissidence from some miners lodges in Durham. They did not wish to continue to support the 'carboniferous capitalists'. For, although there were some joint stock companies in the coalfield, (Holmeside, South Moor and South Medomsley Co.), there was still the pits and enterprises owned by the likes of Lambton, Bowes and Joicey. In fact Joicey was the Liberal MP for Chester-le-Street standing down at the 1906 General Election.

Not surprisingly, Taylor decided to stand and was accepted by the committee. As his was obviously not one of the 50 selected constituencies he was informed that he must stand under Liberal Party colours. He refused to stand under anything but Labour colours! His nomination was dropped, however he stood as an Independent Labour Candidate committed to the ideals of the LRC. This tight approach to candidacy was more due to the secret pact between MacDonald and Herbert Gladstone, son of the 19<sup>th</sup> century PM, who at the time was Liberal Party chief whip by which the Liberals and the LRC agreed not to contest against each other.

In the General Election 1906 Taylor, although not supported by the committee, was supported by the local miners and trade unions and would have got support from ILP comrades.

The official results were

Taylor 8085 - Labour

Shafto 4985 - Conservative

Tebb 4660 - Liberal

Taylor Majority 3100

He joined the 28 LRC elected MPs sitting for was now termed the Labour Party, making the historically recorded 29. He went on to win subsequent General Election and set the trend for the Durham North. Taylor's socialism was not rooted in abstract political thought but born out of the direct experience of industrial and community life. Nevertheless his ILP membership shows that he had been influenced by the three 'M's; the Methodist in the community, (possibly) the Marxist in the Clarion and the Movement.

From this history we can see that there is no truth in a magical belief of some past unity or trade union solidarity. In fact it gives a perspective to contemporary labour movement dynamics. From the past we learn that socialist politics begins with loyalty to the principles of a movement.

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## ORAL HISTORY

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### Lionel Anwell



Jessie & Mick 1993

*At 98 Lionel Anwell is a remarkable man with a remarkable life behind him. Born almost blind before the First World War he survived and prospered despite handicaps which would have demoralised most people. He is very well read, highly musical, and a lively conversationalist blessed with an excellent memory. Active in the*

*Newcastle Labour Party from the early 1920's, as a civil servant from 1945 he was unable to stand for the Council till after he retired in 1973. He then served as a councillor for Moorside Ward for nine years before leaving the area with his wife to live near his daughter in Canterbury. He was interviewed in April 2006 by John Charlton.*

I was born 1909 in Clapham, South London. My grandfather was a manager of a goods yard at Nine Elms, London and my father a commercial traveller in ironmongery. He had an agency with Cooks of St Pauls Churchyard. Our family name Anwell was an anglicised version of a welsh name. My mother's father was a soldier in Ireland; an army saddler. He had travelled to many different parts of the world.

After a time in the Navy, my father travelled as an iron monger sales man dealing in tools. We moved to Manchester when I was very young and lived in the Fallowfield district. I remember sitting at the table with father at the end of the table working out his income tax. In 1914 my father volunteered but he had a weak chest from pneumonia after naval service. He was told, 'When all the soldiers are done, we'll come knocking at the door, and ask you to pick up a gun.'

His Manchester business went well but at the outbreak of war there was a problem. He'd taken on a job order for Brunner Mond, Hamburg. The equipment was worth £1250. It was dispatched to Hamburg in July 1914. In August war broke out. There was no payment from Hamburg. Disaster struck. There was a total loss with no compensation. He struggled from August and things just got worse. We lost our lovely Broadwood piano with only £5 left to pay on it.

After two or three months we moved to Newcastle. My mother's people were running a pub, The Lord Warncliffe on Scotswood Road. We were invited to stay there at 2. Warncliffe Street and stayed till we found our feet. Dad got a job at Armstrong Whitworths at a clerk's wage of £2 per week which was a heavy downfall into poverty in Newcastle. We went round the area

living in rooms from one address to another. There was a serious housing shortage. We had a miserable time. I was six when we left Manchester. Dad was later sent to Armstrong's (shell) filling factory Alexandria, near Glasgow, for two years more factory work. I escaped the clutches of school board.

We went back to Newcastle straight after the war. When I was eight and a half I went to the Royal Victoria School for the Blind in Benwell. I was born with very poor sight. I could just read the headlines in newspapers. I have a nerve deficiency having been born a month premature. I was seven and half years at the school. It was a mixed experience. Some staff did not treat us properly dressing us in institutional clothes and not bothering to wash plates because we couldn't see them. I was fortunate to get a good teacher who had returned to the school from Kings Manor York. The head master asked the class teacher if she had anyone to send up. I was told to get my things. I spent the last three years in the top class with a lovely teacher. She introduced me to Thackeray, Austen, Dickens and lots of poetry. We had a good library with a national book exchange.

I never really understood why three members of the top class were given special training but I learnt that we could be sent to Norwood, London, for a test for further education. There were three of us, Jack Foster, Gertie Bell and myself in a special division but none of us ever sent up to take the exam. I was told my family could not afford for me to go to London.

We all finished up in workshops for the blind caning, basket and mat making. I left school in 1925. I moped terribly at losing everything but round Christmas I pulled myself together. I had

wanted basket making but there was room only for mats. That was all that was left. The workshop on the Battlefield then moved on to Whickham View with a cleaner, more airy building. I was eighteen years as a mat maker right up to the end of the second world war. An opportunity came with the 1944 Disabled Persons Act where the chance came to change your occupation. I chose telephone operating but soon lamp signals were put in so I had to leave. I moved on to short hand and typing where I reached 120 short hand and 80 typing speed. I became a Grade Two short hand typist in the Civil Service. I got all the proficiency allowances and stayed till retirement in 1970 at the Central Exchange building, Prudhoe Street.

I was involved in lot of club activity. I joined the Tyneside Recreation Club. I signed on and had lots of jobs connected with it. We had fully sighted help but we ran the Club. As a teenager I got myself elected to the committee. I remained friends with these people till we went our separate ways. I continued to correspond with Jack Foster and exchanged tapes until his death. Peter Wallace was the secretary of the club. Peter's was a strange position. He had gone to Worcester College for the handicapped and on to Oxford to study law but because his parents' money ran out and he had to leave. His father, a Deputy Pit manager, had lost his job. He became Secretary of the Club and with his law background was good at it. We organised Dances and a small choir giving concerts around the area.

I joined the Clarion Vocal Union. George Matthews who was partially sighted was also a mat maker and a fine tenor. He asked me to join The Clarion Choir as a baritone. I stayed till they broke up in the Second World War. Colin Veitch, the footballer

and actor conducted the choir till he died in the late thirties. It improved my singing quite a lot. Peggy Murray was also in the choir. I knew her well. She was Manageress of the Co-op Fruit Department at Newgate Street. I would do the shopping and meet her there. She was a councillor for many years. I was also a member of the International Club on Jesmond Road. We invited Tory MP Cuthbert Headlam to speak during the Spanish Civil War. He explained that after international agreement the British would blockade arms supplies to 'both' sides. Of course the Germans and Italians supplied Franco. It was a mad, mad world. Many Spanish refugees came to the north east and got a lot of help.

I met my wife Jessie through Esperanto. I met her socially when she was teaching French at Bishop Auckland after graduating from the Sorbonne in 1940. We loved Symphony Concerts and she would come up to Newcastle for a Concert. I would get tickets. She would come up and meet on Sunday and go back straight away. She started to come up on Saturdays and one thing led to another. One Saturday when she came to stay I was down in the dumps. My girl friend had sent a letter saying it was over. It hurt quite a bit. Sitting on the lawn. My father had told her. She said, 'I understand you have had a nasty shock. I said it has been dealt with. That was factual but not elegant. She said, 'I never want you to suffer like that ever again.' From there on we got together. We got married in 1945 on the 22nd December.

My father wanted to argue the point politically though he was really not politically minded. He was a great royalist. He listened intently to the King's Speech on xmas day. I always wanted to get away from it. Most of my life I have had an objection to cow towing to people in positions. It could get me into a spot of bother. For

example the staff in typing section went off to Northumberland Road to see the Queen. The supervisor said , "You should show your loyalty." It was not for me.

I had joined the LP when I was 16 in 1924. I wanted the impoverished to have a better deal and we needed to work for it. My membership sub was 6d per month. I was a member till 2004, eighty years! I remember Bob Hanlan and Jimmy Clydesdale. Both blind, real Glaswegians and both active councillors. I was elected to the council after my retirement in 1973. We had the view that only Tory workers would get time off to attend meetings My friend Eric Walker was my agent for nine years of failure to be elected for Wingrove Ward. After I had left Newcastle Eric rang me to tell me he had been elected, first time, without my help! It was a joke.

## POETRY

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### Labour Party Meeting

*Undecorated and dead this place of meeting  
but soon (how soon) alive and slashed  
with vivid colour of posters.  
I sit with pent up energies  
and desperate hopes. Urgent emergencies  
combine to make a searing ache  
within me. I sit, with perhaps  
a dozen other people round me  
on the edge of the abyss, the air  
pregnant with dreaded possibilities.  
Yet quietly I sit. I'm new to the movement.  
Through a drift of smoke I see, the speaker's face  
and cannot help but bear his voice.  
These few people know each other  
I find. Still here they sit though they  
have left long years behind.  
Is it for this you rallied down the years  
your flagging courage, dreamed your dreams?  
O obstinate hope, that still hopes on.  
Is it for this? I too shall tread  
this early road, and life go on  
always in a state of crisis;  
foam on the wave's crest and underneath  
the mutterings of a people?*

**Nellie Dodsworth (1937)**

## The Marks T' Gan By

*I asked Charlie what a fisherman must know.  
'Aal bloody things!' he answered me. 'How so?'  
'A fisherman hetti hev brains, y' kena, one time,'  
His fingers twisted round the slippery twine  
In the stove's faint firelight. It was getting dark.  
'Them days,' he said, 'w' hetti gan b' marks.*

*'Staggart, the Fairen Hoose; Hebron, Beadlin Trees...'  
Thus he began the ancient litany  
Of names, half-vanished, beautiful to hear:  
'Ga'n roond the Point, keep Bamburgh Castle clear  
The Black Rock, mind. Off Newton, steer until  
Ye've Staggart level the Nick a the Broad Mill.'*

*Novice, I listened. In the gloom I saw  
The rolled-up sail by the long-unopened door,  
A traveller, stiff with rust, a woodwormed mast –  
All the accumulation of the distant past.  
'Now, keep the Chorch on Alexandra Hoose,  
An' yon's the road...' 'Oh, Charlie, what's the use?'*

*I said. 'These memories! I know they're true,  
And certainly they're beautiful. But how can you  
Compete with all the science of these modern days?  
The echo-sounder's finished your outdated ways.  
Efficiency. That's what they want; not lore.  
Why should the past concern us any more?'*

*I could not see his face. The stove had died.  
‘There’s naen crabs noo,’ said Charlie sadly, and he sighed,  
And seeming not to hear me, sealed the knot.  
‘When ye see lippers comin’, when t’ stop  
An’ when t’ gan – that’s what ye need t’ kena.  
The sea’s the boss. Me fatterher telled me so.*

*‘Them marks,’ he said; ‘he handed aal them doon  
Like right an’ wrang. Them buggers for’ the toons,’ –  
He sliced the twine he sewed with, savagely –  
‘Th’ divvin’t kena what’s right. Th’ gan t’ sea –  
Their only mind’s for profit. They’ll no give  
Naen thowt t’ hoo their sons’ll hetti live.’*

*I saw, then. ‘So,’ I said, ‘as we embark,  
The past is map and measure, certain mark  
To steer by in the cold, uncertain sea?  
We leave it, like the land. But all we know –  
What to hang on to and when to let go –  
Leads from it...’ ‘Aye,’ said Charlie. ‘Sic an’ so.’*

**Katrina Porteous**

## **Battle of Friar's Goose**

*Friars' Goose facing millionaires' Rise  
Down across the Tyne, down across the years,  
With no pockmark of pits now. But then, though,  
Then, when men sank lower, lower than the river  
To hew and heave at petrifying darkness,  
Breaking earth up into shattered shadows  
Hauled up and away, leaving hollowness  
Below and a time, a need, for settling.*

*In that year monumental to Earl Grey,  
When masters were eased on Commons' benches  
With no show of hands, the hands showed elsewhere;  
At Black Fell, Hepburn, Boldon and Friars' Goose.  
Earth became emptied of men declaring  
Sixteen hours to be far too long for sweat  
And how Tommy Shops were no shops at all  
For working men not wanting to return  
What little they earned to fine gentlemen  
Far more interested in profit than pay.*

*That was the moment, the bond-age breaking.  
Men defaulted signing their time away,  
Blatantly flouting weighty agreements  
To which pitmen never freely agreed:  
From very deep down resentments surfaced.  
Coal barons lording in their fastnesses  
Called for mercenaries to relieve them.  
Forty-two miners from Cumberland with  
Lead in their boots on uncertain blacklegs  
Met with a pelting of stones and horse-shit,*

*Until only forty remained as two  
Were carried bleeding away. Still, two score  
To occupy holes Friars' Goose pitmen left,  
To take the homes Friars' Goose pitmen lived in.*

*Lawfully, gentlemen's hovels of course,  
Though no gentleman took up residence,  
Only, like labour, theirs to dispose of  
As whim, fancy and profit dictated.  
Only, pitmen were not shifting, they stood  
With brothers from Heworth and Windy Nook,  
Barring the doors to the leaden miners.  
Constables answered their calling, loading  
Guns with irony-pellets of swan-shot  
And their bellies with the bosses' beer.*

*So began the grand eviction, rifling  
Through the few bit 'n' bobs, little treasures  
Looking so mean and meagre wilfully  
Cast out into muck and mud of the street.  
Thus, restoration of law and order,  
Rights of the owners, not for the last time.  
And pitmen, unschooled in jurisprudence,  
Unable to fathom justice at work,  
Caught a constable napping (the beer, maybe?),  
Relieved him of the burden of duty  
And firearms, cornered his compatriots  
In a narrow lane. This was the moment  
For a second pelting, being as they were  
Beneath contempt and convenient hill.  
The dreaded event, stone hard after stone  
As the roof fell in on that contingent.*

*Dogs' abuse with foul oaths and fine cursing,  
With barroom bravery draining away  
In their uniform trousers. Blind panic  
Being the trigger for loosing off swan-shot  
Bringing a sharp reply in kind, causing  
Constables to evacuate themselves.  
United front so firm in their winning,  
But no victory. Even as they cheered,  
Behind their backs little devils crawled out  
From the pit to whisper in weaker ears,  
"Is this the way good Christian folk should be?  
Without restraint? Confounding authority?  
Are these wages of non-conformity?"*

*And a greater demon flew directly  
To occupy sacred meditations  
Of Gateshead's rector, brought low to his knees.  
"Blessed be the coal owners, the builders of spires,  
Blessed be the sons who'll inherit their earth,  
And damned be the hewers and carriers  
Who, deserting their appointed station,  
Presume upon the livings of those few  
With guile enough to turn coal into cash,  
While daring to confront and dissipate  
Forces of law, harbingers of order."  
For King, Saint George and sea coal soldiers marched  
Over the Tyne led by Newcastle's mayor  
And the rector, up off his knees and horsed,  
A small crusade to crucify rebels.*

*Pitmen respected the forces of blast,  
How easily muscles, sinews and bone*

*Could be blown apart by a single spark.  
So they dispersed not waiting for firing,  
Not wanting to leave their women counting  
Casualties again. Forty arrested  
At random, without resistance, without  
Restraint of those who beat them, those so sure  
A union, as bodies of men, might be  
Broken by the battle of Friars' Goose.*

### **Dave Alton**

#### **Tommy on the Bridge**

*(Thomas Ferens, 1841-1907, born blind and begged on  
Newcastle's High Level and Swing Bridges)*

*You were a miner's son,  
blinded  
in the fertile seam they dragged you from  
to beg out your time  
on the backs of bridges  
that joined others  
but left you split,  
splay-footed between rough stones  
and the snapping tomes  
of the Law of the Land  
and the Water.*

*You wore a casual cloth cap  
that muffled your bruised head.  
Your trousers sagging at your feet,  
you filled that dingy trench coat of yours  
reluctantly;*

*resigned to see life through,  
with only coins for eyes  
and a bridging loan to buy  
derelict clothes.*

*At Swing or High Level,  
you found a market;  
a centrepiece for the rich  
to lighten their swollen burden  
of conscience a trifle.  
And you "bored" yourself  
with a dignity that rejected buttons  
and accepted only the silver linings  
of fat pockets,  
bred on Victorian plenty  
and plenty of paupers like you.*

*You buried your stubbled face  
in the crowds that swam the Tyne.  
Years across now,  
you finally supped  
your last cracked gill  
of darkness.*

*And they picked you  
neatly from the swollen gutter;  
linked your broken hands at rest  
to bridge  
an empty chest.*

**Keith Armstrong**

## REVIEWS ARCHIVES SOURCES

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### **Debunking Myths...**

Matt Perry, *The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend* (University of Sunderland Press, 2005) pbk £12.95 ISBN 1873757 603

As the recent ‘fuel lobby’ has shown, the Jarrow March is a useful hold-all kind of protest that can lend its name to almost any kind of grievance about almost anything. Given the persistence of the myth and how widely known the name, it is surprising that Matt Perry’s is the first properly researched book-length account of the Jarrow March and subsequent efforts to lay claim to and employ its legacy. (Perry usually deems it the ‘Jarrow Crusade’, but notes that Jarrovians normally refer to it as the ‘March’).

Perry has done a good job on exposing many of the March’s multifarious and contradictory aspects. Keen to de-bunk myths, Perry considers the myths of ‘success’ and ‘universal support’. He shows that the marchers themselves were aware that the March failed to achieve anything in terms of securing work for Jarrow. Many authorities were, and remained, unsympathetic to the March, including the Labour Party’s national leadership, some newspapers, and, of course, the government itself. Hensley Henson, the Bishop of Durham, was angered at the Bishop of Jarrow’s support for the March and in the letters pages of the *Times* went as far as to condemn hysterically the marchers as revolutionaries. The self-serving motives of many of the wealthy backers of the March are exposed. The imagery of the March—particularly the use of the word ‘crusade’ given its association with Franco’s military uprising in Spain—was especially unfortunate, as Perry ably demonstrates. Another myth was that of its Englishness: Perry points out that most of the marchers were of Scottish or Irish descent. The book also traces how the myth itself developed: the Jarrow

March disappeared from view with post-war affluence, only to be dredged up again when unemployment inevitably returned.

In its new incarnations the Jarrow March was the symbol of respectable protest. Though antagonistic in 1936, the post-war national Labour leadership could associate itself with the image, without fear of awkward questions. Now, March images are used to market the north-east region as a tourist destination. Posterity certainly has a keen sense of irony.

The book seeks to locate the Jarrow March firmly in the tradition of inter-war Hunger Marches organised by the National Unemployed Worker's Movement (NUWM – a Communist inspired and led organisation). Indeed, NUWM activists were marching to London at around the same time. Clearly, in some senses the Jarrow March drew its inspiration from these marches, both earlier and contemporaneous. However, in an effort to contextualise the Jarrow March the aspects that made it very different from the NUWM Hunger Marches seem to be under-emphasised. Its 'non-political' stance, which in effect meant it accepted help from the major political parties but refused it from the far left (CP) and far right (British Union of Fascists) but not far right Conservatives, made it very different to the NUWM efforts. So keen were the organisers to maintain the 'non-political' appearance that care was even taken to choose 'neutral' colours for marchers' banners.

Rigorous application of this stance saw CP-donated money refused as it contravened the 'non-political' aspect of the March! (p.84) March Marshall David Riley was even prepared, apparently, to get the authorities to intervene against the CP if the need arose. This treatment did not, however, prevent Communists from interrupting a meeting they were holding in Hyde Park in order to support the Jarrow marchers' meeting when it arrived in London. As Perry points out, anti-communism was necessary in order to appeal to Conservatives. The tactic partly worked. Conservative support was -in some senses- obvious and fairly substantial. The Jarrow Conservative agent went ahead of the March with his Labour counterpart in order to arrange accommodation and so forth. Local Tories provided support for the March in Leeds (p.59). In Chesterfield, when Labour stayed away, the friendly local Conservatives were there to help out with tea and sympathy. (Here Labour was more anti-Communist than the Tories). So successful in appealing to the right was this strategy that even the implacably capitalist Economic League supported the marchers. In effect, this

tactic inevitably allowed the Conservatives to present themselves as a concerned party eager to do what they could –although it might not be very much- for the doughty unemployed fighters of Jarrow. Even Gratton Doyle, the pro-fascist Tory MP for Newcastle North, got a chance to show his caring side when the marchers reached Parliament.

Clearly, Perry was right to show that many of the rich and powerful were not sympathetic, or if they were it was for their own personal gain, such as self-publicity. (p.154) The key self-publicist was Sir John Jarvis and his role and motives are detailed. One possible aspect of Jarvis' motives that goes un-remarked in *The Jarrow Crusade* is that his son-in-law became Conservative parliamentary candidate for Jarrow. This did not happen until mid-1938, but it would be interesting to know the extent to which Jarvis' actions were part of a long-term endeavour to build a safe Tory seat for his daughter's husband to begin a political career.

The 'myth' of working-class support is not given the same detailed treatment. Yet it is more significant in terms of the March's failure to secure universal support given that, in theory at least, there were very many in the north-east in the same boat as the Jarrow marchers. As already mentioned, the organised working-class in the Labour Party in some localities the March passed through (such as Chesterfield) kept away, terrified by the spectre of communism and mindful of the trade union movement's anti-Communist 'Black Circular'. The lukewarm response in Chester-le-Street suggested that a local councillor's claim that the Jarrow March was a protest for the region as a whole was not widely felt. (p.31). It certainly appeared that they did not enjoy widespread support amongst their own. Indeed, the handful of resolutions and letters that the government received from organisations and individuals supporting the marchers was hardly a ringing endorsement.

This is also evident in the funds the March raised. Perry provides the total raised but there is little mention of organisations that might have been expected to be favourable, which refused to donate. (p.46) There are certainly examples of working-class organisations in the north-east region – such as trade union branches – that might be expected to support the marchers but which did not donate when they were asked. And many of these self-same organisations would often donate to other causes at local, national and even international levels (such as the Spanish relief funds). They had the money, and a requisite level of solidarity, but the Jarrow marchers often did not receive the benefits of this.<sup>1</sup>

The explanation for this must be due, in part, to mis-conceived anti-communism. The 1936 NUWM March helped muddy the waters in this respect, distracting attention from Jarrow and also, perhaps, engendering a level of ‘March fatigue’ (there were veterans and blind marches also going on at this time too; autumn 1936 truly was the British ‘marching season’). But it must also have had a great deal to do with the way in which the Jarrow marchers presented their case. They purposely distinguished their plight from that of the rest of the unemployed in the region -and in many of the towns they passed through- who were ‘simply’ victims of the depression. The Jarrow unemployed, claimed the marchers, were demonstrably direct victims of government policy. Jarrow’s situation, this argument implied, could be remedied by the government in a way that that of all other impoverished, workless places could not. The Jarrow March organisers’ message effectively put them outside of the rest of the unemployed working-class. It was no wonder the March struggled to secure working-class support. Furthermore, in securing the ostensible support of some of the powerful -including representatives of the party in power- the Jarrow March looked like it did not need the help of the rest of the working-class.

The non-political tactic presented the March with new problems and contradictions, but it also gave it a far better chance of good publicity. As Perry shows, the publicity it received was not universally good, but it was clearly predominantly very favourable. And it was surely this contemporary usually positive and widespread publicity that ensured it was remembered in later generations by the BBC and Labour Party leadership – and for the same reason (one that Perry discusses): that it offered no threat to the rulers of Britain. As Perry points out, those leading the March, and presumably most or all of those on it, were somewhere on the political left (with the exception, of course, of the Conservative agent for Jarrow). The ‘non-political’ label was only a tactic, intended to avoid the indifference or demonisation from the mainstream media that was the predominant lot of the other Hunger Marches. In that the March secured such predominantly favourable –and extensive- coverage from the mainstream media it was a brilliant success (and this is all that most of the historians Perry cites appear to have said).

Yet this publicity came at a significant cost. The price the March paid was to have its political impact, its political message, almost totally negated. A contemporary Communist activist claimed that the Jarrow March ‘went with

a begging bowl' to ask for work.<sup>2</sup> The government did not deign to throw a penny in the bowl, and the March had failed. Parliament did not even accept the all-Tyneside supporting petition because it had not been presented in the correct format. (p.165) It was a cruel ending and a bitter lesson for the marchers: constitutionalism and respectability ultimately counted for nothing. Perry claims early in the book that the other Hunger Marches were more successful than Jarrow's, but the reasons for this are not discussed at length. ('Begging' or 'demanding'- as the NUWM marchers- there was a deeper essential similarity. All Hunger Marches were basically legitimising the government of the day in their attempts to get it to provide work which, for many leftists, is merely to line the pockets of the capitalists in capitalist societies). As Perry writes: 'Some historians seem to accept, uncritically, the idea of contemporary publicity as the criterion of success but publicity was a means to an end not an end in itself'. (p.101) With the Jarrow March, the means and the end had become so confused that the sacrifices necessary to secure the means largely obviated the end.

Linked to this question of tactics is that of who invented the Jarrow March myth. Perry has rightly pointed out that the myth has served to obscure class antagonism, and has been employed and reinforced by various institutions such as the Church, the Labour Party, the BBC and so forth. At the time the mainstream media presented its version of the March to the public. But the myth was not merely an invention of the various institutions of capitalism. The protesters themselves, by appealing to 'respectable' cross-party opinion, deliberately chose to play down class antagonism. In this fundamental sense they were not being misrepresented by hostile capitalist interests; their own leaders had misrepresented them. Maybe not the rank-and-file marchers -about who we still know very little- but certainly their leaders, played a far larger part in the creation of their own myth than they might have liked. Capitalism has, in recent times, increasingly revealed its remarkable ability to commodify almost anything; to take something subversive and turn a profit. With its appeal to 'moderate', conservative opinion, the Jarrow March was a gift.

Given these considerations, Perry's claim that 'the Jarrow crusade was inescapably a working class protest and stands in a tradition of popular radicalism' (p.180) is somewhat misleading. Perry claims that the Jarrow riot of 1939 was in the same lineage of protest as the 1936 March. There probably was one kind of lineal connection. Many of the town's inhabitants remained unemployed and poor and their anger and frustration must have played a part in sparking the 1939 riot.

The March's failure to secure work for Jarrow's unemployed must have made the riot more likely. But in terms of 'working-class protest' the two actions were in fact polar opposites: the Jarrow March all order, peace, organisation and an appeal to moderate opinion, the riot all spontaneity, violence, disorder and with no interest in making any kind of appeal to anyone. Clearly the state did not approve of the marchers, and petty bureaucrats showed this by denying their families benefits, etc., But the March itself did nothing but legitimate the state. In no way was it a threat. Only the predictable paranoia of some State officials obscured this.

The Jarrow March is of most significance not for the class and politics of its protagonists but rather for how, given their class and politics, they chose to act in the political world. The tactical choice to adopt effectively a 'non-political' label in an effort to secure the support of those who otherwise were likely to have been hostile clearly distinguished the Jarrow March from the contemporary NUWM Hunger Marches. However, it did bare close comparison with another set of contemporary campaigns. Many of the Spanish Aid campaigns; most notably -in terms of its size and 'success'- the Tyneside foodship, made the self-same Faustian pact.<sup>3</sup> The simple lesson from both the Jarrow March and the Tyneside foodship campaigns is for activists to think very carefully about the extent of the sacrifices they make in order to curry favour with the powerful, be they newspaper proprietors, the government or wealthy benefactors. A radical political message, and the tactics to make it effective, should not be rejected in pursuit of the chimera of ruling class approval. A letter to the *Daily Worker* about the Jarrow March quoted by Perry put it well: 'to be non-political in such circumstances is surely criminal'. (p.147).

This book is almost as much about Ellen Wilkinson as it is about the Jarrow March. The depiction of Wilkinson is a contentious one. Perry appears to endorse Wilkinson's associate Conze's claim that she was a 'British Rosa Luxembourg'. Perry claims that 'Because of her association with the respectable and non-political Crusade, representations of Ellen Wilkinson tend to water down her radicalism'. (p.14) and cites several of her actions in support of this claim. In 1935, Wilkinson identified herself clearly in print with the tradition of revolutionary soviets, in the 'worker's council' sense of the word. But when the chance came to champion a revolution occurring in significant parts of Republican Spain from late July 1936 (inspired and largely carried out by anarchists), Wilkinson did not do so. Perry notes that on the Spanish civil War Wilkinson was 'closer to the Stalinist position than the revolutionary one'.

(p.107). But this position was not an aberration; it is key to understanding where Wilkinson was politically in the late 1930s.<sup>4</sup>

There are some questions, too, over precisely the role Wilkinson played before, during and after the Jarrow March. Clearly an inspiration to the marchers as they were walking to London her role becomes a little more problematic on arrival in Parliament. She ensured, in collaboration with the police, that the marchers were enjoying a boat trip on the Thames when the petition was presented, in order to avoid an 'outcry' in parliament. (p.163). Later Wilkinson and the March leaders persuaded the marchers not to stage a spontaneous 'stay in protest'. Again Wilkinson's role was to ensure that the marchers did not get out of control. (p.168). As Perry writes, the occupation tactic was an expression of working-class confidence at this time. But it was a tactic not favoured by the supposed revolutionary Ellen Wilkinson: at least, not when she was in charge in 1936.

On return from the March the four key Labour Party organising figures, including March marshal Riley, left Jarrow Labour Party. Perry mentions this incident twice but omits the fact that these organisers claimed Wilkinson had tried her best to prevent the March going ahead.<sup>5</sup> That the one individual (on the left at least) who arguably came out of the whole affair having gained the most (in terms of popular exposure) could have tried everything she could to stop the March happening is an astonishing claim. Of course, it may well have been an exaggeration, or even a fabrication, borne out of bitterness at the recognition of the March's failure and the need to find a scapegoat. But it is surely worthy of a mention, precisely because it suggests a more complex-and less harmonious-relationship between Wilkinson, the marchers and its key organisers.

It also hints at anger at Wilkinson's upwardly moving career.

Perry's depiction of the departure of the 'four laddies' from the party as a result of their moving to the left also seems problematic. (p.181) They did eventually establish a short-lived branch of the left-wing ILP in the town, but their stated reason for leaving the party was in protest at the misappropriation of funds. They claimed that funds for the Jarrow marchers were wasted by Labour Party members who did not go on the March themselves. (One Jarrow councillor was alleged to have had a lift to London in a car and then claimed the rail fare!) The four then spent a good deal of time attacking the supposed communists who remained inside Jarrow Labour Party, not what would be

expected of any but the most militant of anti-Stalinist left wingers (and there is no evidence that the four were so inclined). If the 'four laddies' were disenchanted with the results of their first March, it did not prevent them, as Perry points out, advocating a second on more than one occasion. (p.180).

Wilkinson's career, as Perry himself notes, 'blossomed after the Crusade'. This did not occur by accident. Indeed, there may even have been some kind of link between her involvement in the March and her subsequent rise through the ranks. Clearly, advocacy of the March put her at odds with some of the Communist-obsessed Labour leadership, but her 'courageous' stance at 1936 party conference must have brought her a good deal of respect from much of the party rank-and-file, in her own constituency as throughout the country. Evidently, Wilkinson was a complex individual. But she was far more a calculating politician than a Marxist revolutionary who happened to adopt -almost accidentally- a few Stalinist positions. This is not to say that she had no political principles or that she would jettison anything that was awkward. It is merely to recognise that she was operating in confusing times with various influences pushing her in very different directions, and that this inevitably had its complex, contradictory effects. Her relationship with Morrison, who was, after all, a relatively strong advocate for Republican Spain, becomes more comprehensible if she is considered in this way.

This book is well researched. Perry has done a very good job in consulting a wide range of sources, including rent books for marchers as well as securing the release of some files under the Freedom of Information Act. Perry's intention was 'to reach a popular audience, including both North-easterners interested in their ancestors and those more widely interested in the history of labour and to write in a scholarly manner'. (p.8). He certainly succeeded in this, as the book is well-written in an engaging and lively style. The book is structured as a diary, detailing the marcher's experiences each day, but broken up by 'asides' into various relevant aspects of the March, its participants and other events (including the other contemporaneous marches). Some of the most revealing sections are those detailing what the cabinet was discussing as the March was on its way south. Invariably, the cabinet did not concern itself with the March and its demands: it certainly did not appear scared.

At times this narrative method works very well, breaking up what would otherwise be a fairly dry account of the daily drudge of the marchers. Some of the

segues are a little clunky, and occasionally, the ‘popular style’ grates a little. There are also some (admirably few) niggling inaccuracies and a handful of typos.

The history of the Jarrow March is shot through with ironies. The ultimate irony must be that the European war and re-armament eventually provided work for Jarrow’s unemployed, the very thing Ellen Wilkinson and the left in general were trying to avoid. Whether the survival of the memory and the myth of the Jarrow March is a reflection of a widely held belief that it was ‘successful’ or not, there is at least one sense in which the Jarrow March was a fitting symbol for the 1930s. The experience of the Jarrow March, in all its facets, nicely illustrates just how muddle-headed and impotent the left was in the period; how hopelessly incapable it was of extricating itself from the contradictions of its own theoretical and practical imbroglios.

The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend is a good book on the topic. It provides some fascinating insights into how the myth of the Jarrow March was constructed and how it has been used and recuperated since 1936, by who and for what ends. It also contains a good deal of material on social conditions, providing something of an antidote to the ‘revisionists’. It is engaging and passionately written, stimulating and provocative. It is a good place to start a debate on the nature of the British ‘left’ in the 1930s, the problems it faced and the ways in which it dealt with them and why. As Perry has shown, history is there to be contested. There is a story here still to contest and Perry has made a good contribution to this ongoing process. Some myths have been laid to rest. But others, arguably, have been created. This book perhaps poses more questions than it answers, many of which are directly related to contemporary and future ‘protest’ movements. For this reason, they are certainly questions worth posing.

**Lewis H. Mates**

**Reply...**

**The ‘British Rosa Luxemburg’, the Shadow Home Secretary and the ‘counter-myths’ of the Jarrow Crusade.**

I would like to thank the Society for hosting the book launch for *The Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend* and for inviting me to reply to Lewis’s review. Since the publication, my interest in the Crusade remains unquenched. Several relatives of Crusaders have approached me and provided nice snip-its of family history

that confirm my basic assumptions that behind the myth of the Crusade lies a much richer history.

I don't mean to seem churlish given that parts of Lewis's review are very positive about my book. I thank Lewis for his generosity and I put my hands up to a couple of spelling errors he points out. Hopefully my comments raise some interesting points of discussion for the Society and the journal's readership. I offer these in the spirit of fraternal debate.

My approach to the Crusade was to write a day-by-day approach to dramatise the action, give a feel of the Crusaders' experiences and to set the scene of the turbulent atmosphere of 1936 when the global crisis quickened the pace of political time. My aim by adopting this usual structure was to challenge the historicist reading of events as disconnected, unique and without present-day relevance. I also hoped to demonstrate that the Jarrow Crusade has been generally misappropriated and misinterpreted in order to feed prescriptive definitions of legitimate protest and particular institutional views of the past (such as those of the BBC and the Labour Party). Exploration of the sources reveal that the locations and personalities provide innumerable connections between the Crusade and other contemporaneous issues like Spain, the hunger marches, anti-fascism and the abdication crisis as well as reverberations with the present.

I explicitly anticipated the criticism, which as it turns out Lewis subscribes to, that I was creating my own myths. (p.181.) At the level of the historian's understanding of knowledge, or epistemology, scholarly debate cannot be reduced to a sterile he-said-she-said relativism. The widest array of evidence combined with a conceptual and methodological clarity can expose false understandings and go beyond accepted myths and prevailing representations to a more accurate reconstruction of the past. This in effect is what the argument against postmodernism in history has been all about. If we examine my 'counter-myths' in turn then we can see the error inherent in Lewis's relativist position.

Firstly there is my 'counter-myth of working-class support'. I challenged the idea that the Jarrow Crusade had universal support. The sympathy it had was widespread but uneven and can be differentiated geographically and sociologically. Put simply there is a difference between solidarity and paternalism. My counter-myth, according to Lewis, entailed 'little mention of organisations that might have been expected to be favourable who refused to donate'. This

statement is contradictory and ambiguous. Where there were labour institutions refusing to donate, I cited them. But the subjunctive tense 'might have been expected to' implies that I should have speculated counterfactually in the absence of evidence. Indeed, the only evidence that Lewis provides is of Burradon lodge giving 5/- to the Crusade and hence providing data contrary to that he claimed was absent in my account. Where support from working-class organisations was lacking it was not due, as Lewis suggests, to the exclusively local character of the Crusade's demands but because of the official opposition of the Labour and TUC leadership to all such marches.

Secondly, there is my counter-myth of Red Ellen. I did not intend to give a rounded biographical portrait but to reveal the different glimpses of Jarrow's MP as she rushed up and down the country. I did, however, want to challenge the patronising image that was prevalent in the press that she was a tame feeble woman or 'wee Ellen'. I tried to introduce material that had thus far been neglected in discussions of her. Unlike some other accounts of Ellen Wilkinson, I do not obscure either her radicalism (as Lewis does) or her compromises in office. Instead, Lewis states that I 'appear[...] to endorse ... that she was "a British Rosa Luxemburg"'. Any fair reading of pages 14 to 15 could not come up with this. Even more perversely, and this is a bit of a habit, Lewis quotes my own evidence back at me about Ellen Wilkinson's positions regarding the Spanish Civil War. Evidence of her ambiguous attitude to the Crusade is yet more of my own evidence thrown back at me. By the way, she, I'm sure Lewis would approve, condemned the police heavy-handedness in the House of Commons after the Jarrow riot.

On the departure of the four Jarrow councillors from Labour Party after the march, Lewis accuses me of omissions and problematic depiction. Trying to provide new material in the book, I did not rehash my Northern History article of September 2002, although it is referred to in my footnote. Lewis's portrayal - using only one newspaper source - does not do justice to the complex aftermath on the Labour Party of the Crusade. I was aware of the gossipy recriminations about money to which he refers - which by the way persist in certain quarters in Jarrow even today - but the Crusade's accounts were fully audited and emphasis on such unsubstantiated claims would hardly take our understanding further forward.

Lewis has another foible which would render redundant most of the project of history from below or labour history, from Wat Tyler to the Poll

tax. He states that the National Unemployed Workers' Movement (NUWM) legitimised the state because the former put demands on the latter. He, perhaps consequently, slips into the revisionist liberal position that the NUWM and the hunger marches achieved nothing. The David Davis saga illustrates just what an astonishing disservice to the NUWM and its activists this is.<sup>6</sup> At Conservative Party conference last October, Shadow Home Secretary David Davis, bidding for party leadership, claimed that his grandfather was on the Jarrow Crusade. Walter Harrison, Davis's step-grandfather, actually took part in the 1936 national hunger march and was branch secretary of North Shields NUWM. That branch was involved in foiling evictions, advising or representing claimants and organising demonstrations. It made a difference to the lives of the unemployed. In 1932, the National Administrative Council of the NUWM reported thus from North Shields, 'Another demonstration took place on Oct. 5th and a baton charge was made. Fierce hand-to-hand fighting occurred and the workers, numbering 6,000, were able to beat back the attacks that were made.'<sup>7</sup> Harrison went to Durham jail for his part in such events as did hundreds of NUWM activists including the 76 year old Tom

Mann who spent Christmas 1932 in jail thereby unwittingly, according to Lewis's logic, legitimising the British state. As for 'march fatigue', no evidence is offered for this. The fact that so many had taken to the street in October 1936 surely proves the opposite. Like the other hunger marches, Lewis claims that the Jarrow Crusade legitimised the state. Instead, it and the other popular struggles of the 1930s de-legitimised the Baldwin government. This was a slow process ultimately resulting in the atmosphere that accompanied downfall of Chamberlain, when William Beveridge's reforms and Cato's Guilty Men caught the mood and Orwell believed that England was close to revolution.

Furthermore, and more fundamentally than the relativism of his 'counter-myths', Lewis's hindsight lacks all sense of self-awareness or self-criticism. Can someone on the left today really say that the left of the 1930s was 'muddled-headed [...]... impotent' and 'hopelessly incapable of extricating itself from the contradictions of its own theoretical and practical imbroglios'? It is much easier to sympathise with the POUM or the CNT today, than it was for Ellen Wilkinson in May 1937. She did not have Hugh Thomas, Ken Loach and Ronald Fraser to turn to and had not witnessed the events of 1956, 1968 or 1989. The achievements of the left during the 1930s should not be exaggerated. Yet they were real enough. In response to Lewis's dismissiveness, all I can do is

paraphrase E. P. Thompson: I was seeking to rescue the poor Jarrow marcher, the International Brigaders, the 'obsolete' fighters at Cable Street, the 'utopian' NUWMers, the stay-down miners and even the deluded followers of Ellen Wilkinson, from the enormous condescension of posterity.

- <sup>1</sup> For example, Burradon miner's lodge. On 1 October 1936 it decided against donating 5/- to the Jarrow March, but the same meeting did vote in favour of sending 5/- to Blyth anti-Means Test marchers (presumably the Blyth NUWM contingent). It did not support many appeals received from various Spanish Aid campaigns until December 1937 when it sent £1 to the International Brigade Wounded Aid Association. Tyne and Wear Archives Service, 1691/1/3, Burradon Lodge Minutes, 1 October 1936; 9 December 1937.
- <sup>2</sup> Imperial War Museum Sound Archive, 11877, Tape-recorded Interview with Frank Graham.
- <sup>3</sup> See Lewis Mates, 'Britain's De Facto Popular Front? The Case of the Tyneside Foodship Campaign, 1938-1939', *Labour History Review*, 69:1, 2004, pp.323-345.
- <sup>4</sup> For discussion of aspects of the Jarrow March and Ellen Wilkinson, see Lewis H. Mates, 'The United Front and the Popular Front in the North East of England, 1936-1939', unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, Newcastle University, 2002, pp.33-4, 79-108, 200-202.
- <sup>5</sup> *North Mail*, 30 December 1936.
- <sup>6</sup> The Times, 7 October 2005. I played a role in exposing Davis's mistake.
- <sup>7</sup> Working Class Movement Library, NUWM NAC meeting minutes, 3-4 December 1932.

**Matt Perry**

### **The Geordie nation?....**

***Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*** (ed. Robert Colls and Bill Lancaster, Northumbria University Press, 2005)

If the truth be told, British politics has never really taken regional devolution seriously. Occasionally, in the 1970s for instance, governments are panicked into token gestures but it would be a mistake to assume that the heavily centralised British State would ever cede real power to the periphery. Some of the contributors to this volume (but note not the voters!) think otherwise. Well, they can if they want, but over-stressed academics should find

better uses of their time. There is lots to discuss about the ten chapters in the book and if most of it is backward-looking, maybe that's what the region is all about. One hopes not.

Are the Geordies the Catalans of twenty-first century Britain and is Newcastle, despite the incredulous mockery of Brian Sewell, its natural regional capital? Yet even the title of this collection itself is a misnomer and spells out the problems of identifying and locating Sir John Hall's 'Geordie nation'. Is the region the subject matter of the book or just those million or so who cling to the Tyne and have yet to move South and who will thereafter call themselves 'exiles'? The Scots and the Welsh do this, I dare say, but do the evacuees of other English region? As increasingly virulent local football rivalries testify, a new narrative of local identity has sprung into life. In the North East this pits Geordies against 'Mackems' and 'Smoggies'. Lots of people don't fit into any one of these and (see the voting figures for the rejection of the North East Assembly) feared that an authentic regionalism would mean a battle for status among the big three and only crumbs for the remainder.

Curiously, the editors of this collection want to appropriate the term 'Geordie' for the whole region, ignoring the fact that most residents caught up in this trawl would reject the label. No doubt an identikit picture of the North East can, as Robert Colls demonstrates, easily be assembled. Ingredients include peripherality, a shared industrial history and a persistent self-referencing, a formidable dialect (give or take intra-regional variations), a regional loyalty (partly based on a sense of grievance it must be said) and so forth. An emerging North East narrative weaving together various tropes of circuit drinking, sporting failure and a powerful, if slowly receding machismo, provides some of the underlying energy.

At the same time, the narrative also incorporates an increasingly visceral set of sub-regional rivalries. Much of this was a direct and unsurprising consequence of the competitive urban policy ushered in by Michael Heseltine after 1981. The zero-sum logic of this policy has probably corroded whatever consensuality the old municipalism had bequeathed to Tyne-Wear-Tees politics. In addition, the distinctive industrial bases of the North East cities involved a certain degree of interdependence which all but vanished in the new context of the so-called 'weightless' economy. As Colls observes, local authorities across the UK, consequently, are in a headlong and desperate pursuit of

‘place’ marketing and this, alongside the whole universe of urban development corporations, garden cities, European cities of culture and so on, undermines rather than endorses regional loyalties.

Nevertheless, whether the focus is the region or the river, can there be a fresh ‘narrative’ and what might it contain? Obviously not, as David Byrne warns, the neo-liberal model which has dominated British political life for over 25 years. Yet is his industrial alternative feasible? The incoherence of British industrial policy goes back to 1945 and beyond. The Anglo-Saxon mode of capitalism has always relied on short-term expedients – the Heath Government went through the full gamut without success and ended up in bathos – and has only looked the part in some sectors and at fleeting moments. Regional government seems to be his panacea but a North East Region would be dividing up a very small cake indeed and it would not necessarily have a manufacturing flavour. Each of the UK’s regions must, in the end, concentrate on those goods and services where it has or has some hopes of comparative advantage. The present compromise (improve the social and physical infrastructure, invest heavily in skills, education and ICT, take culture and tourism seriously, provide the building land and offices that employers want and take advantage of the potential in port-based enterprises and other indigenous sectors which have some future) could be the only show in the North East. Sid Chaplin’s roll call of greats – Clarke Chapman, Swan Hunter, Reyrolle, Wigham Richardson among many – belonged to an industrial culture long gone and probably not replicable.

Bill Lancaster confirms this. As he points out, Newcastle has been, in fact, relatively well-placed as a regional capital to ride the post-industrial wave. In fact, it’s Wearside and Teeside which regularly vie for the London Evening Standard ‘it’s grim up North’ bouquet, even if neither have experienced Fleet Street fear and loathing as much as Merseyside has. To some extent they resemble Derby and Leicester in the shadow of Nottingham but lacking their economic potential and indeed that of the East Midland Region as a whole. Many of the chapters in *Geordies*, Lancaster’s in particular, describe convincingly how the cultural superstructure of Newcastle transcends the disappointing economic substructure and in fact has possibly replaced it.

Possibly, however, the same sombre conclusions may apply to the region’s consumers as it does to their faltering producers (c.f. Newcastle United). Alan Plater reveals a cultural life, brave and vibrant as it is, just as remote from the

metropolitan core as manufacturing had become. Nevertheless, television's insatiable appetite for material means that even the North East has begun, more than many other regions in point of fact, to feature regularly in the *Radio Times*. It is even possible that Heaton's Maxim Gorky, Jack Common, if he had been born forty years later need not have languished unfulfilled in the South, copying both George Orwell's prose style and moustache, but could have propped up the bar at the Chillingham Hotel alongside Sid Chaplin, Alan Plater, Lee Hall, Ian Le Frenais and other modern heroes.

The dialect too, as a badge of separateness and social class, survives and even thrives. So far it has remained largely impervious to the ravages of Estuary English but also could mark, despite the likes of Jack Cunningham and Alan Milburn, the lack of incorporation of Geordieland into the national culture. At the same time, Barry Carr makes a case in 'Black Geordies', for the dialect as a force for incorporation. Many of the inter-racial resentments in the South Shields of the 1920s and 30s were in fact defused by the common patois of Tyneside.

Other iconic features of Geordie life may not travel very well either. Paul Younger reminds us that, in addition to the language, there are the monolithic politics, the songs, the drinking culture, the sense of exclusion and exclusiveness, fuelling a weird combination of self-esteem and paranoia, the perception of a shared history and much else besides. The theme of old wine in new bottles (or is it the reverse?) is taken up also in Bill Williamson's chapter. 'Living The Past Differently'. The past is certainly a rich tapestry in the North East and a case is made that it need not be a burden. Nor is it, of course, a beacon to the future. Alternative economic scenarios for the North East are scarcely touched upon in the 200 pages of *Geordies* but clearly the heritage industry can expect to play only a minor part in the region's crystal ball gazing.

Presumably social inclusion also must be at the centre of the brave new world of the North East and this is something the book does touch upon. Racism and male chauvinism, for instance, might be expected to leave a grim trail across North Eastern history but ethnic minorities remain a relatively peripheral issue compared with, say, the West Midlands or the North West and the status of women can genuinely be said to have improved in the last fifty years or so. Interestingly, on the racial front, it is on Sunderland rather than Newcastle that far-right groups have set their sights. At 2-3%, the minority ethnic representation in the North East can not be said to bear out the Thatcher

panic about 'swamping', but a battle remains to be fought as it does in many parts of Britain. Carr points out that it is now the Bangladeshis, perceived on all sides as being at the foot of the national status ladder, who bear the brunt of racist animosity across the North East. Can Bangladeshis be Geordies too as the Arabs expected seventy and eighty years ago in South Shields? Incidentally, one missing element, perhaps revealingly, in the social inclusion discussion is the much undervalued Jewish contribution to Newcastle. Geordie Jews have been Councillors, Lord Mayors, Chief Rabbis, MPs and Lord Chief Justices among other things; most impressive from a population which was never much more than 5,000 and is now regrettably in decline. A separate chapter in the next addition of *Geordies* would not be over-egging the pudding.

Significantly, Elaine Knox is the sole female contributor to this book and indeed, swamped by the nine male colleagues, takes a stab at explaining why women should be as crucial to the Geordie narrative as dead footballers. The great five staple industries of Tyneside – coal mining and distribution, shipping, shipbuilding, iron production and heavy engineering – did not greatly lend themselves to female emancipation. Women were confined to those sectors – domestic and personal service, the retail trade, clerks and typists, hotel and restaurant work – which did not threaten male vanities. Even the post-war surge in female employment failed to disturb the stereotypes, and women themselves were apt to resist occupational categorisation.. As Knox confirms, the Second World War shattered much of this consensus and paved the way for sharp rises in the numbers of working women from the 1960s onwards. The two-income family became an inherent part of the post-war consumer boom without, it seems totally torpedoing the North East's Andy Capp illusions. The reality of twenty-first century Tyneside might be female spending, home-making and the strain of women's dual role, but at the level of mythology, Knox concedes, the misogynist male still rules the roost.

Undoubtedly, the book is highly successful in explaining why and how the North East continues to exert its spell both on those who stay and the 'exiles'. When contributing to any debate about the homeland (take a look at the football websites) disqualification is the penalty for anybody writing from a domicile south of the Tees unless they can provide (blood test, birth certificate, witness statements) an alibi. In my experience as an exile, outsiders ( and some natives like Sting) tend to regard this situation with incredulity and dismay. A region celebrating itself, its failures as well as its triumphs, can it is true look somewhat

absurd but who else would do it? Harvey Taylor, in his thought-provoking chapter on ‘Sporting Heroes’, touches on this danger of self-parody but also confirms, along with the other contributions, what rich pickings there are. Could other regions say the same? It will be nice to find out.

**Roger Hall**

***Ongoing debate...***

This book was originally published in 1992 as a celebration of the rich diversity of Geordie culture at a difficult point in its history after the closure of the mines and the loss of many of the traditional jobs in ship building and engineering. Its roots were in the History Workshop series of the 1980s, in particular the 1987 Newcastle History Workshop Conference which both editors helped to organise. This workshop focused on culture and identity and allowed the diverse participants the opportunity to stand up against the prevailing Thatcherism of the period and explore what makes Geordies special. The editors of this book challenged its readers to look ahead to a time when the voice of the north-east would be heard again in Europe and the region would pave the way for a more devolved form of government with the regions at its heart.

This edition has a new preface but otherwise is the same as the original edition with a few amendments and corrections. The very first question which must be asked is whether it still engages with the issues facing the very different north east of 2006, a north east in which Newcastle City Council now has a Liberal Democrat majority and thousands of people are flowing into an art gallery in a converted flour mill which is currently showing an exhibition of photographs of 1700 naked Geordies who got up at 3.0 a.m to claim their place in a work of art.

The first answer must be a resounding yes. The editors saw the book as the beginning of a debate and this debate about politics, the relations between an ever more overbearing state and the regions as well as what constitutes good governance in a rapidly changing society is as relevant as ever. However there is some frustration that the context of this debate is still the lost world of the late 80s and early 90s when it can be argued that the last 15 years have seen changes as profound in the region as those which catapulted it into industrial prominence in the first half of the nineteenth century.

So who are the Geordies? As an incomer to the region who arrived in Newcastle in 1979 from Ireland via Scotland and a brief stay in Yorkshire I felt both very much at home and also quite remote from Geordie land and its people, which I saw as characterised by a male dominated world formed by the industries in which many had earned a living for generations and which were now disappearing. Slag heaps still covered the landscape though many of the smaller pits had long since gone. At the time I perceived a certain self-congratulatory complacency which saw Newcastle in particular and the north east more generally as special, different, unique; this air of self-satisfaction is reflected in places in this book. Its authors all meet one of the shifting criteria for being Geordie of the having been born within three miles of the Tyne. And the women are largely missing as the authors recognise although the chapter by Elaine Knox rightly reminds us that it is the male world which renders the work of many women less visible than it should be.

However despite these reservations, the Geordies has helped me understand how and why I immediately felt at home here in a way I never have further south in England.

The first reason for this is best put by Paul Younger in his reflective coda to the book. His stay in the U.S.A and his friendship with a native American contributed to his understanding of the north east as a border land, always on the boundary, between England and Scotland, between Celts and Anglo Saxons, between Celtic and Roman forms of Christianity, conscious of its otherness to mainstream English views. My own background is in a contested Ulster with a family who over time has moved from Scotland to Ireland, from England to Ireland and thence to Canada and New Zealand and then back and who has never and will never be English.

This brings me to the second reason for feeling at home, though it has taken me a long time to recognise this. The origins of the term Geordies is another contested one but one accepted definition is miners of the nineteenth century and by extension all working people. Who were these people? It is well known that the population of Tyneside grew significantly in the nineteenth century and as Mike Barke shows in his chapter in the same editors' recently published Newcastle upon Tyne although the majority of migrants were from surrounding counties, significant numbers came from Ireland and Scotland, from where they brought their customs and songs as well as religion. The story is that these new comers

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## Jarrow Crusade: Protest and Legend

by Matt Perry

The Jarrow Crusade is hailed as a defining moment of the hungry thirties. It was the protest of the people of a Tyneside town against the closure of their shipyard and the blocking of their new steelworks. More than any other protest, it is held up as a model for others to follow. Its rejection of politics and its courting of respectable opinion are seen as the reason for its success;

this at least is the version of events that many will be familiar. However, the Crusade did not win jobs for Jarrow and a series of myths and folklore have come to surround the event. This book is an attempt to get to grips with the real history of the Crusade. It is a history that offers insights into the character of British society and into the nature of protest then and now.



  
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were relatively easily accepted although the history of the Yemini Arabs of South Shields in this volume reminds us that the settlement was not always without conflict. (It is worth remembering that one of the main changes of the last ten years has been the arrival of people from many parts of the world, many of whom have come after traumatic experiences in their own countries – how soon will they come to be accepted as Geordies?) However the point is that Geordies are not a God given fixed category and that there have always been new Geordies.

Linked to this is the famous Geordie dialect, unique in the world and instantly recognisable. But just like the people, further exploration shows that it in turn has been added to at different times with words brought by some of the migrants. The chapter by Tom Hadaway on Comic dialect made me laugh out loud; he captured the inimitable style and humour of the Geordies but one of the anecdotes included the line ‘Gan ti Ann, an’ tell hor A’ll torn’, meaning change his religion, is instantly recognisable as Irish in origin. (or is it? Maybe it went the other way round but in this case I don’t think so)

No short review can do justice to the rich diversity of this book and I haven’t mentioned many of the chapters. I haven’t even mentioned football I hope that the success of this new edition will prompt new debates and lead to an entirely new collection which looks forward to the next 15 years.

**Sarah Rennie**

### **Big book, big themes...**

Alistair Moffatt and Georgie Rosie, *Tyneside: A History of Newcastle and Gateshead from Earliest Times*, Mainstream Publishing, 2005. Hbk £20, ISBN 1845960130

It is not easy to write the history of a town, city or area. The writer has to be expert in many different periods and, as time passes it gets more difficult since there is so much more ground to cover. The writer has also to take account of changing concerns and new evidence in writing history. The early historians of course had a shorter chronology but they also had less evidence available to inform them. Then, before the nineteenth century a description of surviving physical structures formed the basis of accounts with some attention to function. In the case of Newcastle early historians had the churches and monasteries, the castle and town wall to play with. The accounts of Gray, Bourne, Brand, Baillie and Hodgson dealt predominantly with these areas and

are most useful today in allowing us to see what the town looked like at the point where the account was written.

The two main 19<sup>th</sup> Century histories MacKenzie and Charleton broke much new ground. Mackenzie brought the account down to 1827 dealing in detail with the guild system, the coal trade, industrial disputes and politics including popular politics. His eye-witness account of the great 1819 reform demonstration is invaluable. Charleton's 1882 history is a superbly imaginative evocation of the streets of the town, almost building by building. He very cleverly weaves individual people and some groups like the keelmen into the story.

The only substantial twentieth century work by Sydney Middlebrook, a Royal Grammar School history master brings the new discipline of economic history into play. Fifty years on it still stands as an excellent account of the town's development from the Roman period. It is also pretty good on mainstream political developments before World War I, though some readers of this journal will smile wryly at his encomium for T Dan Smith in the introduction to the Second Edition (1967). Norman McCord's, 'North East England', (1979) is a valuable and comprehensive account but covers a much wider geographical canvass.

The best twentieth century one volume history is Frank Manders, History of Gateshead (1973). He manages to deal very successfully with the need to produce both a chronological and thematic history which enables him to deal with the key post-Second World War issues of education, housing and welfare. He also includes some very useful brief biographies of Gateshead people.

In the new century we already have two volumes. Rob Colls and Bill Lancaster have played safe in Newcastle Upon Tyne: A Modern History (2001). The authors have drawn together a team of experts to produce a first class set of essays. Especially fine are Joyce Ellis's, The 'Black Indies': Newcastle's Economic Development 1700-1840, Joan Hugman's (Allen) on Joseph Cowan, 'Print and Preach, Natasha Vall's survey of twentieth century economic development, Dave Byrne's blistering attack on post-1945 planning and Rob Colls own essay on George Stephenson. However, despite the comprehensive title the book falls short of being a *history* of Newcastle.

The most recent volume, 'Tyneside: A History of Newcastle and Gateshead from Earliest Times' is very different from all previous accounts. It is relentlessly

popular in style and content and hence will not please many academics requiring measure and thorough referencing. On the other hand it is enormously accessible and will appeal to the general reader.

‘So every time someone in Tynemouth or Gateshead switches on a light, he or she makes that elderly American billionaire just a little bit richer.’ This is a reference to Warren Buffet, the second richest man in the world’s majority shareholding in the former Northern Electricity Board. One of the strengths of Alistair Moffat and George Rosie’s book is the deft way in which they relate developments on Tyneside to the context of international political economy. This is as true of their handling of the expansion of the second century Roman Empire and 16<sup>th</sup> Century coal economy as it is of contemporary global capitalism.

The book has other merits. It is very strong on imaginative, yet credible speculations. This is particularly helpful in the opening part of the book which remarkably takes 10,000 B. C. as its departure point in a lively narrative which rattles along all the way through over one hundred pages to 1066. Of course the opening sections are based on the most fragmentary evidence: harpoons shaped from deer antlers, carbon dating of hazelnut shells, DNA samples from ancient breeds of cattle, post holes, small cists (graves), place names. Such titbits are deployed with analogous material to evoke vivid portraits of societies long gone. There is more material available for the Roman period and the picture of Roman Tyneside is as visually sharp as any previously produced. There is a sense of a landscape peopled by real human beings.

Narrative history is very difficult to write in a way which reaches analytical depth and avoids irritating diversion from the main story. The authors achieve the latter by the liberal use of text boxes. Where else could you find a history of porridge rubbing shoulders with gay Normans, contentious keelmen, nags (ponies), Geordies (definition), John Buddle, Harry Clasper, mining disasters, Scots on Tyneside, the author of *Moonfleet*, *Zamyatin*, the *Broon Dog*, *The Animals*, *Get Carter*, *Gazza*, *Sting* and *Alan Shearer*. And these are just a few. It is a successful ploy though occasionally simply banal.

Apart from the luminous early chapters the strongest parts of the book are the middle sections. Here the authors effectively trace and explain the centrality of coal in building prosperity for a small elite which dominated town and countryside creating a powerful culture which ultimately created a distinctive

civic polity. They rightly highlight the importance of a line of innovators from the obvious suspects like the Stephensons, Grainger, Armstrong and Parsons to Cowen senior, Joseph Swan and John and Charles Merz. In doing so they do not neglect the creativity of subordinate groups in building their own organisations and movements. Crowley's crew in 1819 and the engineers giving Armstrong a bloody nose in 1871 are cases in point.

There are several little gems to lighten the story. One such is the reminder that the Iranian supply ship the Kharg was marooned for seven years, after inconveniently launching at Wallsend after the fall of the Shah in 1979. The author quotes an anonymous Tynesider, 'the poor bloody Iranians on board were speaking with Geordie accents.' Notwithstanding such plums the pudding really does go off towards the end. The sections on World War Two and the post war period are very shallow. The last two chapters are too journalistic by far, occasionally lapsing into a virtual travelogue which would do justice to the city Information Service.

These later remarks should not put off potential readers. Weakness in the closing sections of a four hundred-page volume should not detract from what is a very lively, informative and enjoyable account which is certainly worth the modest price for a weighty hardback book.

### **Major Histories of Newcastle and Gateshead**

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**John Charlton**

**Enemies in all directions?  
*Our Friends in the North*, BBC 4, 2006.**

In Spring 2006, the BBC repeated its much acclaimed drama serial, *Our Friends in the North*. It is to the credit of its writer, Peter Flannery, as well as its production team and cast that, it retains not only its dramatic punch but also its political relevance 10 years after its first broadcast. The story itself spanned four decades of modern British history. It opens in 1964 at the end of what Harold Wilson, soon to be the new Labour Prime Minister, memorably called “13 years of Tory misrule”. The 9<sup>th</sup> and final episode is set in 1995. The original stage play by contrast had only covered the period that abruptly came to an end with the election of a resurgent Tory Party under Margaret Thatcher.

The narrative is constructed around four friends from Tyneside: Nicky, his girlfriend Mary, plus his boyhood friends Tosker and Geordie. Though the core story is set in Newcastle, several scenes take place in London to which Geordie and then Nicky move for a period. The Tyne Bridge is the setting for the final scene.

Most of the more overtly political action revolves around a series of triangular relationships. At the apex of the most important one stands Nicky, newly returned from the USA and politicised by his involvement in the Civil Rights movement there. At another corner, there is Austin Donohue, a local Labour politician, modelled on T. Dan Smith. Donahue’s plans for a new Newcastle soon seduce Nicky into working for him. At the third corner is Nicky’s father, Felix, once active but now outwardly disengaged. Indeed he is downright cynical at times, though deep down his principles remain intact. He thereby provides a contrast both to Donohue’s corruption and to Nicky’s naïve hopes.

In turn, Felix is part of another political triangle, involving his old friend Eddie Wells. The latter is still a political activist, first as a (honest) Labour councillor and later an independent Member of Parliament (shades of the real Eddie Milne saga in Blyth in the mid-70s, though the fictional character, unlike the real one, rejoins the Labour Party). Eddie is in turn linked back to Mary who becomes more and more politically involved as the story progresses, first as a Labour councillor and then MP, partly thanks to Eddie’s guidance.

Alongside the political storyline is a more private tale, though the screenplay clearly relates the personal and political in a way few TV programmes have

matched. Nicky is politically engaged and idealistic. Contrast is provided by his two friends Tosker and Geordie. Both are essentially apolitical. Tosker, who, for a period, snatches Mary's affections leading to a doomed marriage, embodies the grab-what-you-can mentality that Thatcherism both reflected and encouraged. Geordie, however, is essentially the loser in this rat race, drifting into the world of seedy Soho strip clubs before being betrayed by one of their owners, the grossly corrupt Benny Barrett. It is this sub-plot that allows the series to take in corruption amongst the Metropolitan Police Vice Squad and later a sleazy Tory cabinet minister (shades of the scandal-tainted Reginald Maudling).

### **Changing Britain**

This narrative structure is used to develop a wealth of themes. They range from issues of a more individual nature such as family ties, loyalty between friends, marital breakdown, domestic violence, teenage delinquency, and the terrible impact of Alzheimer's disease on its victims to wider social matters like the break-up of old working class communities, urban redevelopment, police corruption, media bias, industrial relations, and deindustrialisation.

The presence of Tosker and Geordie in the story is a particularly useful narrative device. It gives the series a social breadth lacking in other political dramas such as *Big Flame* and *Days of Hope*. It creates a much richer tapestry which captures a wide range of social changes and issues in the period covered. There is Geordie's descent into penury and homelessness while Tosker embodies the ex-working class nouveau riche of the times. That said, it is politics that is at the heart of *Our Friends in the North*.

Most of the big events of the period pop up throughout the plot, not least key General Elections and the bursting of the Tory Party economic bubble in the late 80s. But it is the bitter miners' strike of 1984 that really stands out. Careful selection for location filming helps to give a real feeling for place while pop music of the times is cleverly used to reinforce the sense of period.

Of course there had been some memorable social dramas before, not least the widely celebrated *Boys From the Blackstuff*. But even Alan Bleasdale's tour de force does not match the political dimension of *Our Friends*, which manages to embrace both formal parliamentary processes and grassroots activism. Anarchist squatters and Trotskyist entrists into the Labour Party are there as well as 'machine' politicians and shady figures from the Far Right.

Some scenes are particularly sharp. For instance, Nicky stands as a Labour candidate. In the bitter selection meetings, left-wing middle class lecturers and the like, not from the immediate locality, are contrasted with local working class ward members who loyally support right-wing candidates. There is a degree of stereotyping here but it does perhaps touch some raw nerves since there is an element of truth as well.

There is a rather depressing depiction of the quality of the average city councillor (though even Shakespeare had unkind words for the breed as did 20<sup>th</sup> century novels like *Room at the Top* and films such as *Get Carter*, not to forget negative soap opera depictions in *Coronation Street*). The scenes of Parliament with MPs on all sides braying at each other are also less than endearing. Yet many people will have met intelligent, hard-working and honest councillors and MPs so the picture in *Our Friends* is a wee bit lop-sided. The predominance across much of the media of such portrayals must put many decent people off politics (compare to the more positive image in, say, *The West Wing*).

It might be argued that the series focuses too much on battles in and around the Labour Party. The independent Far Left is largely ignored, though its cadres played a significant role in many industrial disputes of the period. So too is the Liberal Party despite the fact that its local activists have managed to make inroads into some urban areas at the expense of the Labour Party, including, of course, Newcastle.

*Our Friends* does not fully convey the explosive growth of new social movements and 'identity politics' such as feminism, gay rights, peace and environmental campaigning in the period. Issues like Cruise missile deployment or the construction of nuclear power plant (e.g. Druridge Bay) are left largely on one side, even though many people were involved in related protests. Yet it might well have made the storyline too heavy, if not downright indigestible, to take on board much more.

Certainly the addition of one or two non-white characters for the sake of ticking off the 'ethnicity box' would rightly have been condemned as tokenism. If the series were to be remade, perhaps the single biggest improvement to the screenplay — within its own terms of reference — would have been more emphasis on the role of miners' wives in the 1984 strike. That said, Mary's own storyline does capture some of the more general changes in the status and role of women over the time frame.

## Changed world

Few TV programmes, fictional or factual have captured so well how society, both particular institutions and general lifestyles, changed in the 1960s and after. The first episodes capture what some critics at the time damned as the growth of a 'promiscuous society'. Growing working class material affluence in those days is also pictured. Family life too is seen to change: single parent households make more of an appearance as do divorce and remarriage (Mary and Tosker are the main vehicle for this dimension). Even the loss of old pubs and working men's clubs in the face of the growing 'clubbing' scene is vividly brought to life (the ghastly *Tuxedo Royale* duly makes an appearance).

The changing physical face of Tyneside is perhaps not quite so well depicted. There is a certain tendency to indulge in visual stereotypes of tower blocks and terraces, though the directors (there were three in total) do feature both terraced houses in leafy Jesmond as well as ones in the older industrial quarters. What is lacking is the dimension of suburbia.

In the early 60s, many well-heeled folk had decamped to Darras Hall, first started in 1910 but really expanding only after World War 2. More affluent workers had begun to move to the new private homes in places like Chapel Park on the edges of the old city. They were also moving to new towns such as Killingworth, Cramlington and Washington all started in the mid-60s (Peterlee, further south, was advertised as "the place to be").

By focusing on slum clearance, *Our Friends* tends to stress the 'push' factor at the expense of the 'pull'. In recent decades, millions of people on Tyneside and across the rest of Britain have voted with their feet in favour of suburban sprawl, mainly filled with what the Malvina Reynolds song memorably called "little boxes, made of ticky-tacky, and they all look just the same".

## Blight-seeing

*Our Friends* is slightly misleading in its picture of the motives for slum clearance and especially city centre redevelopment. What is missing is the twisted modernist vision that led town planners to gut whole neighbourhoods and tear down beautiful areas like Eldon Square, the old City Library and Town Hall. Some readers may remember 60s Newcastle chief planner Wilfred Burns, author of the revealingly entitled *New Cities for Old*. He dreamed of creating what he called a "new Brasilia" while this reviewer once heard T. Dan Smith talk of Newcastle becoming the "Venice of the North" (with motorways instead of canals!).

No wonder that one local critic, Jon Gower Davies, called such people “evangelical bureaucrats”. The American independent Marxist Hal Draper also had a good name: the ‘plannists’. In other words, it is not just a matter of corrupt deals with worthless architects. Rather the key issue was — and still is — the combination of flawed assumptions, warped visions and faulty processes. Again the contemporary relevance of *Our Friends* is underlined by the fact that Newcastle City Council under Labour recently repeated all the same errors in good old top-down fashion with its “Going For Growth” and “Newcastle Great Park” schemes.

It should also be noted that there was more organised and articulate opposition at the time to what the council was doing in the 60s. *Our Friends* does not do full justice to the fact that locals in areas like Rye Hill were able to expose the lack of real consultation beforehand (the near contemporary construction of Byker Wall did demonstrate that a more participative style of planning was possible). There were also alternatives on offer: revitalisation of existing properties, not wholesale demolition. This is not to deny that some slum areas might have gone beyond the point of no return. Rather it is a matter of spotlighting the extent to which planners, architects and developers can create, not relieve, blight, regardless of whether capitalist profiteering, illegal or legal, play any part. It might also be argued that *Our Friends* does not do justice either to the cultural richness of Tyneside. It tends to alternate between an Andy Capp image on the one hand and, on the other, a Hen-and-Stag-Party caricature. For instance the three male friends are shown at the start discussing the formation of a pop group. Little is made, however, of the thriving rock, blues, folk, jazz and classical music scenes in the area.

There has also been a strong film culture centred on the Tyneside Cinema while other art forms, not least poetry readings at Morden Tower and exhibitions at the Laing and elsewhere, have not been entirely absent. Thousands of city people enjoy walking in the region’s hills and dales, as much a face of the North-East as the conurbations. The intensity of local football passions needs no comment.

Of course, at this point, Peter Flannery and his colleagues might well protest against the injustice of expecting them to include everything and the kitchen sink. They would have a valid point since they do cover so much ground over the nine episodes (three in the 60s, three in the 70s, two in the 80s and

one in the 90s). Perhaps that weighting towards the first half of the 31 years of the storyline inevitably means that there were inherent limits to what could be shown of the extent to which Tyneside and the North-East changed over that period.

### **Myths of time**

It is here that a perhaps more serious charge might be made. There is a whiff of nostalgia hanging around the edges. It is most openly put into words by Eddie Wells in conversation with Felix Hutchinson. He rues modern youth, recollecting how, when kids themselves, they were weaned on the milk of socialism. Thus a golden age of lost political radicalism is evoked.

Yet this is bad history. Socialist agitators in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century faced violent opposition from not just the authorities but also many working class people. Often religion had a stronger hold over proletarian minds. Many struggles were not driven by political class consciousness but rather more limited goals, be it over craft dilution or rent levels. This is not to say that concern about 'bread and butter' issues might not to a more comprehensive radicalisation. Yet often it does not (and sometimes it has benefited the Far Right, not the Left). Stirring images of Red Clydeside and the like abound with much rosy myth-making.

Then, as now, radical socialism had but a small base, especially over the long-term. In the North-East there have been times and places when left-wing groups have established some roots but right-wing Labourism has usually been able to rule the roost, comparatively undisturbed by more left-wing elements. Readers might remember how short a tenure Eddie Milne had as Blyth MP before being kicked out by John Ryman, fox hunter and subsequent Parliamentary absentee. Milne's base quickly folded.

*Our Friends* is nostalgic in other ways. Much is rightly made of the disastrous impact of community dislocation and the tearing apart of the social fabric of old neighbourhoods. The ageing Felix and his wife are both victims of particularly mindless assaults by local thugs. One can almost hear Tony Blair preaching about the need for a 'culture of respect'. Yet that requirement has been needed for a long time.

Notions of 'good old days' of neighbourliness, decency and tranquillity, ruffled only by minor misdemeanours, are also encrusted with much rosy

nostalgia. Thus it is frequently said that people used to be able to safely leave their door open at night. Yet, if they did, one reason was that they had little worth stealing. More generally, much of the much vaunted ‘solidarity’ of the past might have been more a matter of basic necessity, with individuals having to pull together in the face of adversity. Even if solidarity did exist (and there were many instances of scabbing during strikes and other contrary behaviour), it is something that has been difficult to sustain in the era of mass consumerism.

In many other ways, old working class communities had vices as well as virtues. Many a pitman’s wife got the occasional beating while incest was not uncommon in some old industrial areas. Hooliganism marred many sporting events in the 20s and 30s while the tearing up of cinema seats was a popular pastime in the mid-50s. Many parts of Tyneside were unsafe in the late 60s and early 70s due to prowling gangs of skinheads who, at one point, started copying the droogs from *Clockwork Orange*.

Yet *Our Friends* has a point. There is both a more vicious and more random aspect to violence in more recent decades. Certainly drug abuse has well and truly poisoned whole communities. The series features a sink council estate called Valley View where social order has virtually collapsed. In real life, some areas have become no-go areas where even the Fire Brigade is likely to be attacked with bottles and bricks. It is Mary, in argument with Nicky, who voices the observation that such social sicknesses cannot simply be blamed on poverty. On top of social exclusion, there is wilful self-exclusion, a problem that the traditional Left has been loathe to address.

### **Changing the world or yourself**

For readers of this Journal perhaps the most interesting aspect of *Our Friends* is the fundamental question it poses. Many of its events and the choices facing its characters pivot on what is the “way of the world?”. More than anything this gives the serial its on-going relevance. As the time of writing, some apologists for Tony Blair’s government, currently embroiled by financial scandal (loans-for-peerages etc.) argue that this is how things are and that there is no changing how the world works. In other words, ‘realism’ is about embracing compromise for the sake of getting through some improvements, as opposed to the impotence, such people further argue, that flows from rigid adherence to abstract ethics.

This conflict between pragmatism and principle is of course embodied the most by the Austin Donahue character. It is here that the screenplay most shows its mettle. It would have been easy to depict him simply as a rotten apple in the barrel. Yet he is shown to want to do good. He is prepared to ride the tiger and it is his tragedy that it devours him. After his downfall, he is shown still sticking to some of his early political ideals. Some may feel that the real T. Dan Smith was rather like his fictional counterpart. (We will leave aside the likes of Andy Cunningham and his heirs today)

But Donahue is not the only character who thinks that life's a bastard and that all one can do is to adapt accordingly. There is Tosker, essentially a chancer with his eyes firmly on personal self-advancement, which, at one point, takes in Freemasonry. He embodies that army of working class people who were to embrace Thatcherism, though here the screenplay might have been even more explicit. He is echoed in comedy television by the likes of Del Boy in *Only Fools and Horses* and Harry Enfield's *Loadsamoney*. There is also Felix who sees how rotten the world is but who thinks that attempts to change it for the better are doomed (though there is a period where he becomes politically engaged again, helping his friend Eddie to successfully stand as an independent socialist).

Here again is another triangle. At one corner, then, is the viewpoint of cynicism, defeatism, and opportunism. Opposite is the belief that the world can be improved via positive engagement in collective struggle. Here stands Nicky. His politics somewhat shift, however. In 1964 he is canvassing for Labour. When we encounter him later, he is more like an Angry Brigade member, utterly contemptuous of the political mainstream and prepared to support violent direct action (shades of Stuart Christie?) Later still, he has entered the Labour Party to change it from inside, though he is a bit less boring than the average member of Militant. Humiliated by defeat in what had been a safe Labour Party seat, he puts his efforts into photography which in turn leads to his capturing on film police violence in the 1984 miners' strike. Yet, like so many political activists, he runs out of steam, subsequently going off to live in Italy. He ends up in the final episode with his eyes firmly on the personal: recovering the girl he lost in episode one.

Mary occupies the final corner of this triangle. Like Eddie Wells, she engages with the world and tries to do things that actually will help people. Unlike Austin Donahue, she retains her personal integrity. In marked contrast to

Nicky, there is something tangible to show for her efforts. Yet it is also true that the structures at the root of so many of the world's problems remain untouched by the parliamentary reformism she and Eddie support. In its own way, it too is a dead end.

Corrupt compromise is also shown not to be justified by any worthwhile results. Austin Donahue's schemes lead to the construction of disastrous tower blocks that eventually have to be demolished. Tosker struggles to find meaning in his life and is ruined in the stock market crash through, true to type, he is soon back with new schemes to make money. Deep fulfilment remains more elusive.

The more honest characters also pay a price for their choices. Mary's political involvement comes at a cost to her family. Eddie Wells has to shut up in embarrassed silence when he is outmanoeuvred at the Parliamentary Committee where he had hoped to expose corrupt Tory MPs. We last see him caught in the great storm of 1987, his life's work literally and metaphorically blown away as he collapses in the street. The policeman who investigates the Vice Squad corruption crimes ends up totally frustrated by the depth of not just active corruption but also official complacency. The corrupt officers themselves go to jail though they do 'get away with it' in that they receive only light sentences..

The last music heard in the final episode, Oasis's *Don't Look Back In Anger*, would seem to suggest that this is the message of the series. It's all been part of life's rich tapestry and one can only take lasting comfort from the smaller things in life, friends and family, even if they too can bring their share of woes. The point, *Our Friends* appears to say, is not to waste time trying to make big changes to the world but to survive it the best one can. It ends then on a fundamentally conservative note, albeit with the smallest 'c'.

**Sandy Irvine**

### **Turbulent history...**

Keith Armstrong (ed), *The People's History: The Town of Old Hexham*  
(The People's History Ltd, 2002) Pbk £9.99 ISBN 1902527690

Hexham, too, has had its turbulent history. As this excellent collection of social history, documentary materials and photographs shows, there is plenty of 'labour' in the history of old 'Hagustald's Land'. This book spans the early history of its settlement to the establishment of the Abbey to the Hexham Races without losing sight of the social and political roots of much of Hexham's development.

As a student of labour history, there is one particular event in Hexham's past that you can't help being drawn to, even though it may not exactly fit the narrow definition of the term. The massacre of 49 civilians, protesting against the Militia laws in the Market Place on the 9<sup>th</sup> of March 1761 had, up until recently, been almost forgotten, but it is an incredible event. Caused in part by the draconian enactment of the Militia Act of 1757 and in particular, the method of electing men to the militia by ballot, there was a fierce and popular rising in Hexham. According to contemporary reports, up to 5,000 people gathered in the Market Place. On the magistrates' orders, the North Yorkshire Militia opened fire on the crowd, earning themselves infamy as the 'The Hexham Butchers'.

The day after the massacre, it rained hard – washing away the blood of the dead and the injured. Now, strolling through Hexham Market Place on a sunny and quiet weekday morning, it's hard to imagine the extraordinary and tragic events of that day in 1761, difficult to imagine the washing away of the blood from the cobblestones and the shock of a community shattered. Recalling Keith Armstrong's poem 'TUESDAY MARCH 10th 1761', however, I begin to picture the scene:

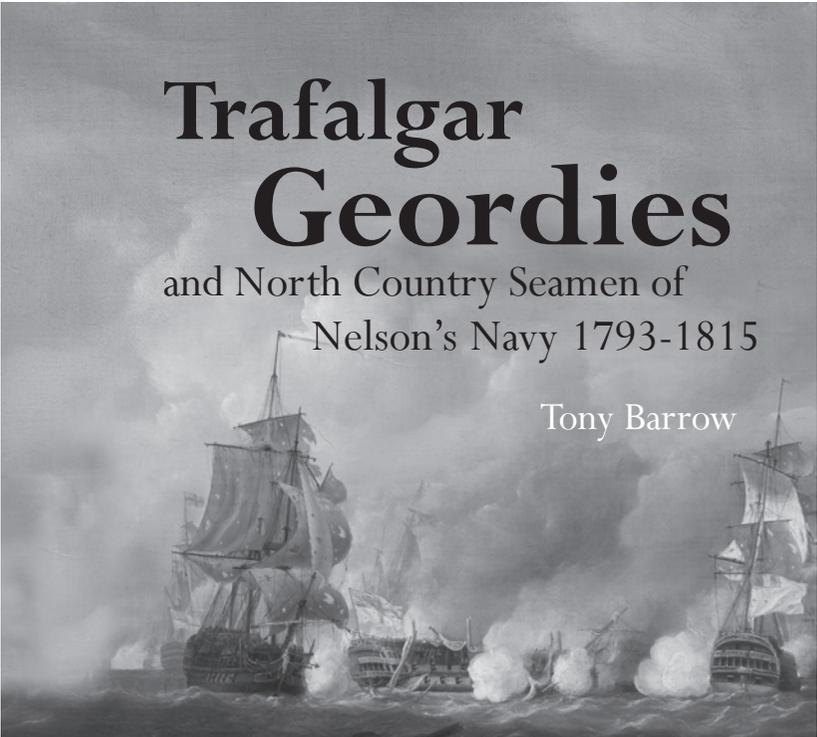
*"The Market Place was a tragic sight. Bodies of the dead and wounded lay scattered. The ground was stained with blood and the cries of the wounded were pitiful. The following day it rained, washing away the traces.*

Wash away the day,  
wash the pain away,  
sweep the remains of yesterday

# Trafalgar Geordies

and North Country Seamen of  
Nelson's Navy 1793-1815

Tony Barrow



At the end of the eighteenth century the maritime communities of North East England, from Berwick to Whitby, contained one of the most important concentrations of skilled mariners anywhere in the United Kingdom. These seamen served with distinction in every major naval engagement of the Napoleonic era. The battle of Trafalgar in 1805 represented the culmination of their achievement. This book offers an insight into the lives and experience of seamen from Northumberland, Durham and North Yorkshire who fought and died in the ships of Nelson's navy.

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into the racing river.  
Beat the Dead March,  
bang the old drum,  
heal Hexham's bust bones  
and cry me a River,  
cry the Water of Tyne.  
Wash away the day,  
wash this pain away.'

(© Keith Armstrong, 1996)

It's a grim and powerful picture to be erased so efficiently from a town's history. There is now, in part due to the work of labour historians and poets such as Keith Armstrong, a growing acknowledgment and awareness of what took place on that day and its place in the town's history, but there is still no memorial to the dead.

This 'People's History' of Hexham is also a reminder of the human sweat that has gone into building Hexham's wealth. Of course, there were the glove-makers, producing Hexham Tans; 'Hides lifted from a lime-pit were soaked for days, scraped and 'bated' in solutions of dog excrement and ground bark before hanging up to dry', but there were also the struggles that Hexham had in achieving sanitary water supplies and transport links to Newcastle. Above all, this book is a reminder that the history of even supposedly 'genteel' places like Hexham cannot be left to the Heritage industry or official history, all too ready to sanitize our difficult and bloody past.

### **Ben Sellers**

#### **Written in stone...**

Stan Beckensall *Northumberland – Shadows of the Past*, Tempus Publishing, Stroud 2005 price £17.99 ISBN 0752433474

Archaeologist, playwright, poet and teacher Stan Beckensall's various publications defy categorization, but suffice to say that readers who enjoyed this author's *Northumberland – the Power of Place* published in 2001 will appreciate the present volume which is written in a similar vein.

Both books are lavishly illustrated with reproductions of works by Gordon

Highmoor and Birtley Aris as well as photographs taken by the author. *The Power of Place* started from specific locations with which Stan Beckensall had been involved as an archaeologist and expedition leader and offered something of an evocative guide to would-be visitors. *Shadows of the Past* has the more ambitious aim of trying to take the reader into aspects of the lives of past generations through the study of what they have left behind. Involving as it does the bringing together of archaeological and documentary evidence from across two millennia the approach has to be thematic rather than chronological and for those not acquainted with the author's previous work the choice of titles for the themes not to mention the themes themselves may seem somewhat idiosyncratic. A section entitled 'Our going out and our coming in' turns out to be mainly concerned with memorial inscriptions and carvings and the 'Valley of the shadow of death' with drainage, disease and water supply.

'The Shadows of an industrial past' and 'Crossing the land' have a more predictable content but 'Rise and fall' moves from an evocation of the landscape surrounding the Roman Wall to consider issues of conservation, disused churches and deserted villages. The last few chapters are the most curious of all. After devoting thirty pages to the ways in which the past is reflected in the present by pageants plays and poetry reading the author perhaps justifiably warns against the inevitable 'sanitisation' to which such productions are subject and reminds the reader that this was a 'land of violence'. The final chapter is an account of the school outing that eventually led to the art exhibition 'Written in Stone' at the Museum of Antiquities in Newcastle.

The book seems to be aimed at a relatively local readership familiar with the general outline of the history and geography of the county and sharing the author's delight in further exploring its diversity. Strangers might prefer to start from one of the more conventional guides listed in the extensive bibliography.

### **Win Stokes**

### **Red Cocoa...**

Lowell J Satre, *Chocolate on Trial*, Ohio University Press, Athens, Ohio, 2005.

At the high point of classic imperialism in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the greater part of the inhabited world, from Latin America to the Pacific islands, and including India and China, served as a huge reservoir of cheap, superexploited forced labour for imperial states and their business corporations.

Although these states had all signed conventions outlawing slavery all of them continued similar practices, now lightly resprayed as ‘contract labour’, which was imposed on the victims, either locally or after they had been ere shipped with varying degrees of ferocity to other locations.

Sir Roger Casement’s ‘red rubber’ exposures of the methods of rubber collection in South America and the Congo are widely remembered. The system used by the Portuguese regime in its West African colonies to produce cocoa beans are less historically notorious but they also roused a storm of controversy in Britain between 1900 and 1914.

Slave raiders rounded up unfortunates in the interior of Angola and marched them in shackles to the coast, where under the guise of contract labourers about four thousand a year were sold to cocoa planters in the adjacent islands of São Thomé and Príncipe, over a thousand miles to the north. There they performed the manual labour associated with the cocoa bean production – deprived of family, homeland or hope, with no prospect of ever leaving the islands (despite clauses in their ‘contracts’ stipulating the contrary). Although the planters do not appear to have been particularly sadistic by the customary standards of slaveowners, not surprisingly the death rate among the slaves was enormous – anything from 15 per cent to 20 percent per year, and for children twenty-five percent.

The principal British buyer of the cocoa beans was the firm of Cadbury, which took most of the crop. Cadbury’s was a firm which valued its reputation for preserving high ethical standards – in the UK it was regarded as a model employer. It was therefore a matter of extreme embarrassment when early in the twentieth century revelations of what was going on in Angola and the islands started being publicised in Britain. The Conservative government of the time looked the other way. According to a Foreign Office memo there was a ‘danger of learning inconvenient facts which might oblige us to make representations to the Portuguese Govt. which we don’t want to do’. (p.51) The fact that the royal families of the two countries were good friends no doubt also counted for something.

The author, who, despite the fact that he lives and works in the US, is a member of the NELH, has as his focus in this volume William Cadbury, the key figure in the firm at that time, whose elegant copperplate signature still adorns Cadbury products. Cadbury was a humanitarian and a Quaker; the development

of Satre's narrative concerns the manner of his attempts to reconcile such sentiments with the commercial interests of his firm. Closely associated in these was the figure of, Sir Edward Grey, the Foreign Secretary and Northumberland landowner.

Following the establishment of Liberal government at the end of 1905 the Foreign Office made repeated representations to the Portuguese authorities to bring their labour practices in São Thomé in line with official declarations. Just as constantly these same authorities, in thrall to the planters' lobby – 'the tool of the planters' according to the *Manchester Guardian* (p.110) provided the assurances and then ignored them.

Meantime, the one argument that would have made a difference – boycott by the chocolate firm of São Thomé cocoa beans, which between 1905 and 1910 led the world's cocoa production – remained unused. Satre makes clear how pathetically eager Cadbury - who was capable of praising the greatness of the Portuguese as colonisers – and Grey were to take the Portuguese government at their repeatedly violated word; in Grey's case not least because the British government was anxious to recruit Angolan labour for the South African mines. 'Diplomatic and economic considerations ... out-weighed humanitarian concerns'. (p.48) Moreover, 'there were many businesspeople and government officials in Britain and elsewhere in Europe who believed that the natives for their own welfare and development, needed to be engaged in what Europeans perceived as productive work, even if that required coercion'. (p.81)

Although the author does not belabour the point, his account nicely illustrates how the economic structures through which profit was extracted in a system of imperial exploitation put humanitarian considerations permanently in second place. The priority always had to be profit, whatever hand-wringing might accompany the process.

One individual who – rather surprisingly in view of his historical reputation – does not emerge with great credit from this episode is E D Morel, who was closely involved in the exposure of the Belgian King Leopold's regime in the Congo, opposed the First World War and founded the Union of Democratic Control in opposition to predatory imperialism. However in this instance he worked closely with Cadbury, made considerable efforts to discredit Henry Nevinson, the campaigning journalist principally responsible for uncovering

what was going on in Angola and the islands, and like Cadbury was all too ready to believe and accept the Portuguese assurances.

The climax arrived in 1909 when Cadbury sued the Standard newspaper after it had accused him of bad faith in relation to his sourcing of cocoa beans. The newspaper's own position however was not a disinterested one: it was pursuing a political agenda. In 1906 the Liberal Party, with which Cadbury was closely identified, after taking over the government had won a landslide electoral victory (exceeding even Blair's in 1997). One of the themes in their pre-election propaganda had been an attack on the horrors of government-sponsored contract labour in the South African mines. The Conservatives, anxious to get back at their adversaries by every possible means, now used through this newspaper the opportunity with which Cadbury had presented them, to expound a charge of hypocrisy.

The libel case which followed was famous in its own day and the outcome was mixed. The jury found that a libel had been committed, but awarded Cadbury contemptuous damages of one farthing, and the costs were divided. The firm and their suppliers made the best of the situation; general reaction was that the hypocrisy charge was justified.

Subsequent developments, not least the publicity generated round this event, did result in a degree of improvement for the São Thomé labourers, until the outbreak of the First World War shifted attention to other matters.

It would be pleasant to be able to record that the issue of red cocoa is now only of historical interest – unfortunately this is not the case. Though Basil Davidson noted in 1954 that there were probably more slaves in Angola then than at the turn of the century, the São Thomé plantations are now abandoned – but cocoa production using forced labour continues energetically in other parts of West Africa and in the very week of writing this an item in *Tribune* (April 14 2006) reports that Nestlé, and also Hershey, the US chocolate giant are involved with West Africa cocoa farms employing child slave labour, possibly as many as 15,000 in the Ivory Coast alone – a depressing thought a century later, after two world wars, innumerable labour struggles and the end of colonial empires.

**Willie Thompson**

**Bygone wrestlers...**

Archie Potts: ***Headlocks & Handbags. Wrestling at the New St James's Hall.*** Black Cat Publications. ISBN 1 899560 59 9 Pbk.£8.99

Headlocks & Handbags details four decades of wrestling at Newcastle's New St James's Hall, from the 1930s until the wrestlers were evicted to make way for bingo in the late 1960s. Although it has sections on the sport in general and the history of the stadium, the book is essentially about the wrestlers themselves and Potts discusses scores of them by reference to various classifications such as good and bad guys, masked men, champions and nationalities.

Potts' collection of photographs and bill matter, alongside a survey of individual wrestlers' backgrounds, styles and careers, creates a colourful portrait of what for a brief period was a popular working-class entertainment. For some of us it is a reminder of a time when our local hero was indeed one of ours; a person who also went about another, legitimate trade on a weekday. Our man may have paraded a championship belt on a Saturday, but we recognised him as a member of the river police on the Tees or as licensee of a house next to Stockton's Odeon.

Potts' does us a great service. His comprehensive account lays out the material from which we can draw our own conclusions about the grappling game and elements of it, viewed from today's perspective, are a little troubling. Although we witnessed strong, skilful and at times theatrical performances, the context was rather primitively arranged. For example, our fair-minded, local lad was often pitted against an opponent cranked up to be something alien and threatening: the wrestler of African origin was billed as a witch doctor, the Hungarian refugee became the 'Butcher of Budapest', a Barbadian was the 'Black Panther', a Londoner born of Afro-Caribbean parents was said to come from Borneo, and two native Canadians war-danced into the ring wearing headdresses. There were countless masked men with sinister biographies, including the Ghoul, the Black Angel and the mysterious Blue Mask, who was actually a miner at Chopwell Colliery. This attempt to create comic book clashes, not helped by the intervention of commercial television, served to trivialise what for many was a sport requiring talent, athleticism and dedication.

Archie Potts is to be congratulated on compiling this fascinating volume which tells us a lot about St James's Hall and its wrestlers, but also reminds some

of us ageing, former schoolboy devotees just how crudely the matchmakers promoted their contests and their perceptions about public taste. The book revisits an interesting episode in our sporting past. To the casual observer this would seem to be a long time ago, but it isn't. For the social historian, this marriage of sport and pantomime is worthy of closer inspection.

**Brian Bennison**

### **New Northern Poetry**

Andy Croft, *Comrade Laughter*, Flambard Press, 2004, 96 pp., £7.50, ISBN 1 873226667

Keith Armstrong, *Imagined Corners*, Smokestack Books 2004, 56 pp., £5.99 ISBN 0-9548691-0-9 and *Angels Playing Football*, A Northern Voices Publication, 2006, £6.50, ISBN 1871536 197.

Keith Pattison, Photographer, Katrina Porteous, Poet and Robert Soden, Painter, *Turning the Tide*, Easington District Council, County Durham, 2001, 65 pp. £8.50

Andy Croft is another fine Northern poet and *Comrade Laughter* is a great title for a book. Although, sometimes some of us old lefties maybe the only ones to 'get' the jokes there are plenty of poems that speak to all of us of the possibility of alternatives to the state were in.

Although this collection is rooted in Northern experience, it is working class politics, national and international which its fundamental strength. Our planets place in time and space is also put in perspective. The poem 'Yooman' opens with the lines

'Yes, here's to us and here's to you  
And all the Yooman things we do,  
The members of a lonely race  
On one small planet, lost in space,

The poem goes on to celebrate people in all their difference and unity. It ends

'And here's to what this lonely planet  
Could be if only Yoomans ran it'.

The Mudfog poems, in the tradition of Dickens, are threaded through the book; they are, without exception a joy and tell of the way it is in celebratory style. Try the 'Elephants of Mudfog' and 'Mudfog goes Bananas' - the story of the Hartlepool monkey. The epic poem 'Letter to Randall Swingler Part 11' is not to be missed.

'Sunlight and Heat', a beautiful poem charting the course of the River Tees and the growth of Teesside industrial complex sings on the page. Historical context is all.

'The Romans passed through here, the Dane, the Celt,  
The monks, the Ironmasters - one by one  
They passed away. All human empires melt

... And nothing is more permanent than grass'

'Kissing to Head Investigation into September 11<sup>th</sup> Terror' reminds us of the other September 11th, in Chile which it exhorts us never to forget. We draw the parallels between Chile and the war in Iraq.

'All planned and paid for by the USA.

It makes no sense, of course, except to men  
Who've let the bloody monsters loose again'.

This is a book of broad vision. It's also funny and uplifting. It will make the comrades laugh and think and remind us that were not dead yet.

Keith Armstrong is one of the north's longstanding finest poets. To quote Adrian Mitchell, he '*tells the terrible truth in all its loveliness... who refuses to turn his back on the wretched of the Earth*' Some of the poems in these books have been previously published elsewhere but are collected here in these two books, Sometimes funny, sometimes musical but always personal and political they are rooted in north east history.

The opening poem in *Imagined Corners* - 'My Father Worked on Ships' haunts; the hard graft of the shipyard- working father, his love of the sea and the Tyne, the pride and love of the son and the urge to

'Rage, rage  
against the dying

of this broken - backed town,  
the spirit  
of its broken-backed  
ships’.

In the same book the poem ‘My Heroes’ strikes a deep chord. Heroes are *‘fragile not monuments of men’*, they are ‘special people but no more special than you or P. This is a ring for the grass-roots, reminding us it’s not about *‘collected works’* but *‘grow scattered in flower-beds, between motorcades and the stony silence of war memorials’*.

A common thread through both these books is the struggle and class consciousness of the industrial past and the superficiality and commodification of the present. In ‘An Oubliette for Kitty’ we read

‘So what becomes of this History of Pain?  
What is there left to hear?  
The kids pour down the Pudding Chare lane  
and drown a folksong in beer’.

In *Angels Playing Football* the powerful poem ‘Dreaming of Jack Common’ continues this theme telling of the big heart of the Tyne whose banks are *‘cleansed for millionaires’*.

Both these books are inspiring. They provoke anger, pain and a depth of feeling for the north and a strong sense of the search for the way forward.

The fourth book reviewed here was produced on an initiative by the Easington District Council Cultural Department as part of the Turning the Tide project to reclaim the coastal ecology of Easington District after 100 years of the pits. The approach taken was to *‘capture the essence of the coast and the people who interact with it’* for an exhibition and this book. *The three artists were asked to ‘record the spirit of the coast’*. In this the book succeeds: the light and the beauty, the loss and the humour and the grit and the blood on the streets are all there. What’s also felt and springs from the page is the strength of family and community, roots deep down in the seams and the struggle to find a way forward after the destruction of the pits.

This is a visually stunning book with photographs and pictures on every page to accompany the poems and people’s own words. Such is the beauty of the book that on some pages it would be hard to know a community was devastated here: *‘the cliffs are made of soft, white cheese. They crumble to the touch. The*

*sea has swallowed all the evidence of yesterday, its brilliance itself a kind of alchemy!*. The poet's words remind us of what was lost.

The people's words also remind us of the devastation in words we know so well. *It was like somebody struck a knife in you when they shut the pit. After everything we'd been through...* The words in this book speak to the depths of the soul, the photographs speak volumes of stark loss, recognition. Many also luminous and soar in the light and the paintings have *'visceral qualities of earth and rootedness'*.

For those who were part of the struggle for the pits, and for those who weren't, this book should be ours. It's a book to be savoured and returned to. It's a record of a past that scarred the people and the landscape. Its also a joyous celebration of the Easington coast and its people.

**Liz Forster**

### Archives

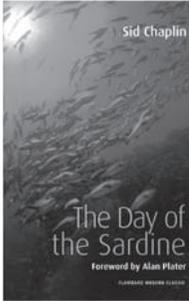
***The diaries and other papers of Ruth Dodds (1890 – 1976)*** of Gateshead – socialist, activist, philanthropist, historian, playwright and much more.

These documents have been recently deposited at the Tyne Wear Archives Service, Blandford House, Newcastle upon Tyne, Accession 4460. There are 31 notebooks containing the diaries as well as other writings, poems, prose, plays, reminiscences, and some of *'The Ever-Circulating Portfolio'* that passed around groups of friends.

The contribution of Ruth Dodds to the life of her home-town was recognised in 1966 when she became the first woman to be made a Freeman of Gateshead. I met her in 1971 in the course of researching parliamentary elections in the inter-war years. I had been told that if I wanted to know anything about Gateshead politics during that period she was the person I should talk to. She had to get out her diaries to recall more precisely the exciting, if devastating, election of October 1931 which followed the defection of Ramsay MacDonald, Prime Minister of the second Labour Government, to form the so-called National Government. Ernest Bevin, best known at that time as the Dockers' KC, agreed to become a candidate for Gateshead in a show of solidarity against the 'traitors'. She read to me the most vivid account of his selection meeting 'in a room filled with foul tobacco smoke' that still surrounded her as she wrote her account in bed later. In that period she was editing the high quality Gateshead



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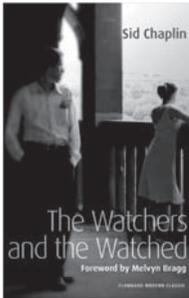


*THE DAY OF THE SARDINE*

**Sid Chaplin** Foreword by Alan Plater  
*'An overlooked but untarnished gem.'* Independent on Sunday

First published in 1961, hugely influential Newcastle author Sid Chaplin's *The Day of the Sardine* is a rite-of-passage novel set in an unforgiving urban landscape.

**Fiction** ISBN: 1873226721 £8.99

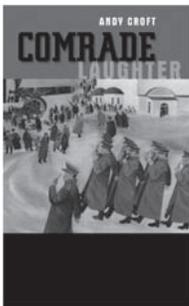


*THE WATCHERS AND THE WATCHED*

**Sid Chaplin** Foreword by Melvyn Bragg  
*'Fiction stripped of allusion and evasion.'* TLS

Sid Chaplin's *The Watchers and the Watched*, a powerful story of disaffection in a changing city, was originally published in 1962 to wide acclaim.

**Fiction** ISBN: 187322673X £8.99



*COMRADE LAUGHTER*

**Andy Croft**  
*'The unofficial poet laureate of the north.'* Northern Echo

Karl Marx once said that history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce. Since we seem so intent to go on repeating the mistakes of the past, *Comrade Laughter* asks why there are not more people laughing.

**Poetry** ISBN: 1873226667 £7.50

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Labour Party newspaper *The Gateshead Herald*, became a borough councillor, assisted refugees from Germany and Spain and wrote and acted in plays at the Progressive Players (an ILP foundation supported by Ruth and her sisters which became the still thriving Little Theatre. A plaque on the wall acknowledges their contribution). For some years she also managed the family printing business on Newcastle quayside. The latter activity came dramatically to a close, to her profound regret, after a quarrel with her brother over the General Strike.

The diaries Ruth Dodds kept for most of seventy years, from 1905 when she was fifteen and on holiday at Alnmouth, until the last years of her life, are interesting and significant from many viewpoints. She records details of school and family life before the First World War - holidays, fashion, ambitions and also passionate support for Newcastle United and its early heroes. The impact of the war was dramatic. At the age of 24 she took her first paid work - night shifts in the shell shops at Armstrongs' munitions factory on Scotswood Road. Later she began to manage the family business when the men went to war. The war radically politicised her. From a Liberal family and with only a rather lukewarm supporter of Millicent Fawcett's suffrage activities in 1918 she joined the ILP and threw herself into its numerous political and social activities. She wrote a number of plays reflecting her political and historical interests including *The Pitman's Play* about Thomas Hepburn, pioneer of the miners' union. She also became a pacifist and a Quaker, joining the Newcastle Friends' Meeting after the war ended. All of these events are interwoven with the life, first of a fifteen-year old girl, then continuing until near her death some 70 years later, which she confides to her diary.

She was a member of a notable Tyneside family that included the famous Mawson's and Swan's. She never married but lived in the family home, Home House (now a care home), in Kell's Lane, Low Fell with two of her sisters until she died. Her diaries detail the numerous personal concerns of a woman's life, and also her passionate response to local and national and indeed international happenings of her times. These include her intimate involvement with Gateshead ILP and then the Socialist Society (she was its national secretary) and her work as a Labour Councillor.

I edited the diaries with the title *'A Pilgrimage of Grace'* (Bewick Press, 1995). This was chosen both to reflect the dedication of her life and recall the account she wrote with her sister, Hope Dodds, of the rising in the north

against the dissolution of the monasteries during the reign of Henry V111. The book, published in 1915, which bore the same title, was until recently the most authoritative account of that series of events.

Copies of the edited diaries can be obtained from [maurencallcott@lineone.net](mailto:maurencallcott@lineone.net) at the discount price of £5 or £5.50 with postage.

**Maureen Callcott**

## AT THE BACK

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### Labour History Society Notebook

#### **North East Labour History Society**

Officers and Committee

(As of the Annual General Meeting 2005)

President: Ray Challinor

Vice Presidents: Maureen Callcott, Archie Potts

Chair: Stuart Howard

Vice Chair: Nigel Todd

Treasurer: Lynda Mackenzie

Secretary: John Charlton

Journal Editor: Don Watson (Vol 37)

Other Members: Ben Sellars (*Durham*), Don Watson (*North Shields*), Graham Brown, (*South Shields*), Lewis Mates (*Newcastle*), Mike Cleghorn (*Newcastle*), Paul Mayne (*Hebburn*), Nigel Todd (*Newcastle*), Peggy Jones (*Hexham*), Sandy Irvine (*Newcastle*), Tony Jeffs (*Ryton*), Willie Thompson (*Sunderland*), Win Stokes (*Tynemouth*), Steve Manchee (*Newcastle*) and John Painter (*Newcastle*)

## **Secretary's Report**

Membership continues to rise. Over twenty people signed up during the year. However there are losses too. Around twenty subscribers who signed up before 2004 have not renewed which means effectively that they have not paid for journal number 36! Non-payers will not be sent a journal but will receive a friendly reminder and invitation. The web site [[www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org)] has been a productive source of new subscribers and has averaged 2000 hits per month through 2005-6. The updated version should bring in even more interest as it includes a searchable index of past journal articles and a discussion board. Over time some articles will be available on line but putting them there is a time consuming business since each article has to be scanned in. We will try to respond to requests.

We have hoped to hold events outside of Newcastle-Gateshead and this autumn the first such meeting will be held in South Durham at Wheatley Hill. We hope that the Teesside members will try to attend. A Durham meeting is also planned in the coming year.

In the past year we have held successful meetings on Industrial conflict on the Tyne in World War Two, The Jarrow March: Protest and Legend, Trafalgar Geordies and the Great Newcastle Reform Demonstration of 1819. Our monthly meetings, First Tuesday, have also been a success with interesting talks on the Ashington coal miner artists, the Sunderland rent strike of 1939, the far left on Tyneside in the 1970's, a 19th century Durham miner's wife and Women and children in the 1984-85 miners' strike. Especially interesting were the two meetings given by Pete Steffens the veteran American radical journalist on the Macarthyite era and the Californian Free Speech movement of the early 1960's.

This year we have made progress in the oral history area. Two very good planning meetings were held and those involved have agreed to assemble again in the autumn with at least one interview per person carried out. Full information on progress is carried on the web site.

In October we did a radical walk round Ouseburn with a first class guide, Eric Larkham and on May Day a full coach load went to the John Ruskin House and garden on Coniston Water.

**2006**  
**SubscriptionSubscriptionSubscription**

Individuals (including overseas): £15  
Individuals (students,retired,unemployed): £5  
Institutions:: £25

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Gosforth,  
Newcastle upon Tyne,  
NE31AH.  
email Lynda Mackenzie at:  
lyndamacke@yahoo.com

**‘First Tuesday’**

First Tuesday was launched in Early December 2004, actually on a Wednesday, however since then the discussions have always been held on the first Tuesday of the month, hence the name.

The aim of the sessions has been to encourage members of the society to talk on their own areas of historical interest, which will then be opened for a debate and discussion.

This format worked well for the first 12 months with a varied and fascinating range of items. John Charlton set the ball rolling with a talk on the Seaman’s strike of 1815. Over the next 12 months the discussions looked at the influence of Methodism on mining communities in the NE & Cornwall from John Painter, this linked to a discussion on Lead miners in the North Pennines by myself. Val Duncan gave us a fascinating insight of her families experience in Fenham between the wars, Paul Mayne & Don Watson both talked on Rent Strikes in South Tyneside & Sunderland in 1920 - 1940. Paul Mayne also gave us a fascinating account, culled from the local press of the interest of the local miners in Home Rule for Ireland in 1886.

The topics were not just local events, Lewis Mates talked on the North East and the Spanish Civil War, whilst we were fascinated by a first hand description of the impact of McCarthyism from Pete Steffans, an American journalist, who came back 2 months later to add to his recollections.

On more recent events Michael Graham gave us an insight into the role of the Far Left on Tyneside in the '70's. Marie Therese Russell (now Maynes) explored the role of the WEA & the Ashington Art Group in the Pitmen Painters.

A very interesting and apposite discussion was led off by Willie Thompson on Labour – what's in a name? This stemmed from the apparent difficulties of potential recruits to the Society, since many saw labour as a reference to the party rather than the trade union movement.

A more flippant but of huge interest in the local community was John Painter's attempt to get to grips with the Geordie-Mackem feud, fuelled by football but having a strong resonance on both rivers.

Our most recent meetings have seen 2 guest speakers Margaret Headley on a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Durham Mining community – Wheatley Hill and Katy Shaw on the poetry & songs of the Women & Children during the 1984/5 Miners Dispute. Their papers are both published in this issue of the journal.

It has been suggested that the group might be interested in seeing some old film footage related to a range of historical issues as a way of encouraging debate.

Currently we are finding it a little difficult to entice members to come forward with new topics, I feel sure there are many budding historians champing at the bit to lead off further discussions. The atmosphere is friendly and helpful; you certainly don't need to be a professional to come along and talk about your interests. I look forward to hearing from you.

**Steve Manchee** *Convenor 'First Tuesday'*

Can be contacted on – [steve@smanchee.wanadoo.co.uk](mailto:steve@smanchee.wanadoo.co.uk)

## THE SID CHAPLIN LABOUR HISTORY TROPHY



### Past winners

1988	Kit Pearce
1989	Elaine Knox
1990	Sylvia Clark
1991	Martin Searles
1992	David Ridley
1993	Pauline Lynn
1994	Kathleen Smith
1996	Reg Brown
1997	Angela Goldsmith
2000	Robert Hope
2004	Craig Turnbull
2005	Craig Armstrong

The author Sid Chaplin was a founder member of the Society and his Memorial Trophy is awarded each year to the winner of a labour history essay competition. The aim of the competition is to foster the interest in North East labour history under the following conditions:

1. The Trophy will be awarded for the best essay submitted on any aspect of the history of labour in the North East. The essay should show some knowledge and use of original sources. It should be word-processed and not more than 10,000 words in length.
2. The competition will be open to anyone who is not employed full-time as a professional teacher or writer of history.
3. An Adjudication Panel, drawn from the Society, will judge the essays and the Adjudicators' decision will be final in all matters affecting the award of the Trophy.
4. All entries must be submitted to the Secretary of the Society and received not later than 30th June each year. The results will be published in the Society's Journal.

The Trophy is a miner's lamp with the name of each winner inscribed on it. Winners may keep the Trophy for one year. The winner also receives a £50 book token.

## **ANNOUNCEMENTS**

### **Remembering Slavery 2007**

2007 marks the two hundredth anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in Britain. The Literary and Philosophical Society of Newcastle on Tyne will be marking the occasion with a lecture series and other events during March and April. At time of going to press the programme had not been finalised but it is likely to include Tyneside in the Age of Reform, Black Victorians, The Anti-Slavery Movement and North East Quakers, and Slavery in British History.

Further details can be had by contacting 'The Lit. and Phil.' on 0191 232 0192, or by keeping in touch with their website: [www.litandphil.org.uk](http://www.litandphil.org.uk)

### **Woodhorn Colliery Museum**

This museum, in the QE11 Country Park near Ashington, will re-open in autumn 2006 after major refurbishment. It holds the major collection of the Ashington Group of pitmen painters, featured in this issue of the Journal, and a purpose-built facility for the Northumberland County Records and Archives. The Museum of Mining Heritage includes a trades union and banner collection as well as an imposing memorial to those who lost their lives in the Woodhorn Colliery Disaster of 1916.

Contact the Museum at [www.woodhorn.org.uk](http://www.woodhorn.org.uk) or 01670 856968

### **The Lost Mills: A History of Paper Making in County Durham**

This book, by Jean V. Stark, is available at £12.95 from the Durham County Local History Society, c/o History of Education Project, Miners Hall, Redhills, Durham DH1 4BB. It is a history of industrial relations drawn from the recently discovered records of the Society of Papermakers 1800-1948.

We hope to publish a review in a future issue of the Journal.

## **ENTHUSIASMS**

Readers are invited to submit information on work they are doing with requests for help, but also to inform us of relevant interests they might have

### **North – East and the Spanish Civil War**

I am currently researching this topic, hoping to use the north-east as a case study in the grass roots campaigns that were staged in support of the Spanish Republic during the civil war. I would very much like to hear from anyone with information on any aspect of this topic, including the role of the Labour Party. I can be contacted at [lewismates@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:lewismates@yahoo.co.uk)

**Lewis Mates**

### **Political Activism in the Post-War Period (1945 –1974)**

I have obtained funding for a two-year project on this topic (several Society members have been involved in the process). I am comparing the levels of activism within the Labour and Conservative Parties using quantitative as well as more traditional qualitative methods. I intend to do a number of case studies, centring on Newcastle, Tynemouth, Darlington and at the northern regional level. I would be pleased to hear from anyone with contacts among activists of this period, or who has ideas about records or other sources. I can be contacted at [lewismates@yahoo.co.uk](mailto:lewismates@yahoo.co.uk)

**Lewis Mates**

### **‘Old’ Labour rule in North-East England**

I have just started on the (over-ambitious) task of producing an outline social and political history of some of the local-government heartlands of urban Old Labour, across all of England, from 1945 to the present day including the North-East. I am interested in understanding what Labour did and did not achieve in its management of the cities, partly because of the light that throws on the opportunities for - and limits to - planned programmes of social improvement, and on dilemmas facing politicians today. I am keen not to drown the stories of individual cities in a bland overview of 'national trends' and statistics, and I am thus trying to put together, as my first stage of research, narrative histories of political, economic and social change in a wide range of distinct places. Although of course I am interested in histories of local Labour Parties (seen from their point of view) I am also even more interested

in understanding the dynamics of the housing programme and of education, and of seeing how these changed the lives of the people ruled by those Labour councils. I would be very interested to be told of work - published or unpublished - that tells the story of Labour's rule in the North-East. I would also be very grateful to be pointed in the direction of local archives or collections of material -locally, or elsewhere - that could throw light on these issues. I can be contacted at: [haroldcarter@mac.com](mailto:haroldcarter@mac.com)

**Harold Carter**

### **National Unemployed Workers Movement**

I am working on what will hopefully be a book-length publication analysing the role of this organisation in the North East in the 1920s and 1930s. I would be grateful to hear about possible sources and references, and particularly interested to hear from people with memories of the NUWM's activities.

**Don Watson** – [donwatson@btinternet.com](mailto:donwatson@btinternet.com)

### **Second World War**

I'm currently involved in researching and interviewing people for a ten-part series on Tyne Tees regarding the war in the NE. We are looking for anyone who might be willing to be interviewed on camera relating their memories. I'm especially interested in anyone who was a member of a union at the time or who was a Bevin Boy but anybody with something interesting to relate would be welcome. Other areas that we are interested in are people with general memories of the wartime NE, those who worked in the Merchant Navy and anyone who can remember the building of local defences.

Unfortunately the television project is under severe time restraints (filming beginning at the end of July) but I am also working on a major research project which will result in several articles and, eventually, a monograph. This research considers the social and economic impact of the Second World War on the Northern United Kingdom (i.e. Durham, Northumberland, Cumberland and Scotland). Anyone who experienced the war in these areas and who was willing to be interviewed would be most welcome. I am hoping to secure funding from the British Academy for this research.

**Dr Craig Armstrong**, Newcastle University  
[CraigArm@aol.com](mailto:CraigArm@aol.com) / [C.Armstrong@ncl.ac.uk](mailto:C.Armstrong@ncl.ac.uk)

**Journal Volume 38 2007**

The editorial collective welcomes contributions on any aspect of the labour history of the North East of England (conceived broadly). These can be formal articles (normally to a maximum of 10,000 words), less formal pieces, including opinion pieces, interviews, or reports of work in progress (enthusiasms). Reviews of books and other media likely to interest readers are also invited. We are interested too in information about archives, deposits and other resources for labour history in the region. Comments on previous volumes in the form of letters would be especially welcomed. Contributions-addressed to the Secretary-in the first instance should be typed or sent electronically via email or on disk. We are very happy to help with any problems regarding research, writing or presentation.

**THE WEA – INTO THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

The 2005 issue of *North East History* noted that the Workers' Educational Association in the North East was 'embarking upon a renaissance.' So, how has it gone?

Over the past year, the numbers of adult students attending WEA courses arranged by the WEA North East Region's voluntary members' branches has increased by over 300, following a few years of decline. This may reflect a decision to hold fees at a low level, but on the other hand WEA branches offered more varied courses, and people seem to like the style of WEA learning (retention rates on branch courses are well over 90 per cent of the students).

The Region enjoyed a bundle of high profile successes as well. One of our students, Bob Douglas from Corbridge, became the North East Senior Learner of the Year via the national Adult Learners' Week Awards scheme. This recognised Bob's achievement in using the skills gained from a WEA creative writing class to write the first volume of his best selling autobiography, *Night Song of the Last Tram*, which tells his story of growing up in a hard part of Glasgow in the 1940s.

Another WEA student, Alfie Powley, a Unison shop steward, went back into learning after 27 years as a council gardner in Newcastle. Joining a WEA-Unison Return

to Learn Course, Alfie overcame huge barriers to learning and went on to become Newcastle's co-ordinator of Union Learning Representatives, a tutor on the WEA Return to Learn course, and won the North East National Training Award 2005.

Meanwhile, a WEA group in Bellingham, led by some very determined women students, is well advanced on a project to produce a history of C20 education in the villages of Northumberland. It is a very revealing piece of work, and will challenge some assumptions made about education when it is published next year.

And that's not all, folks! North East WEA staff, tutors and members gained national recognition by the DFES for the quality of their approach to meeting basic skills needs among adult learners; WEA tutors ran a highly successful set of Fivearts Cities projects for adults drawn from backgrounds spanning mental health problems, physical disabilities, age, ethnicity and gender in Newcastle and Gateshead; and the Region was awarded major projects funded by the Learning and Skills Council to develop educational progression among disadvantaged adult learners and to lead skills and learning development on behalf of the voluntary sector.

Reinvigorating relationships went well, too. The WEA hosted a meeting between the Principal of Ruskin College, Audrey Mullender, and former Ruskin students living in the North East. Learning provision with the GMB and Unison expanded, and new provision got under way in association with the NUT, Amicus and the PCS. And the WEA and the Open University in the North have launched a new partnership to promote OU 'Openings' programmes with WEA tutor support.

Finally, the WEA is still campaigning to convince the Government that alongside funding for skills for the economy there should be continuing support for adult learning that adds to democracy and the quality of life. Sadly, funding is being savagely axed.

The WEA defines its provision of history, literature, politics, philosophy, economics, art appreciation, poetry, music as the 'Great Tradition' of British adult education. It is a tradition made rich in the past by tutors including R.H. Tawney and Raymond Williams, and retains a vibrancy for the 21st Century. In an age when people feel more powerless, the 'Great Tradition' is more relevant than ever.

**Nigel Todd**, Regional Secretary

Workers' Educational Association – North East Region

## **CONSTITUTION**

### **Name:**

The name of the Society shall be the North East Labour History Society.

### **Objects:**

- a. To bring together those interested in labour history in North East England.
- b. To promote the study, teaching and research of labour history.
- c. To assist in the preservation of relevant records.
- d. To increase public knowledge and awareness of labour history.

### **Membership:**

Membership shall be open to all those actively interested in the aims of the Society.

### **Annual General Meeting:**

An Annual General Meeting shall be held open to all members of the Society.

### **Subscriptions:**

The annual subscription shall be determined by the Annual General Meeting of the Society.

### **Finance:**

All money raised by or on behalf of the Society shall be applied to further the above objects. An audited account shall be presented to the Annual General Meeting.

### **Officers and committee:**

The business of the Society shall be conducted by a Committee composed of Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, and Treasurer plus six ordinary members. The Committee shall have the power to co-opt additional members. The Committee and Officers shall be elected at the Annual general Meeting. The Quorum for all Committee meetings shall be one third of its membership, including attendance of the Chair or Vice Chair. The Committee's agenda shall be drawn up by the Secretary in consultation with the Chair.

### **Honorary Officers:**

There shall be a President elected at the Annual General Meeting and not subject to re-election.

There shall be one or more Vice Presidents elected at the Annual General meeting and not subject to re-election.

The President and Vice President(s) shall be ex officio members of the Committee with full voting rights.

### **Bulletin:**

The Society shall publish an annual journal. The Committee shall appoint the Editor/s of the Bulletin. The Editor/s shall report to the Committee on matters affecting the production of the Bulletin.

### **Changes to the Constitution:**

Changes to the Constitution can only be made at the Annual General Meeting, and a motion outlining proposals for change must be submitted in writing to the Secretary at least 28 days before the date of the Annual General Meeting.

## **PUBLIC MEETINGS 2006-7**

### **The Annual General Meeting**

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> September

5.45 p.m.

Lit & Phil

The AGM will start at 6.15 and will be followed by

Katrina Porteous on

**The Fishing Communities of North Northumberland**



### **The Jarrow Crusade: Myth and reality**

Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> October

7.00 p.m.

Matt Perry, University of Newcastle

**Community Centre , Wheatley Hill, South Durham**



### **Edward Allen Memorial Lecture**

Monday 20<sup>th</sup> November

7.00 p.m.

Joan Allen, University of Newcastle

**The Battle for Reform: Chartism on Tyneside 1838-1850**



Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> February

7.00 p.m.

Dave Harker

**'The Pitmen Determined to be free': Song and History'**

Dave Harker specialises in the use of unusual  
(and often unused) sources for social history.

We expect a fascinating meeting.



Two further public meetings are scheduled for

Thursday 26<sup>th</sup> April & Wednesday 27<sup>th</sup> June

**north east labour history society**

I would like to join the society

rates

institutions £25

individual (including overseas) £15

concession £5 (student/retired/unemployed)

subscription includes journal

address .....

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send to: Lynda Mackenzie (Treasurer),  
28 Belle Vue Avenue  
Newcastle on Tyne  
NE3 1AH  
UK

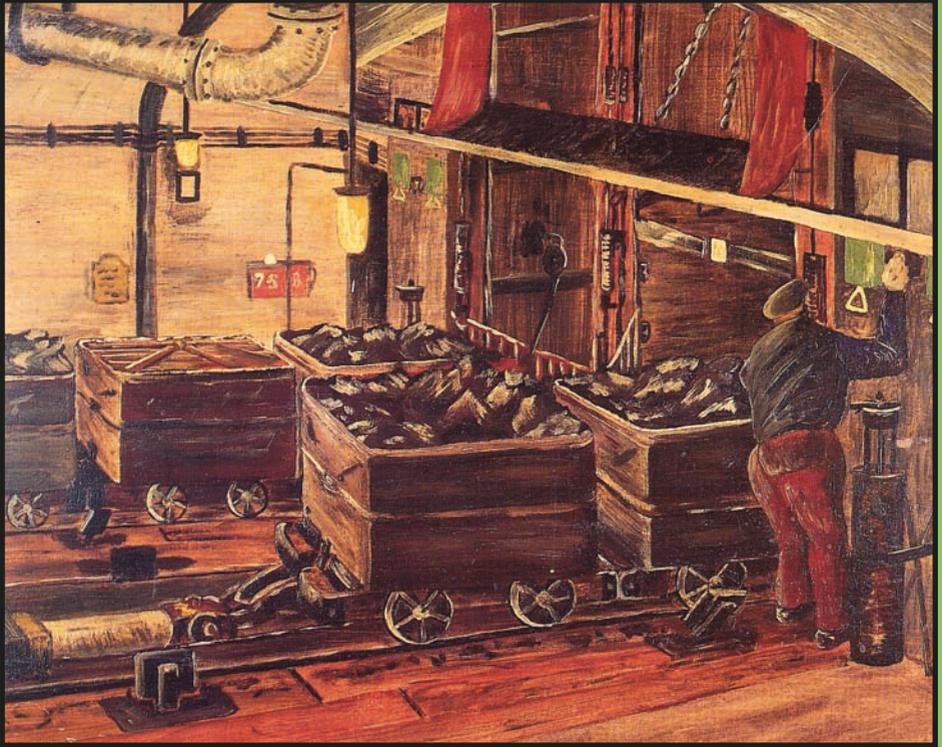


*north east history*



# north east history volume 37

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Jimmy Floyd-The Onsetter



This is the logo from our web site at:[www.nelh.net](http://www.nelh.net) Visit it for news of our meetings and other activities in the north east region. You will find an index of all volumes of this journal back to 1968. You can also join discussions online.

**journal of the north east labour history society**