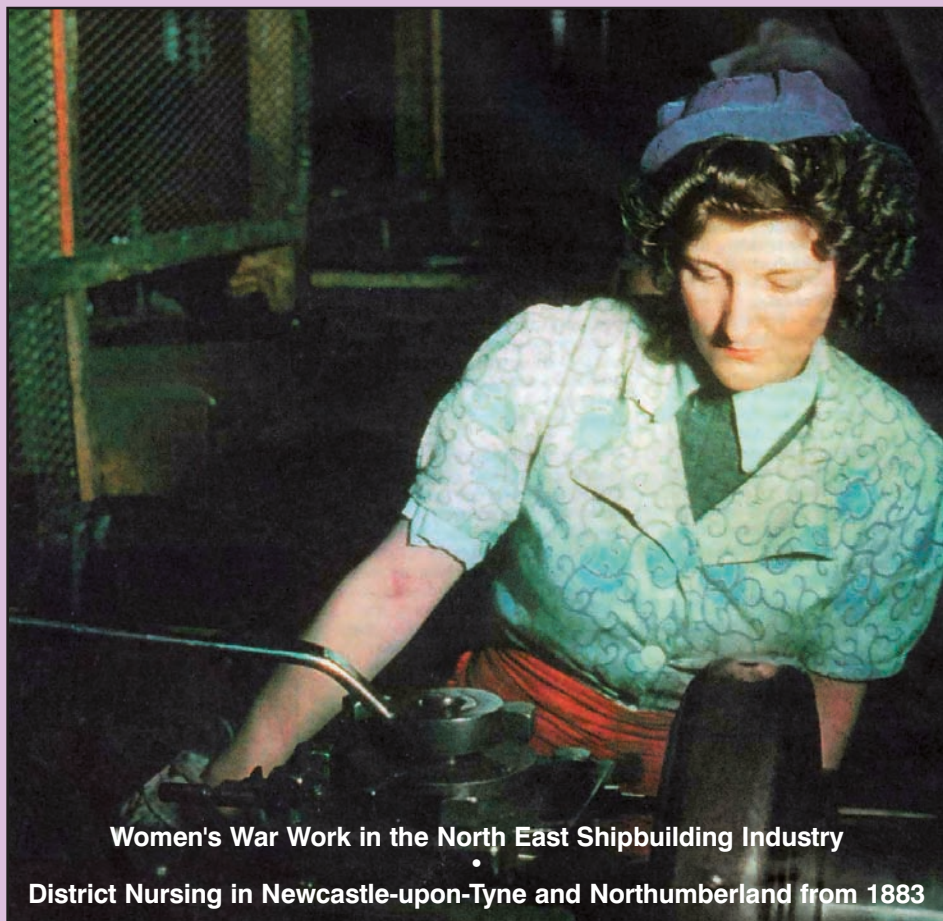


# north east history

Volume 38 2007



Women's War Work in the North East Shipbuilding Industry

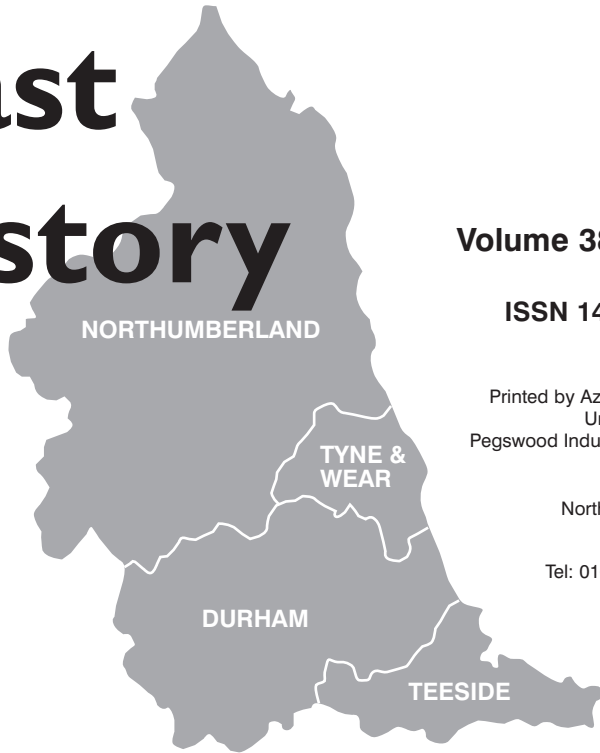
District Nursing in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Northumberland from 1883

journal of the north east labour history society



*north east history*

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Don Watson.**

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### Reviews

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## Editorial

All *Journal* editors have their task determined by the material submitted by contributors. It has been my good fortune in my year's stint in the role, to receive articles of such interest and quality as to require virtually no editorial intervention.

Not only has the quality been high but the subject matter has lent itself to some degree of natural thematic analysis, and there are discernable thematic linkages between the original essays and the publications sent in for review. Elspeth Gould's prize winning essay on the rise of district nursing in the North East sets the twin themes of gender and class in the forefront and these are picked up again in different contexts by Dave Neville's biographical study of the Labour pioneer Lisbeth Simm and Ian Robert's article on women's work in the region's shipyards during the Second World War. Women also figure largely in Don Watson's story of the Sunderland rent strike of 1939 while one of the themes identified by David Byrne's coverage of the 1911 seamen's strike is that of masculinity. Finally Mike Greatbatch's snapshot of the industrial Ouseburn in 1900 explores the exploitative nature of the labour undertaken by working people of both sexes in that area of Tyneside at the turn of the nineteenth century. From the bossy uppercrust supervisors of the district nursing system to the Runcimans and Knotts of the shipping lines class tensions if not always conflicts run through all these contributions and make for a stimulating and thought provoking read.

A further point of interest is the source material upon which these contributions are based which is predominantly either contemporary newsprint or journals, in some cases set alongside oral testimony, an indication of the importance of preserving such records.

The Society's own oral history project continues to elicit interesting material which will appear in subsequent issues of the *Journal*. Here, Oral History is represented

by a vivid evocation of the hazards of coal mining even after the improvements introduced under nationalisation Bernard Newbold whose testimony this is, also contributes to the Review section with an expert analysis of McIvor and Johnston's study of attempts to deal with one of these hazards the respiratory problems arising from inhalation of coal dust.

Similarly the continuance of Chartist aims after 1848 which was central to this year's Edward Allen Memorial lecture is picked up again in the review of Keith Flett's book on the Politics of Radical Education while the theme of community introduced in Mike Greatbatch's study of the Ouseburn appears in several of the other works under consideration.

Readers will note the absence of a poetry section in this volume and the inclusion of an extensive section entitled 'Appreciations'. We have deliberately avoided the term 'obituary' because these are the stories of people whose lives and writings have made a significant contribution to the character of labour in the North East in the twentieth century and as such merit study in their own right. Alongside these goes a brief appreciation of one of that generation who is happily still with us-.the venerable Eric Hobsbawm.

As in the previous issue several of the articles included here grew out of the Tyneside based First Tuesday discussion group which hopefully will continue to be a source of stimulating and well researched articles. However we would welcome contributions from groups and individuals interested in Labour History working on other parts of the region. There must be an awful lot of untapped source material out there. Please keep it coming and remember our website [www: nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org).

My thanks to the other members of the editorial team : John Charlton, Sandy Irvine, Lewis Mates, Ben Sellars, Willie Thompson and Don Watson

*Win Stokes*

## Notes on Contributors

**Elsbeth Gould** is a postgraduate research student who works part-time in the field of health protection.. Her dissertation on the development of District Nursing in the North East on which the first article in this issue of the *Journal* is based gained her the Sid Chaplin trophy for 2006. As a historian her areas of special interest are health and health care, the building industry and death and burial.

**Dave Neville** is a professional engineer and works as manager in a Loughborough community college following a long career in the gas industry. He obtained an M.Phil. in History in 1989. His book on the North East women's suffrage movement *To Make their Mark* was published in 1992 by Northumbria University and is widely referenced in studies of women's suffrage in the region.

**Ian Roberts** left school at 16 and worked as an apprentice plumber in the Wearside shipyards but left before serving his time. He gained a first class honours degree in Sociology from Durham University in 1982, completed a thesis on the labour process in the shipbuilding industry in 1988 and worked as a research associate at Durham University Business School and UMIST. He returned to Durham University as a British Academy Post Doctoral Fellow in 1992 and is currently a lecturer in the department of Sociology. Areas of writing include sociology of work and employment, age and generations and working class studies.

**Don Watson** has published on a variety of labour history topics including theatre, the North East and the Spanish Civil War, sport and bye-elections. He is currently writing a book on the National Unemployed Workers Movement in the North East between the wars . He works in local government in the region.

**David Byrne** is Professor of Sociology and Social Policy at Durham University. He is a native of South Shields and his maternal grandfather was a member of the



National Union of Seamen and Firemen before 'going aft through the hawsehole' and becoming a member of the Imperial Merchant Service Guild

**Mike Greatbatch** is a fellow of the Association for Heritage Interpretation and since 1998 has been project manager for a community heritage project based largely in the Ouseburn.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS AND PERMISSIONS

The photographs illustrating the article on early District Nursing are reproduced courtesy of the Archive of the Royal College of Nursing

The cover of the printed edition of Lisbeth Simm's 1914 speech is taken from Dave Neville's personal archive

The photograph of the woman shipyard worker first appeared in *J.W.Smith and T.S. Holden* **Where ships are born - Sunderland 1346-1946**

The picture of the Sunderland Rent Strikers appears courtesy of the **Sunderland Echo**

The illustrations in Ouseburn 1900 were supplied by Tyne and Wear Archives

The photograph of Frank Graham leading the commemorative parade of the International Brigaders appeared in his **Northumberland and Durham. A Social and Political Miscellany** and that of Len Edmondson in the Evening Chronicle

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District Nurses in training

## ARTICLES & ESSAYS

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**'... Improved through the agency of good women' (1):  
Gender and Class as Reflected in the Beginnings of  
District Nursing in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and  
Northumberland from 1883.**

*Elspeth M. Gould*  
*Winner of the Sid Chaplin Trophy 2006*

*It was only towards the end of the nineteenth century that 'the certificated and uniformed woman, working in the antiseptic setting of a hospital ward, became the dominant model of the sick nurse.' The voluntary hospitals had been founded as sites of medical teaching and treatment of the (mostly deserving) sick poor, but throughout the century most ill people, rich and poor, were cared for at home (2). Much has been written of reforms to hospital nursing but here the focus is on the ranks and roles of women as both nurses and organisers in charities providing home nursing care to the sick poor.*

Nursing has always been an occupation mainly of women. One of the questions asked by feminist historians is how gender has been incorporated by social institutions into their assumptions and organisations (3). Labour historians look in a similar way at class. The records of local organisations reflect class distinctions and women's roles in society as a whole. After examining class and gender and

outlining the earlier developments in district nursing elsewhere, this essay looks in more detail at three very different north east nursing charities and their relationships to a national umbrella organisation, the Queen Victoria Jubilee Institute for Nurses.

The Cathedral Nurse and Loan Society, founded just a year after the Diocese of Newcastle came into being, was run by a largely urban elite with a sense of moral mission to the poor while the Wallsend Nursing Association had its origins in the Women's Co-operative Guild and derived most of its income from local working men. The Northumberland County Nursing Association's organisers came from the county's landed and titled families and could negotiate on a par with the women running the Queen Victoria Jubilee Institute for Nurses, but the latter's Metropolitan standpoint made it hard for them to see the particular problems of providing for a scattered population in the rural north east.

### *Class and Gender*

The terms 'class' and 'gender' refer to differences between groups that 'constitute and are constituted by hierarchical social structures' and so reflect unequal distribution of power <sup>(4)</sup>. Both are highly complex social constructions that have changed over time while remaining crucial for the understanding of organisations. The two are inextricably linked, with sexual status often operating 'in a superficially confusing way within the variable of class' <sup>(5)</sup>. So 'there is no class analysis which is not at the same time a gendered analysis, nor an effective gender history which does not at the same time take class into account' <sup>(6)</sup>.

The evangelical revival of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reinforced existing patriarchy, and even into the twentieth

century Britain remained explicitly and unashamedly patriarchal with social position widely seen as God given. Evangelical Christianity preached that a woman's place was in the home 'providing care, nurturance, and comfort for a family' <sup>(7)</sup> Women were to perform their moral and religious duty in the private sphere of the home and shun the public world in which their menfolk moved. Paradoxically women were enjoined, through their domestic skills and grace within the home, to transform and civilise their menfolk and through them the wider society. Sarah Ellis, for example, insisted on domestic seclusion but asserted that women had 'the social morals of their country in their power' <sup>(8)</sup> and, twenty years later, Ruskin went further. Women should direct the actions of their 'lords', and if they did not, were themselves responsible for the harm men caused <sup>(9)</sup>.

Despite such attitudes being expressed in print, in fact women emerged gradually from the domestic sphere in the 1850s and 1860s and took 'an increasingly large public and philanthropic role ... in close association with groups of other women' <sup>(10)</sup>. The range of white-blouse employment available to unmarried women increased, particularly in teaching and nursing but also clerical and commercial occupations <sup>(11)</sup>, and, for those women whose domestic responsibilities allowed them time, public activity extended the boundaries of traditional charitable work to include membership of school boards and boards of Poor Law guardians. Thus there emerged 'a significant number of women with experience in campaigning, organising, fund-raising and public speaking' <sup>(12)</sup>.

By contrast, many working class wives rarely left the home unaccompanied except for work or on domestic errands. 'Deviation from their traditional pattern of behaviour could subject working class women to considerable abuse. ... No doubt it was to alleviate

fears and suspicions ... that [an] Edinburgh meeting in 1883 decided that there should be “no platform speaking, no advertising, no going out of our woman’s place” (13). Thus for some of the activists in the district nursing societies there would have been a great deal of satisfaction to be derived from setting up and running what were equivalent in complexity to businesses, generating friendships, influence and authority they would not otherwise have enjoyed.

The concept of class evolved during the industrialisation of Britain, with the recognition of subtle nuances of hierarchies within classes (14). Class allocation is approximate even now, but ‘as class entered common usage ... class boundaries were imprecise; people knew they existed but hesitated to say exactly what they were’ (15). In nursing, class was particularly slippery after the Nightingale reforms. Perhaps a mite overstated, by 1902 it could be said that ‘in the hospitals a housemaid may be found sitting next to a baronet’s daughter, and all the gradations of rank between these two may be found at the same table’ (16).

### *General Nursing*

The preponderance of women in the care of the sick has been a fundamental factor in the development of nursing. Thus nursing history combines women’s history and work history and demonstrates the interrelatedness and permeability of the public and private spheres (17). Nursing crosses the boundaries and challenges the social construction of masculinities and femininities yet ‘nursing cannot be understood in its own terms but against the background of the social, political, economic and cultural context in which it subsists’ (18). The ability to nurse was seen as innate in all females so caring for the sick in the family, or as an act of charity, was an extension of the nourishing and care of children that were

‘naturally’ women’s lot <sup>(19)</sup>. From the 1860s onwards there was a shift, partly because of the growth of scientific medicine, from the construct of ‘every-woman as nurse’ to ‘every-woman may be trained to nurse’ <sup>(20)</sup>.

Who should be trained, where, and of what the training should consist were matters of increasing importance to general nurses from the 1880s onwards, and by the close of the nineteenth century, the larger hospitals in England nearly all had nurse training schools of their own <sup>(21)</sup>. The general nurse learned a range of skills with universal application and thus came to resemble not the physicians and surgeons but the general practitioners, some of whom viewed the hospital-trained general nurses as competitors <sup>(22)</sup>. The stricter demarcation of the responsibilities of the two occupations reduced conflict and nurses were never considered on a social par with medical men, to whom they were, by rank and gender, subordinate.

Before 1918 most nurses still came from fairly lowly backgrounds, even if some well-connected ladies had trained and become matrons or superintendents <sup>(23)</sup>, but nurses tended to refer to recruits as from the ‘earnest class’ whose training would render them classless. Obedience, controlled behaviour and self discipline were instilled, along with technical skills, to produce a ‘trained woman, with all that implied in terms of character, subordination and purpose’ <sup>(24)</sup>. Even if the ‘trained nurse was trained to train, rather than to nurse,’ she would undertake menial tasks like cleaning precisely ‘because she was a good woman and a trained nurse’ <sup>(25)</sup>. In training hospitals the person at the bedside was untrained or in training. Trained nurses in this hierarchical structure regulated, trained and disciplined the staff into a standard routine of care <sup>(26)</sup>.

The district nurse had not this distance from the patient. Although she might still see her role as teaching others, these would be the family or friends of the patients. She was still accountable to medical men and to her superior, a superintendent, who might be a lady or a trained nurse (and sometimes both in one person) but who might be based at considerable distance and make only infrequent inspection visits. District nursing was, therefore, very different from hospital nursing prompting moves to provide additional training.

*The Origins of District Nursing*

The term 'district' was used in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to connote an area to which a service was provided, as in the rules of the Newcastle Dispensary. 'The Town shall be divided into seven districts; and one allotted to each Physician, who will visit the home patients at their own dwellings...' (27). It was used similarly by early-nineteenth-century evangelical 'District Visiting Societies of the established and dissenting churches' which 'distributed spiritual, material and medical comforts to the homes of the poor' (28). These district visitors were largely middle and upper class women who could act as role models, an 'important element in the process of moral reconstruction' (29).

The several strands of the history of district nursing are intimately bound up with Christianity (30). District nursing in Northumberland was a continuation of a Europe-wide tradition with pious women living under supervision in a disciplined community and trained to visit the sick poor in their own homes to provide both physical care and moral improvement. Among sisterhoods known to have influenced developments in England were those founded in Paris in 1633 (31), and the Lutheran Deaconesses in Prussia of 1836 (32). Several sisterhoods financed their charitable work by nursing



paying clients, and this left little time for the care of the poor <sup>(33)</sup> The St. John's House Training Institution for Nurses, founded in 1848, was one of many High Anglican foundations modelled on Catholic sisterhoods <sup>(34)</sup>. They aimed to displace the Sarah Gamps with trustworthy women who would tend to their patients' physical needs and spiritual welfare.

*Further Developments in District Nursing to the 1880s*

In consultation with Florence Nightingale (who was setting up her training school at St. Thomas's Hospital) and Mary Jones of the St. John's Institute <sup>(35)</sup>, William Rathbone established a nurses' home at Liverpool. Though non-denominational, the districts were based on parishes and each was managed by a committee of ladies with the working-class district nurses supervised by lady inspectors. Most of Liverpool's district committees insisted their nurses be properly trained, establishing this as the ideal copied by other towns <sup>(36)</sup> Nightingale was critical of nurses who gave handouts, but such was the poverty and bad housing that the organisation was forced to work closely with the Central Relief Committee of Liverpool (CRCL). Nightingale, Rathbone and the CRCL saw the district nurses as agents for moral improvement. As Rathbone put it:

...after the nurse had shown what might be done to restore order the husbands who were well meaning, industrious men took heart again and left off drinking and were saved together with their families from the utter state of degradation and wretchedness into which they were sinking when the nurse came to the rescue <sup>(37)</sup>.

In 1874 a Nightingale nurse, Florence Lees, conducted an enquiry into London's district nurses, concluding that the nursing

was 'slovenly and haphazard' and 'nursing the sick poor was still looked upon in great measure as a religious rather than a professional occupation' (38). The outcome was the formation of the National Association for Providing Trained Nurses for the Sick Poor with objectives that included the establishment of a training school in connection with a London hospital and a raising of the standard of work and the social position of nurses (39).

Rathbone was on the committee, and Lees was the first superintendent presiding over the Central Home and Training School established in Bloomsbury Square in 1875. Lees was to write that the district nurse 'must be content to be the servant of the poor sick and teacher by turns. Wherever she enters order and cleanliness must enter with her' (40)

District nursing societies enjoyed wide, if not universal, support (41). All the organisations were part of the 'increased outside intervention in working-class homes and important shifts between lay and formal sectors of care [that] both took place' in the later nineteenth century (42). In contrast to the Sarah Gamps, those who nursed the sick poor acted as 'a social catalyst in care, a cross-class and cultural conduit into the lives and social spaces of groups otherwise beyond the reach of agents of social authority' (43).

By 1880, there were district nurses working for the sick poor in both London and the provinces. The nurses were 'organised by and accountable to social superiors' (44). They were largely working class with varying levels of training and almost always overseen by either a lady superintendent, who was not a nurse but possessed the skills of her class in domestic management, or by a trained nurse of middle class background, such as Florence Lees. All were expected

to behave in an exemplary fashion. Many on the organising committees were people of deep religious faith who expected district nurses to promote the moral as well as the physical welfare of the sick poor and their families. By contrast, nurses like Dickens' Sarah Gamp and her handywomen colleagues were independent businesswomen hired by the sick, and were seen by some as in competition with doctors, although generally, to be successful they had to work closely with the medical men who recommended them to clients <sup>(45)</sup>. They had also to be able to move between the physically and culturally separated worlds of their own lives and those of wealthier clients. 'It was his observations of the social discomfort which resulted when such skills were inadequate which inspired Dickens' portrayal of Sarah Gamp' <sup>(46)</sup>.

*Newcastle-upon-Tyne in the 1880s*

Newcastle in the 1880s had a complex health care economy. The local paper advertised:

NURSES' HOME AND TRAINING SCHOOL,  
5 Charlotte Square, Newcastle-on-Tyne. Trained HOSPITAL  
NURSES, for Medical, Surgical, Mental, and Monthly, and  
all Fever cases can be obtained at the above institution at a  
moment's notice, being resident in the Home.  
Miss NICOLAY, Lady Superintendent <sup>(47)</sup>.

Three private midwives were listed, as were eight physicians and about sixty surgeons. In addition to the Infirmary for the Sick, Lamé & Poor for the Counties of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Durham & Northumberland <sup>(48)</sup> there were small specialist hospitals: for eye conditions, fevers and smallpox convalescence, sick children; diseases of the skin, diseases of the chest, or of the throat and ear,

as well as the Lying-in-Hospital. The first building at the Workhouse Hospital had opened in 1870. There was even a Newcastle-on-Tyne Homoeopathic Dispensary for the Working Classes <sup>(49)</sup>.

In common with other major towns, Newcastle had a Dispensary, instituted in 1777, ‘a service which did not simply dispense medicines but would make home visits to sick persons confined to bed many of whom could not be admitted to hospital,’ because of infection or poor prognosis <sup>(50)</sup>. Prospective patients had to have a letter from a Governor or subscriber to the dispensary and tended to be from among what were categorised as the ‘deserving’ poor, but by the 1880s patients numbered in their thousands. The Patron was the Duke of Northumberland, the Bishop of Newcastle was a President, the Vice Presidents included the Vicar of Newcastle, and the committee was entirely male <sup>(51)</sup>.

*The Cathedral Nursing and Loan Society*

‘We Must Have in this Work Lay People Acting Side by Side with Clergy, as God’s New Work Goes Onward to its Appointed End ...’: The Cathedral Nursing and Loan Society <sup>(52)</sup>

In addition to their roles on the committee of the Dispensary the Bishop and Vicar were also Patron and President, respectively, of the Cathedral Nursing and Loan Society (CNS) <sup>(53)</sup>. Indeed, Canon Arthur Lloyd, the Vicar of Newcastle, was described as the ‘founder’ of the Society, and was almost certainly influenced by the work of the Dispensary <sup>(54)</sup>. In 1883 the Society issued a pamphlet setting out its objectives.

‘The rule that no religious distinction should be allowed was made at the beginning of the Society’s work, and has been carefully

adhered to. ... The work began with two nurses who lived in lodgings, but by the end of the year, four nurses were working and living in one of the houses known later as 17 and 18 Ellison Place. ... We know also that many have been led by the influence of our nurses to higher ideals. The moral and physical effect of such work is needed more than ever at the present time (55)

The objectives of the Society were

1. To provide a Nurse for every Parish in Newcastle to nurse the Sick Poor in their own homes; the Nurses to be educated Ladies of Hospital training.
2. To provide a Collection of Necessaries and Comforts to lend the Poor during illnesses.
3. To provide an "Invalid Kitchen," from which to distribute such Nourishment as the Doctors and Nurses may decide to be necessary for the various cases (56).
4. [Added between 1887 and 1890] To provide Cottage Convalescent Homes in the country (57).

Work started on 1<sup>st</sup> November 1883 but it was not until late in 1885 that Miss Coleman, the Lady Superintendent, was in charge of six nurses at the home at 3 & 4 Gresham Place. By the fourth year of operation, between them Misses Rennoldson, Bramwell, Topham, Wright, Bucknill and Constable could 'undertake the nursing of all the ordinary cases of sickness amongst the poor in all parts of the city, including the distant districts of Byker and S. Anthony's' (58).

Even allowing for poetic licence, the Society's journal, *Our Quarterly Record* paints a grim picture of the working lives of these 'educated Ladies of Hospital training' whose duties took them 'down to the lowest stratum of city life: some are in that condition, mainly from their own fault or infirmities perhaps; but mostly we have found them so low from their misfortunes.' The effort to show that the sick poor were deserving objects of readers' charity continued:

Their uncomplaining acceptance of their woes, their humility, their patience, their self reliance, their simple obedience to those who go to help them, their gratitude and their steady hopefulness, are lessons which the best of us would do well to take to heart <sup>(59)</sup>.

The nurses had to be physically fit and very resourceful, carrying their 'District Bags' on dark and frosty nights, 'wending their way ... to a back slum of the city, in search of a case just sent in by the Vicar of one of the poorest of our parishes' or laying and lighting fires, using leaky tins to heat water to wash patients, and even tracking down sick children whose parents had flitted overnight. In addition to food, the nurses were able to give letters for the Dispensary and the Children's Hospital, and to lend clothes and bed linen <sup>(60)</sup>. Thanks to a regular supply from an anonymous donor, they could also give out coal <sup>(61)</sup> As well as teaching families how to care for their sick, the staff raised 'substantial' amounts of money by running 'Nursing Classes for Women' <sup>(62)</sup>.

The surviving records of the CNS give no clue to the background or religious affiliations of these hospital trained nurses who lived and worked under the eye of a lady superintendent but they were clearly expected to improve the moral as well as

physical health of the poor. The CNS acknowledged the profound poverty of their patients and enabled their nurses to respond with a measure of material help. The CNS worked closely with other charities, especially the Dispensary. Working only with the poorest and doing no paid work, there is no evidence that the nurses of the CNS were seen by doctors as a threat.

The Bishop and Vicar of Newcastle were not the only connections between the Dispensary and the CNS. Dr. William Crump Beatley, the Resident Medical Officer (RMO) of the Dispensary, and on the committee of the CNS <sup>(63)</sup>, testified to ‘the good work done’ during 1885

among our Home Patients by the Nurses of the Cathedral Nurse and Loan Society. ... [T]he Nurses have worked hand in hand with the Medical Officers, nursing surgical and many difficult cases, supplying nourishment and appliances, and by their kindness and attention have done much to alleviate suffering and distress in the homes of the sick poor <sup>(64)</sup>.

Dr Beatley’s successors also acknowledged other organisations catering for the sick poor. In addition to the CNS, George Walter Ridley praised the ‘Nurses of the Brunswick and St James’ Nursing Societies’ <sup>(65)</sup>. So closely did the Dispensary work with the nursing societies that its rules were changed to allow it to distribute its own funds to them, £135 being divided between the three in 1892 <sup>(66)</sup>.

In contrast to the Dispensary, the CNS’s patrons, committee members and local secretaries were predominantly women, many of them the wives or daughters of clerical or medical gentlemen. Among

the main figures at the foundation of the CNS, Mrs R. J. Johnson was, 'for many years ... the indefatigable Treasurer and Secretary' (67). She edited *Our Quarterly Record* and administered a charity with a fund raising network extending beyond Northumberland and employing several nurses. There was also the invalid kitchen and loan store. At first there was an 'Ozone Fund', used for getting convalescent patients into the fresh air, but the Society soon ran its own convalescent homes.

The Cathedral Nurse and Loan Society's work spread beyond the city. Mrs Drewett (apparently a Riding Mill resident) was paying £130 a year to support a nurse for Jarrow, and by the Society's seventh year, the Parish of Gosforth was contributing £50 per annum, 'in return for which one of the [now seven] nurses [visited] there regularly, and [had] attended several cases of severe and protracted illness, requiring much time and close attention' (68). The next year Miss Brookes moved from Gresham Place to run a branch at Alnmouth and Mrs Sandwell was appointed to set up a branch in Hexham and St John's Lee (69). By the tenth year the 'daughter' branches were 'each supplied, on payment of a sum of £100 per annum, with a nurse for its own special use' and the new branches were at Alnwick (where 'the Duke of Northumberland, Earl Percy and others' paid for two nurses (70), and Haydon Bridge with Warden (including Fourstones and Newbrough) (71).

As the Society had no capital reserves and was paid for no work other than providing classes, maintaining donation income was a constant problem. With supporters who were able to give large amounts it is not surprising that the Society might feel defensive of its patients, whose lives some of the subscribers would be unable to imagine. To a suggestion that the Society should not look after



families with a man in work, the editor of *Our Quarterly Record* responded warmly. 'If any friend thinks that a woman with a husband in work ought not to be helped, we should like him to have the spending of a working man's wages of 14s a week' (72). The Annual Reports make special mention of the contributions of groups of working men (73). The amounts of money handled by the Society were considerable, especially when special projects were in hand. In the year that the workmen managed to contribute £6 0s 9d, the Society paid out £1791 4s 1d for nursing, kitchen, cottage home (in Shotley Bridge), and to the branches (including £80 to furnish the nurses' home at Alnwick) and £2467 9s 8d to build a new convalescent home at Hexham, designed, by R. J. Johnson (74).

## Continuing Developments in the National Context of District Nursing

### *The Rural District Nursing Association*

The Rural District Nursing Association (RDNA) grew from the efforts of Elizabeth Malleson to establish a nurse-midwife in her Gloucestershire village. The RDNA was headed by Florence Craven (formerly Lees) and Florence Nightingale. Its aims were collecting money, training nurses for work in rural districts and publicising district nursing. The RDNA advised on pay and conditions, and insisted that the nurse be trained, provided with a cottage, and should never live in with patients. The affiliated county associations could charge for midwifery, but not for nursing care. The RDNA flourished (75).

### *Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute for Nurses*

To mark her Golden Jubilee in 1887, money was raised by the women of England as a gift to Queen Victoria. After paying for

jewellery, £70,000 was left which was to be used 'for the welfare of nursing' <sup>(76)</sup>. Of several possible schemes that of Florence Craven, Rathbone and Florence Nightingale was eventually the most influential. The Royal Charter was issued to the Queen Victoria's Jubilee Institute for Nurses (QVJIN) on 20th September 1889 and its purpose was

the training, support and maintenance of women to act as nurses for the sick poor and the establishment (if thought proper) of a home or homes for nurses and generally the promotion and provision of improved means of nursing the sick poor <sup>(77)</sup>.

At £2049, the Institute's annual income was insufficient to provide nurses itself so it worked with the Metropolitan and National Nursing Association giving it a £450 grant. It also set and sought to promote standards for district nursing services. Nursing associations were invited to affiliate to the QVJIN but had to meet the standards and submit to inspection of their work by the Institute. The qualifications required of the district nurses who wished to be put on the roll of Queen's nurses were

- (a) Training at some approved general hospital or infirmary for not less than one year.
- (b) Approved training in district nursing for not less than six months, including the nursing of mothers and their infants after childbirth.
- (c) Nurses in country districts ... must have at least three months' approved training in midwifery <sup>(78)</sup>.

The Institute stipulated that town nurses might undertake post-natal care but not act as midwives, unlike those in the country who

might do so. Town nurses were to live in homes, under the charge of a Council-approved, trained superintendent and, wherever they worked Queen's nurses were to work 'under the direction of the medical practitioners' and were 'strictly forbidden to interfere in any way with the religious opinions of the patients or members of their families' (79).

The RDNA affiliated in 1890, and amalgamated with the QVJIN seven years later. The amalgamation was not easy, and the QVJIN had great difficulty in coming to terms with the village nurses employed extensively by county associations. They were trained at the Plaistow Maternity Charity and District Nurses' Home. As this had been set up for rescue work in the east of London the Institute feared the home had more a welfare than a nursing ethos (80). By 1900 the council admitted that rural areas (that is with population below 3000) needed more midwifery help although they could not afford the expense of Queen's nurses. They were adamant that the village nurses should be distinguished from, and have different supervision from, the Queen's nurses (81). Affiliation of district nursing associations to the QVJIN was never universal (82). Some smaller societies could not afford to affiliate, others felt the conditions of affiliation were too restrictive, and some, such as Wallsend Nursing Association, chose to leave the Institute for periods during disputes.

*The Wallsend Nursing Association and Wallsend Queen's Jubilee District Nursing Association*

The Wallsend Nursing Association (WNA) was a project of the Women's Wallsend Co-operative Guild, started in 1894 at Mrs M. Guthrie's suggestion. The launch meeting was presided over by George Renwick, but the elected officers were all women, along

with the 'energetic part of the committee'. To the first year's income of £147 10s 5d, the Guild contributed £4 14s, the Co-operative Society £10, Messrs Swan Hunter's workmen £5, Messrs Fisher, Renwick and Co. £5, Wallsend Slipway £5, and £64 came from collections <sup>(83)</sup>.

The Co-operative Women's Guild was a national organisation set up in 1883, as part of the Co-operative Movement. Although 'the Guild's early leadership had a substantial and highly important middle class element, ... rank and file membership was predominantly working class ... [though] biased towards the upper bracket of the manual wage earning group' <sup>(84)</sup>. The Guild encouraged women to become involved in public life, attend meetings and learn public speaking <sup>(85)</sup>. There was a philanthropic strand to the Guild's work, in common with organisations in the evangelical tradition, yet 'most of its leaders were motivated by a strong belief in the unfairness of the existing economic and social fabric' and it had 'special links with the Labour Movement' <sup>(86)</sup>. It would be wrong to stereotype, however: Mrs Guthrie, wife of a President of the Wallsend Co-operative Society, herself an active member of the Women's Co-operative Guild, was one of the earliest members of the Wallsend Habitation of the Primrose League, an auxiliary of the Tory party <sup>(87)</sup>.

After five years the WNA was well established, but bore no comparison with the Cathedral Nursing Society at a similar age. There were only two nurses working <sup>(88)</sup>, but the year's income of only £341 4s 8\_d had paid for 5,530 visits to 370 cases <sup>(89)</sup>.

Growth was slow, and a permanent third nurse was added only in 1909 when income had reached £440 15s 9\_d, an improvement

‘due entirely to the help given by the workmen of the district’ and an ‘object they desired to attain in the near future was the appointment of a maternity nurse’ <sup>(90)</sup>. The annual meeting was addressed by Miss Glover of the QVJIN, and apparently the nurses ‘held the badges and certificates of the Queen’s Jubilee Association’ <sup>(91)</sup>.

*The Old Association and the New*

There seems to have been an acrimonious disagreement between the Wallsend Nursing Association and six of the seven medical men working in Wallsend <sup>(92)</sup> who, in autumn 1909, set up the Wallsend Queen’s Jubilee District Nursing Association (WQJDNA) <sup>(93)</sup>. Amalgamation was soon proposed, with the local branch of the British Medical Association (BMA) and the Queen Victoria Jubilee Institute was drawn into the negotiations <sup>(94)</sup>. Evidently the editor of the Herald and Advertiser thought the medical men were in the wrong, as they aimed ‘chiefly at bringing the old Association to its knees.’ He regarded their attitude as ‘so childish that we can only wonder how intelligent men can maintain it’ <sup>(95)</sup>.

The question seems to have been one of control, reflecting ‘an underlying power struggle within health care’ <sup>(96)</sup> It is hinted that the medical men’s grievance was with the Wallsend Nursing Association, rather than with the nurses themselves, though the nurses were certainly the targets of complaints. The WNA had ‘been obliged to discontinue the services of the Maternity Nurse, owing to the attitude of the medical gentlemen refusing to attend any case our nurse was engaged for’ <sup>(97)</sup>. The WNA supported its other nurses, and they, in their turn, resigned from the QVJIN when the WNA disaffiliated in protest at the QVJIN’s stance. Writing to the WNA in September 1910, Miss Peterkin, the Acting General Superintendent of the QVJIN, said the Institute could not have

both Associations in affiliation. It seems there were complaints about the nurses, 'both as to the nature of the cases which they attended without a doctor, and as to their refusing to attend when sent for for an operation' (98).

Her accusations seem to have been news to Alderman Jackson, the WNA's secretary, but there are hints in his predecessor's farewell address that the nurses were being criticised (99). The main complaint seems to have been that they were nursing those people in whom the medical men had neither professional nor pecuniary interest rather than going to cases as directed by the doctors. Stung, the committee sought clarification, only to get a far from emollient reply from Miss Peterkin (100).

The dispute probably ran until 1920, and the peace settlement included the doctors of Wallsend, along with all the ministers of religion, being granted the status of 'Honorary Committee.' It seems that the QVJIN was not forgiven so easily, as the third annual report describes the Association as 'constituted in accordance with the recognised rules of Nursing Institutions' (101).

#### *The Northumberland County Nursing Association*

Formed in December 1896, the Northumberland County Nursing Association (NCNA) acted as an umbrella organisation to which districts affiliated (for 5 shillings) to receive advice and superintendence for their nurses. The NCNA made rules about training and uniform for village nurses, and insisted the nurses should attend only the poor and might 'not charge fees to gentry' (102).

Its formation doesn't seem to have had any effect on Wallsend, but the Cathedral Nursing Society felt the impact immediately.

Owing to the introduction of the County Nursing Scheme for the country parishes of Northumberland, under the presidency of the Countess Percy, our two Nurses are no longer required at Alnwick, and may we, in closing this branch, very heartily thank Earl and Countess Percy and the Alnwick Committee for all their courtesy and liberality towards us.

Intriguingly, the 'daughter branches' did not all transfer their allegiances to the NCNA as

Alnmouth and Warden with Fourstones and Haydon Bridge are worked as before each with its own Nurse. ... [T]he parishes of Gosforth and Jarrow are each, by their own payments, worked by one of our Cathedral Nurses <sup>(103)</sup>.

The CNS was not affiliated to the Queen Victoria Jubilee Institute: possibly the CNS saw the Institute's rules as restrictive with no compensating benefit to the CNS.

The NCNA had to postpone affiliation to the QVJIN until October 1897, 'owing to technical difficulties raised by the Institute regarding the training of Village Nurses, and their subsequent employment in general sick nursing' <sup>(104)</sup>. The technical difficulty was apparently settled after the QVJIN's Countess of Selborne visited the Duchess of Northumberland <sup>(105)</sup>. Fortunately for the NCNA, their original secretary, whose salary had been only £50 p.a., resigned in time for them to appoint Miss White, a trained nurse, as secretary and superintendent at £115 p.a. (to which the QVJIN contributed £50 p.a.). The Queen's nurses were, of course, to be inspected by the Queen's Institute, 'but it must be remembered that the supervision of a highly-trained Nurse is much appreciated by the

Village Nurse, who has been taught by her few month's training that she has still much to learn, and who can look to her Superintendent for professional testimonials and assistance, should she wish to secure hospital training, and qualify as a first-class Nurse after her three years' agreement is over, and that this induces superior candidates to apply for the preliminary training offered them at Plaistow' (106).

As well as the two Queen's nurses at Alnwick, there was one at Bedlington and another at Morpeth. None of them lived in, there were no fees for their services and, the areas they covered were relatively compact. Seven districts employed village nurses. Three charged fees, four did not. In at least three of the districts the nurses could take 'resident' cases. Beadnell and District, covering a population of 5000, employed three nurses who had 'attended 33 Resident Cases, varying in length, from one to twenty-two weeks; 13 of these being Maternity Cases' (107). One suspects the QVJIN would be very uneasy about Beadnell but three village nurses covered the parishes of Beadnell, Bamburgh, Embleton, Howick, Rock, Longhoughton and North Sunderland and living in must have been the only practical way to cope if patients needed much attention. The nurse at Rothbury at least had a bicycle.

The village nurses were not 'educated ladies' like the CNS nurses but they were going among the 'lowest stratum' of life in their districts. On top of the hazard of infection (108), the resident nurse's security was uncertain (109). The standard of accommodation and food for nurses residing with the sick poor must be questioned, yet the system was still in operation in 1920 (110).

The NCNA gathered affiliates as the years passed, but by 1920 neither Newcastle nor Wallsend was part of the NCNA, in spite



of its training home being sited at Willington Quay. The CNS was, perhaps, too much part of the city and the diocese, but Wallsend probably had more in common with some of the associations which had affiliated, such as Ashington and Hirst, Blyth and Cowpen and Tynemouth<sup>(111)</sup>. The committees of the NCNA included members of the highest strata of county society, and perhaps the WNA was too imbued with the spirit of the Women's Co-operative Guild to become part of that social and organisational hierarchy.

### *Conclusion*

Nineteenth century society was divided along class and gender lines. Nursing operated within this framework, but in many ways transgressed accepted bounds. Caring was part of a woman's role, but the training and the tasks nurses performed moved them into a 'third sex'<sup>(112)</sup>. Lady nurses were expected to act as teachers, bringing order and moral improvement into the homes of the poor, while nursing was recruiting from a widening range of women and ladies who could expect to work alongside each other, creating an 'earnest class' of good women.

The Cathedral Nursing and Loan Society saw district nursing partly as a moral mission to the poor, but this is not apparent in the case of the Wallsend Nursing Association with its origins in the Women's Co-operative Guild. The CNS was in the accepted mould, with its own lady superintendent to oversee the nurses and a close working relationship with the medical men, but it didn't see the need to affiliate to any other society. By contrast, although supervision at Wallsend had come from the Queen Victoria Jubilee Institute for Nurses when the Institute sided with the doctors against the WNA, they left the Institute rather than tolerate interference. Workmen contributed tiny amounts to the CNS, whose support came largely

from the well-to-do via parish based giving, whereas the WNA depended largely on the contributions of local working men.

The committee of the NCNA had a similarly upper and upper-middle class background to the women running the QVJIN, but the latter's Metropolitan origins made it hard for the Institute to appreciate the different needs of scattered, rural communities in Northumberland.

The organisations that employed district nurses were dominated by women motivated by deep religious faith or an interest in politics. Perhaps any woman who took on the management of such organisations had to be a strong personality to operate in such a public sphere, and strong personalities don't often find compromise easy. However, it seems safe to conclude that, as with hospital nursing, the service to the sick poor was '...improved through the agency of good women' (113).

### *Acknowledgements*

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### *Notes*

The abbreviations NCAS and TWAS denote records in the care of Northumberland County Archives Service and Tyne & Wear Archives Service, respectively.

- (1) 'Mrs. Sarah Gamp was, four-and-twenty years ago, a fair representation of the hired attendant on the poor in sickness. The hospitals of London were, in many respects, noble institutions; in others, very defective. I think it not the least among the instances of their mismanagement, that Mrs. Betsey Prig was a fair specimen of a Hospital Nurse; and that the Hospitals, with their means and funds, should have left it to private humanity and enterprises, to enter on an attempt to improve that class of persons – since, greatly improved through the agency of good women.' Charles Dickens. 'Preface' *Martin Chuzzlewit* (Originally published 1843-4. London: Chapman and Hall, undated c. 1868), iv.
- (2) Anne Summers: 'The Mysterious Demise of Sarah Gamp: The Domiciliary Nurse and Her Detractors, c.1830-1860' *Victorian Studies* 32 (Spring) 1989, p.367. Anne Summers: 'The Costs and Benefits of Caring: Nursing Charities, c.1830-c.1860' in J. Barry and C. Jones (eds) *Medicine and Charity Before the Welfare State* (London, Routledge 1991) p.134.
- (3) Joan Wallach Scott: *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York, Columbia University Press 1988) p.50.
- (4) Scott: *Gender and the Politics of History* p.25.
- (5) Kate Millett: *Sexual Politics* (London, Virago Press 1993) p.36.
- (6) Thomas Dublin: 'Gender, Class and Historical Analysis: A Commentary' *Gender & History* 13 (1) April 2001, p.23.
- (7) Barbara Caine: *English Feminism 1780-1980* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1997) p.82.
- (8) Sarah Ellis: *The Daughters of England* (London, 1844) p.216, quoted in Caine: *English Feminism* p.84-5.
- (9) John Ruskin: *Sesame & Lilies, Unto This Last, and The Political Economy of Art* (London, Cassell & Co, Ltd 1907) p.90.
- (10) Caine: *English Feminism* p.89.
- (11) Christopher J. Maggs: *The Origins of General Nursing* (London, Croom Helm 1983) p.42.
- (12) Valerie Bryson: *Feminist Political Theory: An Introduction*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition

- (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan 2003) p.72-3.
- (13) Gaffin and Thoms: *Caring and Sharing: The Centenary History of the Co-operative Women's Guild* (Manchester, Co-operative Union Limited 1983) p.14-15.
- (14) Gaffin and Thoms: *Caring and Sharing*, p.20.
- (15) Anne Phillips: *Divided Loyalties: Dilemmas of Sex and Class* (London, Virago 1987) p.32.
- (16) Quoted in Phillips: *Divided Loyalties*, p.49.
- (17) Efi Avdela: 'Work, Gender and History in the 1990s and Beyond' *Gender & History* 11 (3) November 1999, p.530.
- (18) Anne Marie Rafferty, Jane Robinson and Ruth Elkan: 'Introduction' in A. M. Rafferty, J. Robinson and R. Elkan (eds) *Nursing History and the Politics of Welfare* (London, Routledge 1997) p.4.
- (19) Jan Marsh: 'Votes for Women and Chastity for Men: Gender, Health, Medicine and Sexuality' in John M. MacKenzie (ed) *The Victorian Vision: Inventing New Britain* (London: V & A Publications 2001) p.102.
- (20) Maggs: *The Origins of General Nursing*, p.12.
- (21) 'During the thirty years that followed the founding of the Nightingale School .... the militant, almost fanatical trained matrons fired the old nurses and trained new ones. When change came to a hospital, it was relatively swift and usually ruthless.' Brian Abel-Smith: *A History of the Nursing Profession* (London, Heinemann 1960) p.36.
- (22) Maggs: *The Origins of General Nursing*, p.2.
- (23) Margaret Pelling, Virginia Berridge, Mark Harrison and Paul Weindling: 'The Era of Public Health 1848-1918' in Charles Webster (ed) *Caring for Health: History & Diversity*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (Buckingham, Open University Press 1993) p.113.
- (24) Maggs: *The Origins of General Nursing*, p.22, 14.
- (25) Maggs: *The Origins of General Nursing*, p.28-9.
- (26) Maggs: *The Origins of General Nursing*, p.11
- (27) *The History and Statutes of the Newcastle Dispensary Instituted 1777* (Newcastle, 1790) p.19.

- (28) Summers: 'The Costs and Benefits of Caring' p.134. In 1827 the Brighton District Visiting Society even sponsored a dispensary.
- (29) Robert Dingwall, Anne Marie Rafferty and Charles Webster: *An Introduction to the Social History of Nursing* (London, Routledge 1988) p.27.
- (30) Summers: 'The Costs and Benefits of Caring', p.134.
- (31) It was still going strong when Florence Nightingale visited. Monica E. Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute* (London, Croom Helm 1987) p.1.
- (32) Gerald Bowman: *The Lamp and the Book The Story of the RCN, 1916-1966* (London, The Queen Anne Press 1967) p.8.
- (33) Summers: 'The Costs and Benefits of Caring', p.136, 140. *A History of the Nursing Sister's Institute* (London, Shearn Bros. 1930) quoted in Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute* p.4.
- (34) The High Church sisterhoods 'soon came under attack as proselytizers, determined to drag patient and nurse alike to the feet of the Pope.' F. F. Cartwright: *A Social History of Medicine* (London, Longman 1977) p.157.
- (35) The Nightingale school was non-sectarian and, at this time 'existed ... "to train training matrons". That is, a graduate was expected to head an untrained staff and to train it to Nightingale perfection. The St. John's school at King's existed to train nurses.' Cartwright: *A Social History of Medicine*, p.156.
- (36) Dingwall, et al: *Social History of Nursing*, p.174. 'By the end of the 1860s there were a number of district nursing associations more or less on the Liverpool pattern' Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.10, 7-9.
- (37) William Rathbone: *A Short History and Description of District Nursing in Liverpool* (Liverpool, Marples 1898) p.8, quoted in Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.8, 9.
- (38) Quoted in Lucy Ridgely Seymer' *A General History of Nursing* 4<sup>th</sup> edition (London, Faber & Faber 1956) p.203.
- (39) Gwen Hardy: *William Rathbone and the Early History of District Nursing* (Ormskirk, G. W. & A. Hesketh 1981) p.19-20. The organisation was later

renamed the Metropolitan & National Nursing Association. Florence Lees married the Rev. Dacre Craven in 1880 and, in 1890, published the first textbook for district nurses.

- (40) Craven, Florence. *A Guide to District Nurses and Home Nursing* (1899), quoted in Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.15.
- (41) 'Unhappily Institutes of District Nursing, ... depend almost exclusively on the donations and subscriptions of the upper and middle classes. Hence instead of increasing the independence and self reliance of those to whom the nurse is sent, they exert the opposite effect and encourage them to depend on the gratuitous help of the benevolent.' Dr. J. B. Hurry: *District Nursing on a Provident Basis* (London, Scientific Press 1898), quoted in Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institut*, p.43.
- (42) Pelling et al: 'The Era of Public Health 1848-1918', p.97.
- (43) Rafferty, et al: 'Introduction', p.3.
- (44) Dingwall, et al: *Social History of Nursing*, p.29.
- (45) Summers: 'The Mysterious Demise of Sarah Gamp', p.373-4.
- (46) Barbara Mortimer: 'Independent Women: Domiciliary Nurses in Mid-nineteenth-Century Edinburgh' in A. M. Rafferty, J. Robinson and R. Elkan (eds) *Nursing History and the Politics of Welfare* (London, Routledge 1997) p.147.
- (47) *The Newcastle Daily Journal*, Wed. January 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1883, p104.
- (48) The Queen consented to the change to the Royal Victoria Infirmary when the system of admission by letter was abandoned. Also, as 'soon as the hospital was made free, the workmen took up the cause of its support with enthusiasm' and raised £2,503 in 1898. George Haliburton Hume: *The History of the Newcastle Infirmary* (Newcastle, Andrew Reid & Co. Ltd. 1906) p.87, 89.
- (49) *The Post Office Directory of Durham & Northumberland* (London, Kelly & Co. 1879) p.932, 937, 963-4. George Hurrell and George P. Harlan: *The History of Newcastle General Hospital* (Newcastle, The Newcastle upon Tyne Hospital Management Committee 1966) p.3. *Ward's Newcastle Directory* (1883-4) p.862.

- (50) Fred J. W. Miller: 'Dr John Clark: The Forgotten Physician 1744-1805' in David Gardner-Medwin, Anne Hargreaves and Elizabeth Lazenby (eds) *Medicine in Northumbria: Essays on the History of Medicine in North East England* (Newcastle, The Pybus Society 1993) p.114.
- (51) For example, in 1884, of 6060 letter patients 4202 were 'home patients' with the rest attending the Dispensary. *Annual Report of the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Dispensary for the One Hundred and Seventh Year ending December 31<sup>st</sup>, 1884* (Newcastle, 1885) p.10. *Annual Report of the Newcastle-upon-Tyne Dispensary, 1884*, p.2.
- (52) Bishop Ernest Roland Wilberforce's sermon at his enthronement, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, 3<sup>rd</sup> August 1882, quoted in Peter J. Jagger: 'The Formation of the Diocese of Newcastle' in W. S.F. Pickering (ed) *A Social History of the Diocese of Newcastle* (Stocksfield, Oriel Press 1981) p.51.
- (53) TWAS CHX20/1/1 *Cathedral Nurse and Loan Society for the Sick Poor of Newcastle Annual Report 1887*, 3. This fourth annual report is the earliest to survive. The organisation survived into the mid-twentieth century, becoming the Cathedral Nursing Society, and then the Cathedral Nursing Society Charitable Trust. Lloyd says its original title was the 'Cathedral Nurse and Hearse Society', but this has not been found used in the material at TWAS. (Lloyd. "Social Work in the Diocese", 230.)
- (54) TWAS CHX20/1/6 *12<sup>th</sup> Annual Report June 1895*, p.7.
- (55) TWAS CHX20/1/31 *39<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, December 31<sup>st</sup> 1922*, p.5.
- (56) TWAS CHX20/1/1 *4<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1887*, p.2.
- (57) TWAS CHX20/1/2 *7<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1890*, p.2.
- (58) TWAS CHX20/2/1 Cathedral Nurse and Loan Society, *Our Quarterly Record* No.1, March 1886, p.3. That year they paid 13,218 visits to 1,211 cases, giving out '1,654 Pints of Beef Tea, 5,135 Pints of Milk, 1,571 Dinners and 117 Puddings; besides Broth, Eggs, Barley Water and various other requirements for invalids.' TWAS CHX20/1/11 *4<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1887*, p.3.
- (59) TWAS CHX20/2/1 *Our Quarterly Record*, March 1886, 5. Case studies

follow. One man has ‘only his blind wife and a lame friend to look after him. The poor blind woman keeps house and washes the clothes ...; the lame friend acted as nurse in my absence. Very poor – not able to get nourishment, which was needed, so it was supplied from the Invalid Kitchen, the kind cripple came to fetch it because she knew the way; but as she could not walk without sticks, she could not carry the beef tea, etc., and a deaf woman came with her to carry the can.’

- (60) TWAS CHX20/2/1 *Our Quarterly Record*, March 1886, p.6-8.
- (61) TWAS CHX20/1/9 *15<sup>th</sup> Annual Report to June 1898*, p.7.
- (62) Miss Coleman had run the classes at Heworth, Tynemouth, Whitfield, Alnmouth, Alnwick and Cumberland, as well as in Newcastle. TWAS CHX20/1/2 *7<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1890*, p.6.
- (63) TWAS CHX20/1/1 *4<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, 1887, p.3.
- (64) *Annual Report of the Newcastle-on-Tyne Dispensary*, 1885 (Newcastle, 1886) p.19.
- (65) He also thanked the ‘Charity Organisation Society, the Surgical Aid Society, and the Invalid Loan Society, for their hearty co-operation.’ *Annual Report of the Newcastle-on-Tyne Dispensary*, 1890, p.19. The 1893 report also acknowledged the Brunswick Nursing Society and the St James’ Congregational Nurse Deaconess Society. *Annual Report of the Newcastle-on-Tyne Dispensary*, 1893, p.21.
- (66) *Annual Report of the Newcastle-on-Tyne Dispensary*, 1892, p.6.
- (67) TWAS CHX20/2/56 *Our Quarterly Record*, Dec. 1903, p.60. Born in London c. 1838, Lucy Allison Johnson was the wife of architect Robert James Johnson and living at 1 North Street, Newcastle, at the time of the 1881 census. They had a cook, waiting maid and housemaid living at the same address, but no children. (RG11/5059/96/6). R. J. Johnson has been described as ‘the best type of Victorian architect: scholarly, pious and professional’, who ‘is said to have prayed over his designs’ which expressed ‘his deeply held religious convictions.’ (T. E. Faulkner: ‘Robert James Johnson, Architect and Antiquary’ *Durham University Journal* New series Vol.



LVI, No. 1, p.9 & 7.) Johnson was diocesan surveyor for 23 years. (A. D. Matthews. *The Ecclesiastical Works of Robert James Johnson*, F.S.A. (unpublished B.Arch. dissertation, University of Newcastle, 1983), Appendices 3 & 2, and p.5.)

- (68) TWAS CHX20/1/2 7<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1890, p.5,7.
- (69) TWAS CHX20/1/3 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1891, p.6.
- (70) TWAS CHX20/1/4 9<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1892, p.6.
- (71) TWAS CHX20/1/5 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1893, p.6.
- (72) An example was given. "They use three stones of flour a week, which costs 5s., for the children are growing up and have large appetites .... Then there is 8d. for schooling, 2s. 9d. for rent, 1s. 3d. for coals, and the balance of 14s., which will be 4s. 4d., has to buy boots and any other clothing required, the tea and sugar, and the Sunday "bit meat." TWAS CHX20/2/4 *Our Quarterly Record*, March 1887, p.7.
- (73) These were very modest. In 1893, for example, there were donations to general funds from the workmen of Messrs Armstrong and Mitchell (15s 9d), Messrs J. Abbott & Co. (£2 2s), Messrs Hawthorn Leslie (£2 2s), and Harvey & Davy (£1 1s). TWAS CHX20/1/5 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, 1893, p.21.
- (74) TWAS CHX20/1/5 10<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1893. CHX20/1/3 8<sup>th</sup> Annual Report, June 1891, p.6-7.
- (75) Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.51-2.
- (76) Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.21.
- (77) The Royal Charter quoted in Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.27.
- (78) Quoted in Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.29.
- (79) Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.29-30.
- (80) Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.52, 54.
- (81) It was said that 'after fifty years, Florence Nightingale's minimum standard of one year in hospital has been reduced, for the nurses of the poor, to a few months, with disastrous results, as the presence of the cheap nurse

makes it increasingly difficult to raise the salary for a thoroughly efficient Queen's nurse. ... Call them what you will, the cottage nurses are not nurses ... and...no lasting good comes from acceptance of inferior professional service for the poor. ... The cottage nurses ... themselves cling to the very poverty-line.' Lavinia Dock, Mrs Bedford Fenwick, Miss Margaret Breay, Miss Amy Hughes, Miss Gill and a committee of Irish Matrons: 'The Story of the Nurses of Great Britain and Ireland' in M. A. Nutting and L. Dock. *A History of Nursing: From Earliest Times to the Present Day with Special Reference to the Work of the Last Thirty Years*, vol. 3 of 4 (c.1912, reprinted Buffalo' The Heritage Press 1974) p.25-6.

- (82) Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.30.
- (83) W. Richardson: *A History of the Parish of Wallsend: The Ancient Townships of Wallsend and Willington, General, Ecclesiastical, Industrial, and Biographical* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, The Northumberland Press 1923), p.480. William Richardson's (1857-1933) wife, Maria Isabel, had an interest in the Willington and Howdon Nursing Association so he probably knew the WNA well.
- (84) Gaffin and Thoms: *Caring and Sharing*, p.19-20.
- (85) Arnold Bonner: *British Co-operation*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Manchester, Co-operative Union Ltd. 1970) p.125.
- (86) Gaffin and Thoms: *Caring and Sharing*, p.54.
- (87) 'Wallsend Lady's Death' *Herald and Advertiser* 15<sup>th</sup> November 1912, p5, c6.
- (88) Richardson: *A History of the Parish of Wallsend*, p.481.
- (89) *Shields Daily News* Weds. 13<sup>th</sup> December 1899, p3c3.
- (90) 'Wallsend Nursing Association' *Chronicle* 18<sup>th</sup> December 1909.
- (91) 'A Wallsend Presentation: To Mrs Garforth Drury' *Herald and Advertiser* 11 March 1910, p6, c1-5.
- (92) The six presumably included Drs. D. R. MacGregor, Spencer, J. P. Milne, Forrest, and Wilson. 'Wallsend Nursing Association: The Proposed Amalgamation of the Local Associations: Interesting Correspondence' *Herald and Advertiser* 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1910, p2 c1.
- (93) 'Wallsend Jubilee Nursing Association: First Annual Meeting: Proposed

Amalgamation' *Herald and Advertiser* 21<sup>st</sup> October 1910, p12 c2.

- (94) 'The Queen's Nursing Association' *Herald and Advertiser* 21<sup>st</sup> October 1910, p7 c1. 'Wallsend and 'Sick Poor' Nursing: The Old Association and the New' *Herald and Advertiser* 28<sup>th</sup> October 1910, p10, c1-3. 'Wallsend Nursing Association: The Dispute with the Medical Profession' *Shields Daily News* 16<sup>th</sup> December 1910, p4, c2. 'Wallsend Nursing Association: Proposed Amalgamation' *Herald and Advertiser* 16<sup>th</sup> December 1910, p9, c2-3. 'Wallsend Nursing Association: Interesting Correspondence'.
- (95) 'The Queen's Nursing Association'. It seems he had held similar views for a while. When Dr MacGregor presented the report to the first annual meeting he reminded those present of the 'events of a year ago when there were frequent fulminations in the local press against those monstrous oppressors of the sick poor – the medical men of Wallsend.' ('Wallsend Jubilee Nursing Association').
- (96) Christopher Maggs: 'Nursing History: Contemporary Practice and Contemporary Concerns' in C. Maggs (ed) *Nursing History: The State of the Art* (London, Croom Helm 1985) p.3.
- (97) 'Wallsend Nursing Association: Proposed Amalgamation: Jubilee Institute the Stumbling Block' *Herald and Advertiser* 16<sup>th</sup> December 1910, p9 c2. Writing from 22, Park Road, Wallsend, E. Steel responded to the item about the maternity nurse in the annual report of the WNA. '...As I am the nurse in question, and as I am now engaged in maternity work in Wallsend on my own account, and as such a statement is likely to do me harm, I shall be glad if you will publish the fact that all the doctors in town are working harmoniously with me.' 'Maternity Nurse' *Herald and Advertiser* 23<sup>rd</sup> December 1910, p3 c3.
- (98) 'Wallsend Nursing Association: Interesting Correspondence'.
- (99) 'It had been said to her that their nurses were going too much to chronic cases. ... She quite believed that many nurses preferred to attend upon operations and such cases, but operations were much better when done in hospitals and infirmaries, where there were those conditions which could not possibly be

obtained at home. That was why she had valued so much the services of Nurse Harris and Nurse Edgar, who had never tired of attending to the chronic cases.' Mrs Garforth Drury quoted in 'A Wallsend Presentation'.

- (100) 'Wallsend Nursing Association: Interesting Correspondence'.
- (101) NCAS 1304/2 Wallsend District Nursing Association, *Annual Report*, 1923, p.2.
- (102) NCAS ZBS 5/17 *Northumberland County Nursing Association, First Annual Report*, December 1897, p.6.
- (103) TWAS CHX20/1/8 *14<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, June 1897, p.6.
- (104) NCAS ZBS 5/17 *First Annual Report*, December 1897, p.1.
- (105) Baly: *A History of the Queen's Nursing Institute*, p.57.
- (106) NCAS ZBS 5/17 *First Annual Report*, December 1897, p. 3-4.
- (107) 'Morpeth was one of the first districts in Northumberland to start District Nursing among the poor.' NCAS ZBS 5/17 *First Annual Report*, December 1897, p.8, 9-10.
- (108) 'On December 20<sup>th</sup> [Nurse Davidson] was sent by the doctor to a case of Typhoid Fever at Capheaton, where she is still in attendance.' NCAS ZBS 5/17 *First Annual Report*, December 1897, p.10.
- (109) As, thirty years later: 'Here we have two brave women going in and out of the homes of the people every day of the year.' 25<sup>th</sup> Annual Report quoted in 'District Nursing: The Whitley and Monkseaton Association' *Shields Daily News* 24<sup>th</sup> February 1930.
- (110) Resident districts were Beadnell (9 parishes), Belford, Lucker, Beal & Chatton, North Tyne (11 parishes), and Tynedale (19 districts). Part resident districts were Cambo, Kirkwhelpington & Little Harle, Otterburn & Elsdon, Upper Coquetdale, and Redesdale. NCAS ZBS 5/17 *25<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, March 1920, p.29-31.
- (111) NCAS ZBS 5/17 *25<sup>th</sup> Annual Report*, March 1920, p.19-31.
- (112) Maggs: *The Origins of General Nursing*, p.197.
- (113) Dickens: *Martin Chuzzlewit*, p.iv.

**Hope Springs Eternal**  
**The Life of Labout Pioneer Lisbeth Simm**  
*Dave Neville*

*Cramlington in Northumberland, is not a place that springs to mind as a significant location in the history of the labour movement. Developed as a new town in the 1960s, a century earlier Cramlington was a farming village surrounded by collieries. It was there that one of the first North East Co-operative Societies was formed in 1861, and in 1863 the new Northumberland miners' union was established after a mass meeting in Shankhouse, Cramlington.*

In 1865, the Cramlington collieries were the battleground for the first confrontation between the coal owners and the new union. Locked out for months, the community was defeated by the import of blackleg miners from Devon and Cornwall. Two of the Cramlington miners caught up in the strike were Frank Simm and George Dodds. Frank was one of the strike leaders and was evicted from his house to make way for a blackleg family. In 1869 Margaret Simm gave birth to a son, Matthew, and in 1870 Margaret Dodds gave birth to a daughter, Elizabeth.

Cramlington continued as a centre for radicalism as the effect of the strike was felt for a generation. The blacklegs were ostracised

and their children had to be educated in a separate school. When the first mixed marriage took place, the couple had to leave the area. A significant ingredient in the radical mix was Primitive Methodism which provided the platform for self improvement and development, and was the religion of the Dodds and Simm families. This was the environment in which Matthew (Matt) and Elizabeth (always known as Lisbeth) grew up. Matthew didn't go down the pit on leaving school – he became a draper, working at the co-operative society. Lisbeth became a schoolteacher via the pupil teacher route. The couple married in 1895 and moved to Middlesbrough where Matt worked as a draper and was an active member of the Independent Labour Party (ILP). His political activities led to his appointment as an organiser for the Land Nationalisation Society in the North West of England in 1899.

The call for independent labour representation increased to a clamour in the early years of the last century. The ILP saw the opportunity and appointed Matt Simm as a full time organiser based in the North East. Matt launched the North East ILP's monthly newspaper in 1906, and Lisbeth made sure from the start that women were going to be a key part of the political movement. Her "Women's Page" began in the first issue of the *Northern Democrat* for which she wrote for at least the next six years, using the superficial disguise of the nom-de-plume "Ledron" (L for Lisbeth, Ed for Edna and Ron for Ronnie – her two children)

Her first article was aimed at women in the Co-operative movement who balked at committing themselves to socialism at their Congress:

““If we discuss politics, our members will leave the Guild” said other delegates, and “Socialism is a very lively bogie” said others.

Why, then, this fear of Socialism, when as co-operators women desire the very things for which Socialism stands? Many times I heard women wind up with the words of the co-operative motto, "Each for all, and all for each." Do they understand the meaning? If not, then truly, "We must educate ourselves ere we can join the Labour Party."

Assuredly, no education is needed in order to join any other political party. Let a woman call herself a Socialist, and she is at once subjected to a microscopic examination of character and conduct which no Liberal or Tory woman needs to pass. Let us remember this, and try to live up to the high ideal which even our opponents look for in us, so that by what we do even more than by what we say, we may help on this necessary education of others.

It is said that "Never a man says a good word for a woman, but that he says two for himself and three for the human race." This page is for women, therefore it is for the race, for do we not "bear the race"? May we use it for our mutual aid, and to help to bring women into the Labour Movement in these northern counties."<sup>1</sup>

Lisbeth was a skilled writer and used analogy, anecdote, history and humour to highlight issues of particular interest to women. She strove to persuade women that the trials they faced in everyday life were as a consequence of an economic and political system which was stacked against them. She argued that socialism was the vehicle of hope, but that to achieve a different society, they had to stand shoulder to shoulder with the men.

Socialist women faced a dilemma in their approach to socialism and the vision of a new and fairer society. On the one hand they

pressed for women to be afforded the same opportunities as men. Yet on the other hand, women were different, they gave birth to, cared and nurtured their children and were usually closer to their specific needs. In the North East, most working class women were homemakers facing a day to day struggle to feed, clothe and raise their families. They were the economic managers of the wage brought to the table.

These different roles, qualities and experiences meant that women could bring an alternative, yet no less important perspective to the debate about society and socialism. So was the desire for complete equality reasonable? Could women achieve more by recognising these differences and so influence the direction of the socialist movement? Lisbeth recognised that both approaches were valid, and that women weren't just one homogenous group heading in a single direction. For the women who wanted the same opportunities as men, and total equality in the eyes of society and the law, socialism was the vehicle for achieving that end.

In 1907, Lisbeth met some women who confessed that they didn't understand all about socialism:

“One of our women comrades who presided at the meeting, apologised for not understanding “all about Socialism.” She said she had not long been in the movement, but was sure she was right in joining, because Socialism meant a better chance in life for the children. I was glad to hear the expression, and I daresay very many women comrades echo the thought. We do not pretend to know all about Socialism or any other ism, but as women, we know the care and thought and intelligence needed for the right training of children. The parents, who are struggling against bad



housing conditions, irregular wage supply, and the consequent ills incurred by these evils, yet manage to raise sons and daughters for the world's work almost accomplish miracles. When they fail, they are named "thrifless, ignorant and neglectful." Women, you and I are in this struggle."<sup>2</sup>

Lisbeth regularly railed at the idea that if women were educated they would therefore be poor at performing domestic work. She recognised that being a good homemaker was a valid source of pride to many women.

"In schools we contrive that each lesson shall encourage the reasoning powers of our girls, but when they put these same powers into practice, and ask why life is such a burden to the poor, and devote themselves earnestly to the task of trying to alleviate the toil which is of no value to anyone, then they are subjected to foolish criticism. I do not think that any woman's brain was meant to exert itself wholly on the cooking of the most elaborate food, but I think if she is capable of grasping the meaning of the great social problem which faces us everywhere, surely she will manage the other thing."<sup>3</sup>

In November 1910, Lisbeth took exception to comments made at a tea party held in the Hebburn miners' hall.

"About two hundred people were entertained to tea, and judging by appearances, the women seem to enjoy their bustle and work very much. Men comrades might be seen coatless and wearing a look of responsibility, assisting in various ways, and several well-trained husbands helped in the washing-up. Still, it is sometimes said that "the women should stay at home and clean their houses."

I often wonder if the people who say this have the remotest idea of the meaning of life. We are not in the Labour movement because we wish to get rid of our proper share of work - whether it is house-cleaning, washing, baking, mending, cooking, or any of the other manifold duties so quietly accepted by the worker's wife. Some of us would go mad or melancholy if as well as doing these things eternally we had also to keep our thoughts and minds from other things. It is said that a vision of the ideal prevents monotony of toil from being monotony of life, and unless women are given some opportunity of cultivating their minds as well as their hands, life must become monotonous indeed. My bread tastes none the worse that I was wondering how best to interest women in labour politics while I baked it, and if a happy inspiration comes to us while ironing or polishing, it can be treasured up till next meeting time, and then handed on.”<sup>4</sup>

Her “Scrub, Scrub, Scrub” article of June 1911 captured her frustration:

“While the sun is shining, and nature invites women to come out and see the glories of summer weather, the time of Spring cleaning is upon us, and everywhere one hears the music of the scrubber. Alas, alas, through what ages humanity must have sinned to find us at last waging such a war against dust and dirt and smoke and soot. Say the men folk “It’s quite unnecessary, such an upheaval.” The women know better, and even the splashes of whitewash are welcomed, because they mean thorough cleaning everywhere. It is said that some “heads” of families help by hanging pictures and fixing curtains and blinds. This, however, is only rumour, and usually “he” is a thing apart, not understanding, not asking reasons, but seeking only a way of escape until normal conditions are

restored. It is the woman who organises and carries out the scheme of work.”<sup>5</sup>

Yet although Lisbeth accepted that the role of homemaker, mother and wife was the lot of many women, she believed that acceptance of the status quo was not going to satisfy many women in the future. Change was inevitable and the green shoots of aspiration and ambition were steadily growing. In December 1906 she said:

“Women have always done so, but women will not always do so. Other forces are at work besides education, and the next few years will show a great change in the industrial position of women in this country.”<sup>6</sup>

Lisbeth also highlighted the plight of sweated workers:

““Flowers are so much worn this season,” say the milliners, and innocently the customer replies, “Yes, and they are so pretty.” Could they but see on them the life’s blood of the maker, and hear the weary sighs of the women who toil through the dreary hours making up the numbers. But stay, buttercups at 3d per gross do not touch the lowest limit, for in the making of beautiful Confirmation wreaths much less money is earned. These wreaths contain about a gross of small white flowers. Each flower has to be made separately, and the wire stem has to be covered with white lawn, then intertwined with silver leaves, which are supplied to the worker, and the whole shaped into a complete and beautiful caplet; 1s 9d per dozen is the price paid for completed wreaths. Did women but know how such things are produced they would not dare to wear them. Instead of saying, “Is this or that fashionable?”

they would say: "Is this made under fair conditions and did the woman get a decent wage in return for her work? If not, why not? I am willing to pay a reasonable price, but it must go to the person who does the work."”<sup>7</sup>

Despite the aspiration of the ILP to be an inclusive party in which women could play a full part, the reality was something else. It consistently expressed concern that there were few women members, but lacked the vision – or perhaps the will - to take initiatives to really appeal to women. Consequently it remained largely a “men’s party” with an estimated 10% female membership. Lisbeth was an extra-ordinary woman married to the ILP organiser who supported her activities. An ordinary woman was never likely to have the confidence to engage in debate, or the time to get involved in the male dominated environment of the typical ILP meeting.

Lisbeth applied her creative and engaging style to her pieces in the *Northern Democrat*, but what was the point if there was no audience? Her hope was that the ILP member might leave his copy lying around and the female members of the household might see her article – even better, the more enlightened men might actually encourage their wives and daughters to read it. In September 1906, she praised the activity and commitment of the tiny band of women and challenged the men for their general reluctance to involve their wives and daughters in the movement:

“Those women who for the cause of right have stood alone, have worked and toiled for a movement in its days of unpopularity, and have left their homes in fine or stormy weather to try to bring in recruits, are richly entitled to all the service and help

our increasing army of women workers can bring. The paths are easier now. Those branches which are still waiting to enroll their first woman member must be on the alert. I constantly hear the despairing cry "We cannot interest our women." Have you ever tried? Do you men ever put yourselves in the place of women and then talk of politics? Rest assured, until you can not only interest women, but gain their enthusiasm and service, the human cause of Socialism cannot fully prosper. "The woman's cause is man's; they rise or sink together.""<sup>8</sup>

The social side of the movement was important. Recreational activities meant that bonds were formed, contacts made and discussions held. The "meeting" whether work or play, was an important occasion when the only method of communicating remotely with other members was by letter. Many social gatherings had a dual purpose – for members and supporters to meet, and to raise funds for the cause. Inevitably the hard work fell to the lot of the already overworked women. Getting men to do their share was a major issue. Lisbeth pressed them to do their bit both in support of social events, and to extend this to their life in the home.

"ILP Branches in the North have certainly entered on their winter plan with high spirits. Not only is the ordinary propaganda work going on apace, but we hear in all directions of classes, socials, tea-parties, etc., etc., while there are also signs of bigger attempts "nearer Christmas." This is as it should be; but, of course, on occasions the women members and friends come in for a large share of work. May I remind our male members that women are needed in the branches for their own sakes, as well as for the help they are asked to give, and every opportunity of offering a hearty welcome should be taken. Some branches without a single woman

member are able to get in a host of willing workers for their socials. Is the word spoken in due season? Are they ever invited to join the movement? Can it be possible that sometimes a vote of thanks for services rendered is forgotten? It is hoped that this season's activities will largely increase our membership and quicken our energies." <sup>9</sup>

Lisbeth had to tread an extremely fine line. She longed to attract more women into the ILP, so could not paint a wholly black picture about the way women were often regarded in the organisation. Yet her column would probably be read by more men than women, and this gave her a platform for arguing that women had a rightful place in the ILP - that if the men really believed in the equalities that they supported at the political meeting, then it was not unreasonable for them to put their beliefs into practice with respect to their womenfolk. Lisbeth was never afraid of delivering a swipe at the men; often keeping her tongue in cheek and using humour to good effect.

"In the Socialist Institute, an untiring little band of women carry on a Cafe business, and on Saturday evenings any comrade in town may be sure of a little light refreshment at moderate prices. It is as well to be early, for sandwiches etc., have a surprising way of disappearing on occasion. These women have washing up and cooking to do every day in their homes, yet they willingly set to work again when they are out for a little change and recreation. Brave, heroic women! I honestly admire you, but I am not envious. Pray, make the men do more work."<sup>10</sup>

What might be achieved if there could be an organisation for women in which they would feel comfortable and act together to

campaign on issues that they felt were important. Then, in the same year that the "Northern Democrat" started, a women's organisation was founded which provided Lisbeth with exactly the vehicle she needed. The Women's Labour League (WLL) was formed to work for independent labour representation via the Labour Party, and to obtain direct representation of women in parliament and on local bodies.

Lisbeth threw herself into building the WLL in the North East and beyond. She addressed meetings, built up branches and campaigned on issues - all of which meant a punishing workload. She corresponded regularly with secretary Mary Middleton:

"June 11 1908

My dear Mrs. Middleton,

I was very glad to get your letter after Committee meeting. (I think I was rather hoping they would give me the sack). However Gateshead did cheer me up a little, and I know you all realize what hard work it is trying to rouse women. Quite true the lack of funds does tie one down, but I've been able to work in some odd times with the I.L.P. and that helps. However the foundation must be laid by someone, and we cannot expect to form branches right off.

Throckley branch is already notorious. They sent a resolution to the local council urging them to provide a recreation ground and as such a suggestion from a women's organisation caused quite a sensation, the branch got a show in the papers. The men in the I.L.P. seem to be sorry they never thought of doing such a thing.

Kind regards Yours L.E.Simm."<sup>11</sup>

At the end of 1908, Lisbeth could be justly proud of her first year's work for the WLL. Eight branches had been established and few in the North East labour movement could deny that great progress had been made in bringing women into its ranks. It had not been an easy ride. Many in the ILP doubted the need for yet another organisation in the labour and socialist movement. Opponents argued that such a move was divisive, and that the ILP branch was capable of providing all that was needed for any member, male or female. Lisbeth had tried to show that the formation of the WLL did not detract from the mission to achieve a socialist society – on the contrary it enhanced and enriched it. Women's consciousness in general was not at the level of men's in the movement. In addition, the logistics of merely being able to leave the house and meet was of an order of magnitude more difficult than it was for men.

Bit by bit Lisbeth chipped away at prejudice against a separate women's organisation. She demonstrated that significant numbers of women could be brought into the movement via the WLL, when there wouldn't have been any chance of doing this through the existing ILP set-up. She must have been confident that her approach had paid dividends when she wrote that:

"Some of the ILP who feared the League would draw women away from Socialist work, now saw that it would be a means of strength. Socialist papers please copy; and oh, ye sceptical I.L. Peers (if any are yet left), please note."<sup>12</sup>

Lisbeth realised that branch activity was the key to building the WLL. The seedling needed tending and nurturing if a great tree was to grow. The branches had to be organised by and for women with a format in which any woman would feel comfortable. The branch



meeting had to be something women would look forward to as an enjoyable social occasion. That meant time for social activity and having a good natter over a cup of tea. Politics there was, but Lisbeth was astute enough to know that political development needed to be built upon the reality of women's lives. Issues discussed had to relate to their day to day experience, and not be pitched at a level of political thought which would be incomprehensible to many working class women.

To add to the problems she appeared to be regularly out of pocket and was dipping into her own funds to keep the show on the road. In one letter she told Mary Middleton that she'd been using her housekeeping money and needed cash for a series of meetings in County Durham:

“£1 will probably serve me but two would be better as I will probably have to pay for all my lodgings as well as fares.”<sup>13</sup>

Then again for her Glasgow trip:

“The fares and expenses will be rather heavy .....I must watch the funds”.<sup>14</sup>

Lisbeth's letters paint a picture of a woman confident in public speaking and political organisation, yet strangely subservient and reticent when dealing with the WLL leadership. In one letter she apologises for submitting her account and writes:

“When I see little bits in the Woman Worker about the London WLL I think our branches must be very elementary, or yours seem very advanced. Is that so?”<sup>15</sup>

History was to show that Lisbeth was far from being an inexperienced organiser with “elementary branches” At the 1909 WLL Conference, the secretary made it clear that the growth in the WLL was largely as a result of Lisbeth’s efforts:

“Since the third Annual Conference, 20 new branches have been added to the 23 then in existence. The increase is largely due to the work of Mrs. M.T. Simm who has acted as organiser when called upon and has visited towns as widely separated as Glasgow, Lancaster and Macclesfield, besides working up quite a group of branches in her own North East District.”<sup>16</sup>

At the Executive Committee (EC) meeting in February 1909, in Lisbeth’s absence, the committee addressed the issue of a paid organiser.<sup>17</sup> Despite her acknowledged success at Conference only a few weeks earlier, she was not considered for the post. Even worse, she was expected to train Dorothy Lenn, the new national organiser which she did with good grace. Dorothy was not a success, and the WLL reverted to having two “spare time organisers”, one being Lisbeth.

From 1907 to 1914, Lisbeth fulfilled a busy programme of visits and meetings in her role as spare time/part time/national organiser in addition to building her North East Federation. She was fired with enthusiasm and willing to sacrifice a great deal for the cause. The leadership saw a capable hand and was happy to prevail on her good nature. Each year she was called upon to spread the word throughout Northern England and Scotland. A study of the WLL minutes reveals that when any visits were required, representation needed at by-elections, papers to be written or branch problems to be solved the name of Mrs. Simm was usually pencilled in for

the action. The operational existence of the organisation largely depended on her endeavours.

Lisbeth gave the keynote paper to the 1914 conference. It provided the opportunity to speak from the heart about the position of working class women in society and the need for change. It was the culmination of her years of hard work and experience, joy and frustration. The paper struck a chord, not only with the delegates, but throughout the whole labour movement with the result that it had to be published as a 6d pamphlet with her picture on the cover.<sup>18</sup> It seemed a seminal moment which gave encouragement and hope that fundamental change would be just round the corner.

In April 1914, Lisbeth was asked to take over as secretary – a post she declined.<sup>19</sup> At the June EC meeting, with Lisbeth absent, the secretary and treasurer proposed that she be asked to become Northern Organiser with a retaining fee of £2 per month. They agreed that the WLL had taken a continuously greater amount of work for a smaller retainer. At least this went some way to admitting that they had taken Lisbeth for granted and had treated a willing workhorse very poorly.<sup>20</sup> The EC had at long last recognized this by effectively giving her the post that she had de facto been fulfilling for years

Amongst the many campaigns fought by the North East WLL and covered by Lisbeth in the pages of the *Northern Democrat*, were those of the plight of children of poor families and the need for better education. They campaigned against education committees who demonstrated much more concern for the ratepayers than the children of the poor. “The Education (Feeding of Necessitous

# THE WORKING WOMAN IN POLITICS



By  
**L. E. SIMM.**

(Paper read at the Annual Conference of the Women's  
Labour League, Glasgow, 1914.)

**PRICE ONE PENNY.**

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Lisbeth's 1914 keynote paper

Children) Act” allowed authorities to raise a rate and provide assistance, but only if they so desired. Gateshead and Newcastle councils refused to implement the act, and were only forced to do so following years of campaigning by the socialists.

The Newcastle ILP and WLL fought this battle on more than one front. Protests and political activity were well and good, but while the good councillors pontificated and argued, children starved. So they started the “Cinderella Breakfasts”.

“Near the Socialist Institute, Darn Crook, Newcastle, little children, ill-clad and badly fed, are often to be seen asking for “a ticket please,” and the reply: “No breakfast tomorrow” causes many a little countenance to look sad and disappointed. During the past winter a sum of over £80 has been raised for Cinderella breakfasts; and our comrades, both men and women, have worked hard to spend this money wisely and well. Several of the women have stood with collecting boxes at football matches, sometimes in wet and snowy weather. The men have even lost a night’s sleep in order to have all prepared for the early morning visitors, and indeed a wonderful amount of energy and enthusiasm has been displayed on all hands.”<sup>21</sup>

The *Northern Democrat* inevitably became involved in one of the major issues for women at this time, that of securing the parliamentary vote. Lisbeth became an active member and willing speaker for the North East Society for Women's Suffrage (NESWS) when she moved back to the North East. However, her involvement in the NESWS was not without its critics in the labour movement, reflecting the suffrage debate at national level in the ILP. Some considered that discrimination against women was a major issue

that had to be fought against. They believed that the granting of any measure of women's suffrage would be a step forward as the thin end of a wedge which would ultimately force complete voting equality with men. Many held an opposing view – that women's suffrage was a diversion from the main campaign for socialism, and that full adult suffrage for all had to be the demand. Adult suffragists also feared that a limited measure of women's suffrage would enfranchise a significant constituency of women who would not be predisposed to vote Labour. The debate raged in the pages of the *Northern Democrat*.

The Pankhursts' Womens' Social and Political Union (WSPU) with its militant approach provided a challenge to the existing suffrage societies. Lisbeth resented the way the WSPU operated. In her letter of September 15 1908 to Mary Middleton she wrote:

"I went to one of Mrs. Pankhurst's meetings last night (wish I'd my shilling back). They charged 6d, 1/- and 2/- and got the Town hall nearly full, and then took collections and got over £30 **in spite** of the awful distress in this part. How very theatrical they are! I think most of the I.L.Peers there had complimentary tickets, but still a great crowd had to pay. And we have to be content when we get a dozen women to join our branches, often! (Never mind raising funds!)."22

and later, in her letter of November 11:

"As regards expenses - you ask if I charged enough for Glasgow visit. The expenses I put in just cover my outlay - having to provide for my homework during my absence. However I imagine there is a current idea that one makes a very good thing out of being an

organiser. I'm sure some of the Glasgow women have a notion that a W.L.L. organiser is in a similar position to the W.S.P.U. organisers. If only we had the funds to keep a woman going that would be the best, and let her time be all spent in the work. I had thought that by doing what I could this year, some other one might get the benefit later, but it is slow, slow work rousing women. Where our branch at Wallsend failed - Miss New is starting a branch of "Votes for Women." She gives them teas and provides entertainment. The women think that is a very nice change and something to turn out for."<sup>23</sup>

In October 1909 the People's Suffrage Federation (PSF) was born out of the belief that women's suffrage could only be realised in an effective manner by the reform of the franchise toward full adult suffrage. In May 1910 Lisbeth supported the PSF and reversed her previous position on women's suffrage. However, her change in view has to be considered against the background of a transformation in the campaign for votes for women. The WSPU had grabbed the headlines and claimed that they were the only organisation willing to fight the government on the issue. Lisbeth had already been underwhelmed by the approach of the Pankhursts in focusing on well to do women, and opposing any politician who did not put women's suffrage at the top of their agenda. For Lisbeth and the other WLL women the parliamentary vote could only be part of a campaign for the liberation of working class women. The autocracy of the Pankhursts and the destruction of democracy in the WSPU were counter to Lisbeth's politics and seem to have helped to persuade her to approach votes for women from another broader direction.

The hopes raised at the time of Lisbeth's address to the 1914 WLL conference were soon overshadowed by the outbreak of the

First World War.. 1914 *did* bring a big change in society, but it was not as the socialists had hoped. The rising tide of militarism had alarmed the WLL and as early as June 1913, Lisbeth penned a major article against militarism. The war changed the agenda for women although Lisbeth continued to be in demand as an organiser and speaker throughout the war years. The campaigns included equal pay and conditions for women, the establishment of baby clinics and the future for women after the war.

In 1916, Lisbeth was again asked to take over as secretary of the WLL, and again declined. However forces were at work which were to have a profound effect on the Labour Party and on Lisbeth herself. The details of a new Labour Party constitution were presented to the WLL in October 1917.<sup>24</sup> This proposed women's sections in the party, with four Executive Council seats reserved for women. The WLL would be no more.

Lisbeth was witnessing the organisation she had given a large part of her life to being subsumed into the men's party. She knew what could be achieved when women had their own organisation, and felt that a separate WLL had much more to do to raise women's political awareness before they would be confident enough to stand as equals with men in the Labour Party. But the new constitution was accepted and the 1918 WLL conference voted itself out of existence. Lisbeth was replaced as the North East women's organiser. Nowhere in the minutes of the WLL and Labour Party is there a word of thanks or appreciation of her efforts at a time which must have been both momentous and upsetting. She also experienced tragedy in her personal life during 1918. Her daughter Edna died and her son Ronnie was dangerously ill.



Later in 1918 there occurred a remarkable turn of events for Matt and Lisbeth. Prime Minister David Lloyd-George called an election for December 1918, and as expected, Matt was a parliamentary candidate for the Wallsend constituency. What wasn't expected, given the years of commitment and toil for the socialist movement, was that Matt would stand as a candidate for the anti-socialist National Democratic Party and that Lisbeth would back him. The party had been formed in 1915 to unite support in the Labour movement for the Lloyd-George government and it is probably a measure of the effect of the course of the war on public attitudes that in his electoral meetings Matt expressed his total hatred of all Germans and his antagonism to socialists who didn't support the war. Lisbeth spoke in his support at many of his public meetings. At the poll, Matt secured a resounding victory.

Four years later he had to defend his seat, but disillusionment with Lloyd-George's "land fit for heroes" meant that supporters like Matt faced a tough time. Again he spoke of the danger of the Labour Party and the fact that he had left it because it was full of conscientious objectors whom he despised. Again Lisbeth was at many of his meetings. The seat was won by Labour with Matt a poor last.

The war had changed everything and politicians recognised there would have to be a substantial rebuilding of society. In December 1918 the government set up the Oversea Settlement Committee to encourage emigration. The committee included representatives of organised labour and women. There was a substantial demand to emigrate after the horrors of the past four years. In addition there was the opportunity for social engineering – many of the dominions had a shortage of women – Britain now had a surplus.

In 1919 the committee sponsored an enquiry into openings in Australia for women from the United Kingdom and appointed Lisbeth as one of the two delegates. They were asked to give “full information as to the new avenues of employment which women had followed in Britain during the war and make full enquiries as to the possibility of new openings in Australia for women of these types.” They arrived in Australia in September 1919 and visited all the states to take evidence.<sup>25</sup>

Emigration for women was the cause that Lisbeth now worked for. Her work was through the Society for the Oversea Settlement of British Women (SOSBW), founded in 1919. She worked as tirelessly for the cause of womens’ emigration as she had done for the WLL. Matt died of a brain haemorrhage on 7 October 1928 aged 59 and Lisbeth became warden of Orchard House, a residential training centre for domestic service in Newcastle. In November 1946, Lisbeth left Britain for good to live in the US. At first she lived with her son Ronnie who had emigrated some years earlier. Sometime in 1947 she moved to Los Angeles where she died of heart failure on 4 August 1952.

In the years before the First World War, there was no guarantee that the Labour Party was going to succeed. The war changed everything, and in just six years, the party was able to form its first government. Lisbeth deserved to be part of that success, given the commitment she had made to bringing socialism to women. Circumstance decreed otherwise and the name of Lisbeth Simm is not to be found in the ranks of labour movement pioneers. However her work showed to many that socialism was the movement through which women could aspire to equality and a fairer society. And there would be women in the North East and

beyond whose horizons were lifted because of the hard work of a woman who believed there was something better.

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**Women's War Work in the  
North East Shipbuilding Industry**  
*Ian Roberts*

*The part played by women workers in the British shipbuilding industry during the Second World War has been under-represented. The neglect of the topic is apparent both within the contemporary journals and the standard histories of shipbuilding. Thus for example in the journal 'Shipbuilding and Shipping Record' for the whole period between 1939 and 1946, there appear to be only ten references to women working in shipbuilding and all of these are one paragraph long editorial comments. Similarly, in the standard history of shipbuilding on the River Wear the treatment of the part played by women workers is fleeting and often condescending in tone. (1) The lack of attention devoted to the part played by women in this industry is particularly striking because shipbuilding and ship repair was, perhaps, the most notable example of a north eastern industry where, during war time women were employed on production tasks from which they had been completely excluded prior to the war, and were to be again after it.*

Women workers never became as large a proportion of the workforce in shipbuilding as they did in engineering, where they comprised a third of all workers, but thousands of women did take

a wide range of mostly non-skilled jobs in the industry. Evidence from official records in the National Archives suggests that in the North East of England shortages of labour were less acute than in other shipbuilding regions and consequently fewer women were employed. In June 1942, for example before labour mobilisation reached its greatest extent, just over a thousand women were employed on manual work in North East coast shipyards and dry docks. Half of the shipyards, however, including all of those on the River Wear, were recorded as having no women production workers and at that date women represented less than two and a half percent of all manual workers in the industry in this region. However by December 1943, when war time mobilisation was at its height nationally, there were some 13,000 women working in the industry and even on the Wear 700 women had gained employment within the yards.

About the circumstances of this employment, the methods of recruitment, job allocation, the processes of work, eventual demobilisation, and, importantly, what the women thought themselves of all of these issues, little was known. In order to help contribute toward filling this gap a research team from the University of Durham interviewed 47 women during 1983 and 1984, who had worked in shipyards on the rivers Tyne and Wear (and also one from the Tees.) The information gained from this oral history forms the basis of the following sections.

### *A Positive Evaluation*

All of the 47 women interviewed in the course of the research were in complete agreement when assessing their various experiences in the war time shipbuilding industry; for all of them, to have worked in the shipyards was a source of satisfaction. No

matter what the capacity in which a particular woman was employed – whether a rivet-catcher or welder, electrician or plumbers mate, skilled or unskilled – their assessment was the same, a positive one. Furthermore, for most of the women, whether or not they continued in paid employment outside of the industry in the post war years, those few years in the shipyards represented the high point of their working lives.

One of the main themes running through this paper is an attempt to explain the reasons for such a unanimously positive assessment of work in an industry where conditions were “heavy and unpleasant.” (2) and where the women were faced with “rough and unfamiliar” tasks (3). The dimensions of the paradox that such a situation suggests are well captured in the statement of a welder who worked in Palmers yard at Hebburn:



the high point of their working lives

“.....it was a pleasure. It was great. Mind I had to get burned with hot slag. You know, when the hot slag flies off. You see, we were supposed to wear a turban (something on your head all the time.) But being young, we were too proud to have our hair covered up all the time Me hair used to come out in handfuls when I used to comb it because of the Sparks flying down on me, y’see.”

Hot slag, the dross from welding rods, oxy-acetylene fumes from burning gear, the din of hammers, burns from hot rivets – are only a few examples of the “unpleasant” aspects of the shipbuilding process. That unpleasantness was emphasised by the physical environment in which shipbuilding took place. For, whilst a few of the informants expressed their preference for working in a shipyard rather than a factory because it was “out in the open”, all made reference to the accompanying disadvantages of outdoor work:

“.....I think it was the winter when I started.  
Oh, it was freezing and the snow was inches thick.  
And I had never been in a shipyard before and they  
says ‘Go on, you’ve got to go out on that ladder’ and it  
was on the stocks, well you know what the stocks-  
Oh, it was all open, and it’s all staging planks.....”

Whatever the weather, shipyards were not pleasant places to work. To many of the women the first experience of working on a ship was a frightening one.

For one girl, one day was enough:

“Well me sister started at half past seven in the morning....we took her on the stocks....and we went up the gangway and it was massive...she was only 15... We went for her at dinner time – took her down – she never went back...she was petrified. She would never go back in a shipyard, she hated it ‘Oh it’s too cold. It’s too dangerous.’”



“Some liked it, some didn’t.” is how this woman summed up her own and her sister’s experience. Even for those who came to terms with the conditions of shipyard work, there was the ever present possibility of an accident:

“..so she says ‘Howay pack in we’ll go for breakfast’. I says ‘No I must finish this job’....And I had just got off my knees and the crane with all the girders snapped on the very spot where I had been kneeling....we had a narrow escape, I’ll tell you.”

“Hard, dirty work I did,” one electrician remembered “and I was very tired at night. I used to just fall into bed.” a reminder here that the physically demanding nature of the work and the conditions was exacerbated by the needs of war time production. Systematic overtime, two or three half shifts a week of 4 hours each on top of a forty seven and a half hour week, and weekend overtime in many shipyards, was the rule rather than the exception. Moreover, for women with children, whatever their child care arrangements, there were always domestic responsibilities waiting at the beginning and end of the day.

One possible explanation for this apparent paradox of an enjoyable experience amid objectively difficult conditions is the attraction of a patriotic mission. Virtually all of the informants made reference to patriotism in assessing their experience in the shipyards. By working in shipbuilding they were “doing their bit” for the war effort. Married women whose husbands were serving abroad in particular made this connection. However, a note of caution must be introduced. The war of 1939-1945 is an historical event which has been embellished with the sheen of patriotism. The intertwining of patriotic threads

around the deeds and words of that period is arguably as much a result of retrospective investment as contemporaneous feeling. Nowhere is this more clearly demonstrated than in the mobilisation of women for war work. Initially voluntary offers of service were deemed sufficient. Then the registration for employment orders were introduced. This was a method of mobilisation which was notionally voluntaristic, but which in effect was a high pressure form of persuasion, requiring all women classified as eligible for war work to register at Labour Exchanges. Ultimately, however, as the demands of the war effort grew:

“..it was apparent that nothing short of the total mobilisation of the woman power of the country would avail, if victory were ultimately to be won. This could not be left to patriotic volunteering.” (4)

Thus conscription or compulsive patriotism was introduced in the form of the National Service (No2) Act of December 1941. This Act compelled all eligible women to do some form of war work either in the armed services, the Land Army or in essential industries. Patriotic calls were clearly insufficient to meet the needs of war time production. In the United States, where direction of labour involved less compulsion, the experience was similar.

“..women were responding to labour market mechanisms in the same way that men did; high wages and higher status attracted them from other sectors or into the labour force for the first time. Although many patriotic exhortations were made in order to get women to shore up the labour starved service and trade sectors, they consistently refused to do so as long as wages there remained low.” (5)

If patriotism alone provides an inadequate explanation of how and why women entered the war time labour force, it also fails to explain the positive valuation that women placed upon working in shipbuilding. War work as a contemporary study of a war factory reveals was rarely inspiring:

“The war is regarded (by young working girls) with mainly negative emotions. The cardinal virtue is the negative one of endurance: endurance of danger; endurance of distasteful jobs, endurance of shortages.” (6)

Evidence that “negative” virtue was present in the shipyards as well as the war factory was forthcoming in this study, as a driller at the Wallsend Shipyard stated:

“... it was tiring work. I mean both physically and mentally, it was tiring. But it was something you had to do and you just got on with it”

Again we note that this “negative” virtue of endurance did not represent the totality of assessments made in the study:

“Doxfords – there was only one yard for me...you see I used to work at the Galvanisers across the road, and it was a mans job... and the very day I started at Doxfords – they were going to come for us to start there again – I wouldn’t have went back in any case. My father’s mate, Charlie Ruskin, I used to say to him ‘Ee, I would love to be working in Doxfords – I would love it.’ ‘No, no it is no place for you, tis no place for you.’ I thought God there is a place there for me and that’s why I went ... and I thought I only want to work down Doxfords.”

What is critical then, to an understanding of the experiences of these women is an appreciation of the changes that the war – or more precisely the war time production needs brought about. A starting place for discussing the cause of the women's positive evaluations of working in the industry is to be found by examining those structural changes consequent on the demands of war.

“Well if it hadn't been for the war –that's how I got in if there hadn't been a war I would never have been in because they didn't start women in the shipyards did they?”

It could be argued that women represented a reserve army of labour. Indeed as Beechey points out, they are uniquely qualified for the reserve army. She argues that:

“...married women function as a disposable and flexible labour force in particular ways, and that the specificity of the position of women arises from their domestic role in the family and prevalent assumption that this is their primary role.”

Flexibility and disposability are key considerations when the reserve army of labour is utilised. This is particularly so when the reserve is activated in the circumstances of war. In such a situation the need was for a labour force which would contract out fairly easily at the end of the war. The advantages of calling up such a reserve were clear to the trades unions. An alternative solution to the employment of women was the employment of migrant Irish labour. While some shipbuilding districts accepted such workers at the urging of the Ministry of Labour, the North East Coast did not. Underlying this rejection was the fear on the part of the unions

that migrant workers might become long-term members of the labour market, thereby increasing competition for jobs.

Union concern that relaxation of the conditions of entry to shipbuilding labour markets could effect long-term changes in their structure, is most clearly demonstrated in their attitude towards dilution. While it should be noted that the ultimate *raison d'être* for those fears in the case of the shipbuilding industry sprang from heavy unemployment in the inter-war period, “job protection” for members has long been a concern of unions. (9) The basis of this concern remained evident throughout the period of the war-time emergency, and was clearly appreciated by Ernest Bevin as he wrote in a letter to the Minister of Production on 15<sup>th</sup> August 1942;

“I think...it is quite visionary to think that any prejudice against dilution will be removed by further discussions between both sides of the industry. Prejudice against dilution exists, in my opinion, because the men remember what happened to them after the last war and do not trust the employers or the Government to prevent the same thing occurring after this one.” (10)

Inevitably, however, shipbuilding workers had to accept some measure of dilution, though they preferred.

“...skilled workers from their own or other industries – who would probably return after the war to their own trade or industries – or women who would return to their homes, to upgraded unskilled or government trainees.” (11)

The union concern to ensure that the status quo which prevailed before the war-time emergency would remain is clearly demonstrated by the agreements reached between the Shipbuilding Employers Federation (SEF) and the unions over the employment of women. The agreement between the SEF and the Confederation of Shipbuilding and Engineering Unions (CSEU) which governed the circumstances of women's employment was followed by a series of agreements between the SEF and individual unions. Each agreement is basically the same in form and content and all have a subtitle which begins "Temporary relaxation of existing customs..." Thus demonstrating the concern of each of the unions to prevent women securing long-term membership of the labour market in the particular trade that the union strove to protect and represent.

What all of this clearly shows is the difficulty that the Ministry of Labour had in persuading the shipbuilding unions to accept the mobilisation of women. For the Ministry, faced with the manpower budget requirements of 1942, the solution was simple: conscript the reserve of women's labour. Nevertheless, union acquiescence and government concern did not by any means result in a large scale entry of women into the labour force. By December 1943, the peak of manpower mobilisation, only 5.7% of the ship building labour force was female. This compares with a figure of 13.5% for the iron and steel industry. <sup>(13)</sup> There were of course much higher percentages in the munitions and aircraft industries. The disparity between "traditional" industries and the newer ones simply suggests that the government was able to put its mobilisation of the reserve army of female labour into practice more easily in the new sectors of production. The shipbuilding employers had considerable reservations about the employment of women:

“In September 1939 the shipyards put on record the view, which was said to represent the consensus of opinion at the end of the First World War, that women could only be employed usefully in the yards in so far as they could be segregated within four walls and provided with a separate entrance. It would serve no useful purpose to employ them in open shops or on ships for, apart from their unsuitability for the work, any increased output obtained by this introduction would be more than offset by the loss of output from the men already employed.” (14)

The concern of employers here is about the effect that women would have on the level of output and the maintenance of profits. While Beechey argues that an advantage which accrues to capital through the employment of women is the lower wage rates that can be paid, other considerations are focussed on the employers' claim that shipbuilding work was unsuitable work for women. It is easily shown that doubt about the desirability of employing women was deep-rooted. In June 1941, when the agreement was signed between the SEF and the CSEU permitting the “temporary relaxation of custom” only 900 women (0.5% of the workforce) were employed in the industry. By December of that year, the figure had only risen to 1900 (0.9%). Further evidence of the employers' reluctance is shown by the nature of the Ministry of Labour propaganda directed towards the industry. The pamphlet *Wartime Employment of Women in Shipbuilding and Allied Industries* (16) is a document which bases its case for the employment of women in shipyards in terms of national requirements:

“Present labour demands in the shipbuilding and allied industries run into several thousands and they must

increase on to the expanding shipbuilding programme. The need is urgent and imperative and brooks no delay.” (17)

The same document however also asserts that the introduction of women is “of course, primarily a matter of management policy”. (18) Attempts to convince management of the validity of women’s employment were restrained, being limited to a few comments on “Jobs needing modification”, “Attitudes of Foremen” and a list of occupations in which “Women are already employed”.

In contrast, the pamphlet entitled *Women in Shipbuilding* (19) is a much more lavish document with the clear intention of convincing employers of the validity of women’s employment:

“WHAT IS WOMEN’S PLACE IN THE SHIPYARD?  
On what work can she be employed with the greatest effect? What guiding principles should be observed to bring about her contribution to production?” (20)

The “guiding principles” of this document start from the basis that women, when trained, can be employed in work which is “within their physical strength” it goes on to propose that the “application of thought and ingenuity” may bring such work within the women’s capacity.(21) Such modification of male jobs is one aspect of the propaganda. “Where women excel” is the heading of a part of the pamphlet which points out where the “natural deftness and neatness of women have full play”. Such work includes welding, painting and electrical wiring. (22) It is sufficient to note that a stumbling block to the Ministry of Labour’s intention of making women 10% of the labour force was the reservations



about the efficacy of such workers in maintaining levels of output. The propaganda had an effect however. By December 1942 9,000 women (3.8%) were working in the shipbuilding industry. Twelve months later, December 1943, the figure was 13,000 (5.7%) – the peak of women's involvement.

While the advantages of employing women workers were clear – at least to the Ministry of Labour – employers and unions were not so convinced. Their reservations stem from the framework in which they operate. From the point of view of labour, the issue was job preservation and the maintenance of barriers of entry to labour markets. Though such markets were guaranteed by statute in the form of the Restoration of Pre-War Practices Act and the Schedule of Restricted Occupations Order, the shipbuilding unions were wary of allowing unlimited access. Women as shipyard workers were seen as a last resort solution to the labour shortage problem. Women, married and single, were prepared to accept the temporary – “for the duration” – position in the labour force. The aim for employers was the maintenance of output and hence profits. What they questioned was the “suitability” of women for shipyard work, this despite the fact that they would gain from the benefit of paying lower wages. The Ministry of Labour's role in this was to assuage the reservations of capital and labour.

### *The Right Woman for the Job?*

Women entering the shipyards were largely a labour force undifferentiated in terms of skill. Only those who had gone direct to a Government Training Centre at the behest of the Labour Exchange did not conform to this. The remainder entered the industry directly. The employment available to women was mainly in the unskilled and semi-skilled occupations but was supposed to

be work that was “within their physical strength”. Physical strength was a key criterion in determining what types of work would be given to women. Thus women worked as rivet-catchers, storekeepers, painters, plumber’s labourers, plater’s helpers and cleaners – or rather those aspects of those jobs which were held to be within their capacity. Rarely, within the confines of the accounts, is there any sign that “thought and ingenuity” was applied to the labour process to bring tasks within the reach of women’s capacity. Overall, this resulted in the labour process remaining largely unchanged. Most skilled work was not open to considerations about suitability. The main reason for this was the protection given to skilled tradesmen by statute and administrative order. The upshot of this was that the male labour force who in peacetime had access to these jobs, continued in wartime to retain their positions. In all only 7% of the skilled labour force was made up of dilutees (male and female) in the main shipbuilding firms and only 4% of the main repair firms in 1944. <sup>(23)</sup> Another factor aside from the scepticism on the part of the employers and union resistance, that played a significant role in barring women from skilled work was the absence of technological innovation. Frequently, the opportunity for employers to dilute or deskill a part of the labour process comes via the introduction of new technology or machines. In shipbuilding there was little scope for deskilling in this way. As the labour process contained little repetitive work, the absence of innovation meant that union resistance to dilution was strengthened. <sup>(24)</sup> However, in two areas there were technical developments, welding and electrical work.

Welding involved technological innovation in the production process – as an alternative to riveting. The two trades of riveting and welding were particularly important in determining the pace of production. <sup>(25)</sup> Consequently, employers were keen to employ

welders, also training for welding was comparatively short. Thus a skilled welding labour force could be created in a relatively short period of time. Such considerations provided employers with a major impetus to take on women for welding. Behind this impetus, however, was the pressure of labour shortage. On Clydeside, an area with greater supply problems than the North East, women constituted 38% of the welding labour force – working on skilled tasks or assisting skilled men. (26)

Unlike welding the wider access allowed to women with regard to electrical work was not a consequence of the application of new technology to the labour process but to the product. Developments such as radar meant an increase in the proportion of electrical work done in shipyards. As a consequence throughout the period of the war, the proportion of electricians to other trades employed in shipyards increased. What these technical developments generated was labour shortage. The consequence for women was that these were two primary avenues to skilled work. The making of the shipyard female labour force has been outlined in this section. The prime determinant was management conception of the suitability of the parts of the labour process for female workers. Despite Ministry of Labour exhortations to transform the labour process in order to bring it in reach of women's capacity, employers' scepticism and union resistance combined to close off large portions of the labour process from women. On the North East coast this position was maintained due to the absence of labour supply problems. Only in two areas, welding and electrical work, where technical developments made for labour shortages, were women allowed access to skilled work on any large scale.

*The Importance of the Pay Packet?*

For a satisfactory account of the experience of working in the yards we must now turn our attention again to the accounts of the women themselves. The directive power of the state was applicable to women over the age of 18 who were classified as “mobile”, that is, unmarried or married without domestic responsibilities such as children under the age of 14. For them, shipyard employment offered the opportunity to avoid the rigorous application of direction:

“...you had to go into the shipyard or go into the forces. Well, I had a widowed mother, you see, and I thought – well I was prepared to stay at home and work – and I went over to Wallsend Stadium to be a welder.”

While the options available to women were not so narrow as the statement implies, the consequences were clear: Classified as “mobile” such women could be moved out of the area. Taking up work in the shipbuilding industry – an industry classified as “essential”, gave these women the opportunity to satisfy a statutory requirement laid upon them but within circumstances amenable to themselves. For some women, parental apprehension at the prospects of a daughter’s conscription was sufficient to cause them to find work for their daughters in an essential industry within the region:

“My mam – you know we were a big family and my mam wouldn’t let me go away into the land army and munitions, you know. So like I say, I started at Swan Hunters.

For one married woman without children it was her husband's disapproval which thwarted her ambitions to join the armed services:

I wanted to join the W.R.N.S., and he stopped it. There was twelve volunteers in Newcastle, and they have always been very, very fit...and there was only five passed and I was one of them, and I was the oldest of them all – they were just kids – to go into the Navy, in the W.R.N.S. and my husband had to sign, and he wouldn't sign it he wouldn't allow me to go in. So that's when I went into engineering.

Married women with children under 14, on the other hand, constituted a category which could claim exemption from war work. Nevertheless, by mid 1943 (the high point of war-time demands), it was calculated that within the age group of 18 to 40, 8 married women out of 10 were in the forces or industry. <sup>(27)</sup> Not all of these had domestic responsibilities. Nevertheless a substantial number of married women, who were otherwise exempt, entered the industry. In shipbuilding, as in other industries, the primary attraction was financial. This was particularly so for married women dependent on an army wage:

“I only had thirty-two shillings army money for the little girl and myself. I mean my husband made a contribution of seven shillings a week towards that from his pay. They were only getting 2/- a day then – the soldiers. And the army authorities made up the rest. That's all anybody got with one child.

Thirty six shillings a week “for me and four bairns” was the situation of another service wife. Twenty shillings for a married woman with no children. The prospect of more money in addition to the service pay was highly attractive to such women.

Women with children faced the problem of coping with their domestic responsibilities when they worked full-time in the shipyards. In most cases, it was the woman’s mother who took over their role:

Well me mam looked after them during the day and then they could go to school all right and she’d get dinner ready for them. And if there was one who wasn’t going to school, she had to look after it all day. And then she would have our teas ready. Mine and that for the bairns coming in on a night time. And of course, I used to do the house work when I got in and the washing.

Whatever their occupation in the shipyards, the responsibilities of their primary role – that of mother and housewife were waiting for them at the beginning and ending of the day. While they were at work, these responsibilities transferred to another woman – typically their own mother. The extent to which they were relieved of domestic responsibilities varied. In a few instances, mother and daughter combined households resulting in the mother taking over a large part of the domestic role.

None of the women who were interviewed who had children made use of day nurseries opened up during the war. To some extent that was because many of the children were of school age. Before

and after school hours were critical for such women. Furthermore, all the women were able to make alternative arrangements with relatives. Day nurseries, which were established to look after pre-school children, were of little use here. Even where they might have been advantageous, there was a resistance to leaving children in the care of nurseries. "I wouldn't have let mine go into a nursery. I wouldn't have gone out", was the reaction of a plater's helper who worked at Doxfords. But the incentive to work was strong. The financial benefits were never in doubt for married women in particular:

"...getting a pay packet was good because I was saving up for him coming home...wanted to get a home because I hadn't a home then you see...I used to get stuff what I needed, you know furniture and all that. I used to bank mine and leave his – leave the money I got off the government for me and the bairn."

For unmarried women what must be remembered is that if they lived in a parental home, as most did, control of the pay packet was not their right.

"Two pounds, seven shillings and sixpence a week I earned. I'll never forget. I knew it off by heart. £2/7/6 right, the mother took £2 – she left me with seven shillings and sixpence. And I had to buy my own clothes out of that. Now when I worked on a Sunday...I used to get 13/- for a Sunday, and she used to take 6/6 out of the 13/-...Them days you obeyed your parents, you didn't tell them what you were going to give them – they told you."

The importance of money as an incentive to job satisfaction must not be over-rated. Money per se, is an inadequate explanation of the positive appraisal made by the women. At the instrumental level, it is the use to which the money was put which gave the pay packet its value. For married women, the utility of their earnings lay in the fact that they could be spent to enhance and improve their domestic environment. "I used to get stuff what I needed, you know furniture and all that." The parameters for spending the earnings for married women lay within their gender role. For unmarried women, their parameters were defined by the fact of their subordination to their parents.

There is another more expressive aspect to the possession of a pay packet which lies in the symbolic nature of paid employment. What "getting a pay packet" symbolises is independence and adulthood. For most of the women who worked in the war-time industry their situation was a reversal of their subsequent experience within the family. Typically their situation was one of financial dependency upon a male earner. During the war years all of these women had access to an independent means of financial support. Married women with absent husbands, enjoyed a situation in which they were not dependent on the whims or needs of a male breadwinner. As a splicer from Doxfords put it:

"...I mean up until then you know for a fact women were just drudges and men were so superior. So they got out, they got their own pay – which they'd never had. They had been married when they were young 16 and all that – some of them had half a dozen kids, and they never knew what it was to have any money. They just had to depend on their husbands giving them so



much. And then it was always the rule, ‘don’t tell your wife what you get’, and then they had their envelope with their own money in – it felt great!”

For unmarried women their entry into paid employment marks the beginning of a transition into adulthood. Though they did not have the right to dispose of their earnings, their evaluation of their own worth was enhanced by their new found status as wage earners.

“...I used to come home with about four pounds and nineteen shillings. Of course I was working all hours God sent. And oh, it was fabulous that. I was so proud to take all that money home to my mam, you know.”

The same woman reflecting on her married state in the post-war years summarised the expressive symbolic quality of being able to earn a wage:

“Well I often used to say well I wish I could go out to work and have a bit of money of my own – that little bit of independence.

For her husband, who liked his “home comforts” she became a full-time housewife and mother to the children, but recognised that employment meant independence. By contrast, the war-time situation of married women was a large measure of independence.

*“Work Culture and the Community”*

In the early years of the war the small number of women that were employed in the industry tended to be restricted to general

labouring and cleaning work. However, as the range of occupations for which women were accepted grew, the problem of allocation came to the fore. In order to deal with both the recruitment and supervision of women in the yards the Ministry of Labour required the appointment of women supervisors. The specific functions undertaken by such supervisors varied from yard to yard. However in most places the supervisor had a say in which jobs the women could do:

“I was going round and seeing what jobs were suitable for them... what I thought was suitable for them, and where we could place them and what jobs women could do”

The yardstick used by this supervisor to assess the suitability of the work for women was what she herself was capable of:

“...for instance, crane driving. When it came to that, I said ‘if I can do it, anybody can do it’ you know. I was stupid, I would say ‘If I can do it, they can do it.’”

Reporting on the role of another supervisor the Ministry of Labour circular <sup>(28)</sup> noted that in one yard in 1942:

“A woman supervisor was appointed for the purpose of looking after general welfare The supervision of women is carried out on the following basis..Each foreman instructs the women in his department as to their work and supervises the same with the exception of the general labouring department. In this department women are from time to time changed from one class of work to another. This is carried out by the woman supervisor in collaboration

with the manager. The woman supervisor along with the assistant manager, interviewed all applicants for employment. These are submitted by the Labour Exchange. Women book on and off at the rest room and the whole timekeeping and wages clerical work is done by the supervisor. She looks after the women's rest room and sees that it is kept in proper order. She visits all the women working morning and afternoon and keeps a daily record of the work on which each woman is employed. All women's accidents are reported to her....she gives attention to minor injuries and there is a first aid ambulance box for this purpose in the women's rest room."

The range of functions outlined in this report is considerable, encompassing not only managerial duties such as hiring and allocation of occupation but also timekeeping, wage calculations and first aid. One might expect that the qualifications and experience which would be required for such a post would be considerable. However an interview which was done with a former welfare officer at Hawthorn Leslie painted a different picture.

"When the war broke out we had to do something, when I went to the Ministry of Labour you had to say what your education was up to. And when I told them – they would let me know...and I saw this advert for – I think it was for a supervisor and I thought well I'll apply for that. And I said I don't know whether they'll let me come here because the Ministry of Labour told me....I got a letter the next day – telling me to call and see them again. That was it I mean there was never any doubt about it."

Not only was the post of welfare supervisor an important one but in many ways it broke new ground for few companies had any experience of personnel or welfare officers. Indeed the SEF remained opposed to the appointment of personnel officers throughout the war. <sup>(29)</sup> However, the employment of women was seen to be a special case, so much so that in July 1940 the government issued the Factory (Medical and welfare services) order giving the Factory Inspectorate powers to direct employers engaged on government work to employ welfare staff. <sup>(30)</sup> What this order did not do was to specify the relevant qualifications for welfare officers. In the case of the woman supervisor at Hawthorn Leslie her formal qualifications were nil. A married woman with one grown up son, her work experience was:

“..very little, I was born in Bridlington, East Yorkshire, and married very very young. And I really didn’t work at all. Well my father was a businessman. I helped him a little bit. But nothing. Nothing.”

In terms of practical qualifications this woman had none, no evident suitability for the job. However, what can perhaps be suggested is that her class position, as defined by her father and her husband (a bank manager) was seen as the salient factor.

If the criteria used for the selection of the supervisors were vague then similarly the criteria used by such supervisors to allocate individuals to particular jobs were not too tightly defined either. However, physical fitness was important:

“...health and age. I mean I got a woman in – she was 50 – she told me she was 40. So I got her ...

(bless her soul) – I put her in the plumbers shop. Got her sweeping up and cleaning. But she was the oldest one.”

Within the constraints of health and age, there seemed to be no other significant criteria employed in the process of allocating women to particular jobs. It was possible though, for individual women to have some say in where they eventually ended up, even if, in some cases, this only amounted to avoiding a job that one definitely did not want to do:

“...I went up to the Labour Exchange and one of the girls said ‘well don’t go as a painter’... So when I went in she said ‘You can go painting’ and I said I’ve got a bad chest, you see, I thought I daren’t go painting cos if I had said I was frightened of heights I wouldn’t have gotten in...when I went down the yard they said ‘you’re working on the shell as a plater’s helper’. I said yes”.

In another case a woman who had started at one yard as a driller found the work unsuitable and was able to leave and go to the same yard in which her mother was working:

“...the drills were like pin needles, and I used to get embarrassed when they snapped – I used to think it was a calamity. I never turned out actually what I was doing for the ships – so I says, ‘I’m leaving this’, and then a woman died that did the splicing with my mother so I just went down there (Doxfords), and just walked in, you know and started.”

The point to be made, then, is that the allocation of individuals to specific jobs took place within the context of a very tight labour market and whilst many in the reserve army of labour were conscripts it was nevertheless the case that they could within limits assert their agency with regard to what type of "war work" they did.

For those women undertaking a course at a government training the initial selection for training was largely a random process:

"I went over to Wallsend. It was rather amusing, because that morning there must have been about 300 young girls and men, and a number of elderly people in a line...they counted 1,2,3, and said 'you'll be a joiner', 1,2,3, you'll be a fitter', 1,2,3 and I was a welder. It was as simple as that... It turned out very nice because I dropped in comfortably".

Again whilst the initial process of selection was random the outcome was one in which this woman saw herself as very much suited to the work that she was faced with.

In a few instances, women who entered the shipyard labour force had some previous experience which may have helped in determining their location in the labour process. For example one woman who had previously worked as a painter in De Havillands aircraft factory joined a painting squad in Redhead's shipyard. A bench fitter -that is, electrician repairing welders' cables -had some experience of electrical work. On the Wear a woman who previously had written posters for cinemas was engaged, with help from her father, a charge-hand painter, as a sign writer at the South Docks.

In fact a number of women entered the industry at the behest of a relative -frequently a father acting to mitigate the effects of "direction" on a daughter:

"So my father was working in the shipyards then, Wallsend Slipway, and he came in one day and he said 'right, just go down and see the manager' he says, 'I've got you a job' Of course I don't think they wanted me to leave home".

What the above discussion shows is that with several notable exceptions, the criteria for job allocation were very loose and apart from general guidelines about physical capacity (that is, health and age) the process of matching individuals to jobs was largely done at random. Or rather was dictated by the availability of particular jobs at specific times. Similarly with the Government Training Centres, these had training programmes which needed filling at particular times and therefore women (and men) were selected at random to fill them. In a few cases, however, there was self selection, and even if a woman was allocated a job which she did not like or could not do, there was often the possibility of changing jobs or indeed yards.

This element of choice of where to work was clearly of some importance to the women interviewed and came across particularly in the cases where women had left other types of work in order to come into the shipyards. In this connection it is interesting that some women felt that working in a shipyard was less dangerous than other types of war work:

"I worked in Dunlop's factory in Birmingham but we were only in lodgings you see so I came back

and started at the shipyard...It was a bit dangerous in Birmingham...I got me fingers jammed one day, you see you had to ease the rubber through like that -and the rubber used to come out in strips You see the difference between the sawmill (at Doxfords) and the factory -well in the sawmill when you are sawing you can ease off, when you are in the factory where they are cutting the rubber, well you can't You're not in control of the machine. A few narrow escapes there."

Not only was the work seen, in some cases to be less dangerous than the alternatives, but to some extent it was seen to provide intrinsic satisfaction. As one welder put it:

"It wasn't appalling work. It was taxing. And you obviously had to know how to do a job. As far as the work was concerned it was a pleasure."

Moreover, the nature of the final product in the shipbuilding is often an object of pride for those who have worked upon it. For one plater's helper this was certainly the case:

"Oh, and the first time they said there was a launch I went down I was so excited Oh I said "Tommy look at all our work" -it had grown up- they were going mad I thought my God look at that work and it's going into the sea and it was away, Oh, if I live to be a hundred I will never forget or feel anything like it."

Furthermore, the level of direct supervision and control that one was subject to in the yards was often seen as less "tight" than elsewhere. One woman compared a short experience that she had



in a munitions factory in an unfavourable light with her later work in the yards. She said of the factory:

"You darsn't move there -if you went to the toilet you were timed. If they thought you were too long, the supervisor used to come down and knock on the door 'come on -out' .Oh they were strict".

Another account stresses the "freedom" from the detailed control of the labour process as a positive aspect of shipyard work:

"...of course we had a freedom, you know, you weren't sort of tied down -it was a freedom of getting on with your work if you couldn't get on with that, or you felt you needed a break, then you were at liberty to move off the job and pull yourself together or whatever, you know".

Furthermore, when those responsible for direct control, foremen or the woman supervisor, were about there was always someone who would "telegraph" their impending arrival. As a labourer from Doxfords explained, the men would alert the women workers if they saw the supervisor coming:

"if she came on the deck...she used to come on the deck now and again, and the lads would say 'hi-up she's here' -well there was me standing gossiping like".

Such freedom from direct supervision or the mechanical regularity of machine-paced factory work was clearly seen to be a

very positive aspect of life in a shipyard. As such this "freedom" forms as much of a part of the "objective" conditions facing the women entering the industry as did the more negative features of the physical conditions in which the work took place.

If the form of the labour process confronted the women with an objective force, the form of social relationships within the work place was at first sight less determined. Indeed the novelty of women working in a shipyard initially, was, as we have seen, thought to create problems which could actually lead to a fall in output. This view was totally wrong and to a large extent failed to take into account the specific nature of the occupational community surrounding the shipyards which ensured that the "moral order" of the wider community was imported into the yards. This is not to deny that some mutual adjustments had to be made. It is interesting that the issue of "bad language" was raised by a majority of the women interviewed, without prompting. Most respondents went on to say that they heard very little of this. However, there were one or two who gave a different view. A welder at the Neptune yard noted:

"Well they weren't used to women working in the yards and the language was disgusting. So I came off the job and went to the gaffer and said 'I'm not working with them' and then they put notices up, you know, 'Women –No Bad Language.'"

Other women tackled this issue in a different way:

"...And I've heard people swear. I mean if you hit your thumb with a hammer you'll swear - let's put it that way. And of course,

I never let anyone know I heard. That was my way out". On the whole most of the women interviewed found that the "unease" that their presence caused was more of a source of amusement than complaint. Moreover the impression given is that often it was the men who had greater trouble adjusting to the situation than the women:

"There was one foreman -I said 'can I have a pass out please?' and you know he didn't know what to put on it so he put 'pass one woman out'. I said 'Look at that, that's education for you.'"

In order to understand the specific quality of the relationships established between men and women in the yards it is necessary to appreciate that most of the women employed were part of the occupational community. Many had relatives or neighbours working in the same yard, or had such connections at some time in the past. Unlike some of the munitions factories there was no direction of female labour into the North Eastern yards from other regions, all of the women were from local areas. For the men working in the yards this meant that it was "their own women" working amongst them. This was an important dimension in prescribing the bounds of acceptable behaviour. Furthermore if the existence of these "unwritten community rules" were ignored the penalties could involve more than the application of official discipline within the workplace. This point was illustrated during an interview with a woman who had worked as a labourer at Short Brothers yard on the river Wear. She explained that one man had "pestered" her for some time and on an occasion when she was carrying a fragile object he grabbed her trouser leg. This was the final straw and as her husband explained: "I had to go round to him one night and threaten him".

In this case the woman's husband was working in another yard on the river. For other women the relative that one could turn to if someone was being a nuisance would be different -a father, brother, uncle or even mother, or, in the absence of any of these, even a neighbour or friend of the family. Where women did not have a relative within the yard it was sometimes the case that an honorary father figure would be "appointed". As one welder remembered:

"I always had someone who was labouring for me, and it mostly turned out to be a kindly old gentleman, I think he was called Jim, and he was very protective. He would turn and say to another man 'now here -let this bonny lass alone, don't interfere with her work' It was lovely really."

This is not to deny that there were some "illicit" relationships formed in the yards during this time. However, as one woman stressed the "blame" for such relationships can not be put upon working in a shipyard:

"I could stand on the 'touch line' and see little things going wrong -people getting together who really ought not to. But that's life. That's nothing to do with working in a yard ".

The point to note then, is that unlike women who were directed to unfamiliar parts of the country the women who worked in the North Eastern shipyards were on home ground", and therefore the acceptable form of behaviour between men and women in the yards mirrored more closely that of the non-work community. This fact also ensured that it was clearly understood that whatever the

objective capabilities of women proved to be, shipbuilding would remain a man's industry. This recognition was one of the main factors which helped to ease the exit of women from the yards in the later stages of the war. There was an expectation that it was natural for the men to return to their jobs in the yards and for the women to leave, as a fitter from North Eastern Marine put it:

"Well it's only natural in a way isn't it. Because the men would be coming back, and there would be men to get jobs for".

Moreover, the men who were returning were often not anonymous individuals but relatives of the women who were working in the yards. Here again the existence of the occupational community helped ensure an unproblematic repair of boundaries with respect to work after the "exceptional" circumstances of the war were over. In several respects, then, for these women the existence of a work-based community eased their process of entry into the shipbuilding industry and the same factor effectively ensured that there would be little resistance offered by the women when they were eventually required, by the restoration of pre-war practices, to return to their "primary role" of looking after "their" domestic responsibilities.

### *Conclusion*

The apparent paradox as to why women should rate their experiences of working in wartime shipyards so highly in spite of the harsh physical conditions in the industry is resolved when we realise that many of the positive features of shipyard work that men found attractive held true for women as well. The work was not machine paced and the levels of direct control were often much

less than those in other available forms of work. The wages were relatively high and the symbolic importance of bringing home a wage packet was highly valued. Added to this was the fact that most of the women interviewed were in their teens or early 20's when working in the yards and therefore that time can be seen as formative in relation to an emerging adulthood. The nature of the occupational community from which the women came ensured that the workplace and to some degree the work itself was not unfamiliar. This eased their entry into such work as did the existence of a moral order that encompassed both the community as well as the workplace. The irony of this is that whilst it made entering this world of work easier it also facilitated the smooth and relatively unproblematic removal of women from this work towards the end of the war.

Other satisfactions to stem from the experience of such work were more related to the realisation that other things were possible. As a splicer from Doxfords suggested:

"It changed them It made you a bit less dependent on your husband or content with your home life, a lot hadn't any life before that. I think we were waking up really to things then, and being independent, more independent than the generation before us".

The same sentiments were echoed by a welder from Redheads on the Tyne:

"You know", it's a funny thing about women, once they find that they can do different things you can never go back".

Whilst such views tend to over-emphasise the degree to which the war implied long-term changes in macro employment patterns they nevertheless indicate that in the individual case the experience itself was often seen to be of great value.

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**‘We don’t intend paying it’.  
The Sunderland Rent Strike of 1939  
Don Watson**

*On Tuesday 5<sup>th</sup> June 1939 the rent collectors for the North East Housing Association in Sunderland were probably expecting an ordinary day at work. Their duties included collection at the new Hylton Lane and Plains Farm Estates, and they would have been expecting to collect an extra 6d with each weekly rent, the latest increase to be imposed by the North East Housing Association. They were probably unaware that over the previous two days well over a thousand tenants had been meeting and had agreed to withhold the increase. They could not have been expecting the reception awaiting them as they entered the estates.*

According to the *Sunderland Echo*:

‘1,600 tenants on Sunderland’s two newest housing estates... have refused the 6d a week rent increase introduced by the NEHA...Following meetings of tenants on the two estates last night, parties of demonstrators with banners, bells and rattles, met the rent collectors as they arrived this morning’ <sup>(1)</sup>.

The demonstrators picketed the rent offices and followed

the collectors about their rounds, using a gramophone horn as a megaphone to urge tenants to pay their rent but to withhold the 6d increase. Almost everyone on the two estates did that and apparently the rent strikers were good-humoured, the collectors reporting that they were not being intimidated. Certainly the published photograph shows a determined crowd but one that is in high spirits and clearly enjoying itself. Several of the tenants' leaders put their case to the newspaper, stating that in 1938 the rent for a three bed-roomed house on the Hylton Lane Estate had been 8s 7d, this had been increased, and with the new proposed increase it would be 9s 10d. *Nearly everyone on the estate is unemployed* and they could not afford it. The tenants continued that they *'hoped to force the Council to take action, since they won't do it otherwise'*. Delegations from the tenants successfully petitioned Sunderland Council to hold a special meeting of the Estates Committee to hear their views. On June 9<sup>th</sup>, four days into the strike, this Committee agreed to recommend to the Council that it withdraw the increase on the grounds of the hardship it would cause (2).

It soon became clear that it would not be so simple. Sunderland Council ran the estates in partnership with the North East Housing Association, and any changes to the rents would have to be agreed by the two organisations. The process that had produced this arrangement is worth examining.

### *Sunderland and the 'Special Areas'*

By 1934 it was obvious that large scale and long-term unemployment was likely to be a continuing feature of life in areas such as the North East if matters were left entirely to market forces. In fact in 1937, when the south of Britain was enjoying the economic recovery and boom noted by some commentators, there

were areas in County Durham and Tyneside that were still suffering nearly 30% unemployment, more than twice the national average (3). The response of the Conservative-led National Government was the Depressed Areas Bill 1934, which was amended by the House of Lords to the more euphemistic Special Areas Act. This appointed Commissioners with a national Special Areas Fund budget of £2 million to promote the economic development of designated areas such as County Durham and Tyneside. The Commissioners were not allowed to fund public works and the Government was ideologically reluctant to direct inward investment. Therefore the Special Areas legislation and the sites for new industrial estates it created – such as in Pallion and on the Team Valley – had only a marginal effect on employment rates and represented only a hesitant and ineffective intervention (4).



This is how Plains Farm tenants to-day greeted a Sunderland rent collector

Several reports commissioned by the Ministry of Labour had laid the groundwork for the Special Areas initiative. One on Durham and Tyneside went beyond industrial conditions and unemployment to note that:

*Houses are small and poor in type, and the percentage of overcrowding is unduly high, even compared with most of the other coalfields in Great Britain'. It recommended a 'comprehensive housing scheme' to address this, not just because of housing need but because it would create work for unskilled labourers and be good for morale in the depressed areas. Further, 'special and urgent consideration should be given to Sunderland, because of the peculiar uncertainty of its prospects of a natural recovery in the demand for employment'.*

But as the Report also noted:

'It seems sufficiently clear that the need for houses at rents which the lowest paid workers can afford cannot in present circumstances be met, in this area, either by private enterprise or by allowing the local authorities to build without a subsidy...the financial gap must by some means or other be bridged by an Exchequer contribution'.  
(5)

The 1924 Labour Government had given local authorities a primary role as providers of housing for rent and provided subsidies to make this possible. The Housing Act of 1930 had also introduced a Government subsidy for slum clearance, based on the numbers to be re-housed. But progress had been slow for financial reasons; most house building was still for sale rather than rent; the National Government had, by 1933, scrapped any Exchequer subsidy for council house building. Rents for good and spacious

enough accommodation continued to be beyond the reach of people who were low paid, in and out of work, or unemployed (6).

This issue was taken up by the Commissioner for the Special Areas, who stated in his first Report in 1935 that *'The overcrowding problem in the Special Areas in the North East is acute and there is a pressing need for more houses to be let at low rents'*. (7). He also seemed to have found 'some means or another' to bridge the financial gap by an Exchequer contribution. The problem was to get round the fact that some Exchequer subsidy for slum clearance was available under the 1930 Housing Act, and subsidies for house building to alleviate overcrowding were available under the 1935 Housing Act, but only where local authorities were making their own contributions to these projects through the rates. This, in impoverished County Durham and Tyneside, they could not afford to do. But the Commissioner believed he had the solution.

Legislation did not permit the Commissioner for the Special Areas to subsidise house building by Councils but he could do so through a 'Public Utility Society' – a not for profit company limited by guarantee and with no share capital. Accordingly he arranged for the constitution of such a body, the North East Housing Association, in December 1935. The Commissioner appointed its Chairman, Viscount Ridley, and the other voluntary Board members, who included the Bishop of Jarrow and Mr. W. Leslie Runciman. (8) The NEHA was established for the express purpose of *'providing accommodation for members of the working classes in the North East Special Areas'*. This was to be achieved by entering into arrangements with local authorities for the provision of re-housing necessitated by slum clearance and addressing overcrowding. Councils would pass to the NEHA the less than adequate subsidy they received from the

Exchequer, and the NEHA could supplement this from the Special Areas Fund. The supplement would take the place of, but be no more than, the contribution from the rates that the Councils would have had to make had they built the houses themselves. By this means houses could be built and let at rents the tenants could afford <sup>(9)</sup>.

In 1936 the Commissioner made capital grants to the NEHA for a number of new housing projects, including building an initial 492 homes on the Hylton Lane Estate. He reported a year later that over 6,000 new dwellings had been built and 27,000 people re-housed in Durham and Tyneside under these arrangements, with 2,000 jobs involved. The Commissioner congratulated the NEHA on *'having achieved such remarkable progress in so short a time'* <sup>(10)</sup>. So what had gone so badly wrong two years later?

### *Managing the Cuts*

The NEHA officials explained at a meeting with the tenants that an effect of the 1938 Housing Subsidies Act had been to reduce the Exchequer subsidies available for re-housing projects, even when these were managed through public utility companies such as the NEHA. Unfortunately around half of the houses in the Sunderland project had been built before this Act, attracting a higher level of subsidy, and the rest after it, thus attracting a lower. This had in effect increased the cost to the Association of the houses by 2s 6d per house per week, a situation that could not have been foreseen in 1937. Therefore further rent increases were not unlikely. Also, the new flats to be opened in the East End were not attracting enough tenants, because people preferred houses, and lower rents were seen as the solution. The NEHA, with Council agreement, had pooled the total expected rental income from all the houses and arranged things so that higher rents on the Hylton Lane and Plains Farm

Estates would meet the costs of the decreased subsidies and the lower rents in the East End. The NEHA Secretary, with touching optimism, had told a newspaper reporter that ‘...*the bother will die down when the tenants have the matter properly explained to them*’. Those at the sharp end of the decision were not impressed:

‘We have 1,500 tenants living on the verge of poverty. The children are not getting sufficient to eat. This 6d has been placed on the people lowest on the social scale in the town’.

Mrs. Cotterell from the Hylton Lane Tenants’ Association put its position succinctly: *‘We are not here to argue the point. We are just here to tell you that we don’t intend paying it’*.<sup>(11)</sup> The tenants, who were often unemployed families, had not caused the problem and refused to accept that the solution should involve further hardship on their part.

### *The National Picture*

The events in Sunderland were part of a national movement. Between June and the end of August 1939, for example, the *Daily Worker* carried reports of at least twenty-seven different tenants’ disputes around the country, frequently leading to a rent strike. Some – particularly in the East End of London – were directed at private sector slum landlords who were extracting high rents and failing to carry out even basic maintenance and repairs. Many were against rent increases imposed by Tory Councils, such as the biggest and most successful of them all, in Birmingham. Here at one point thousands of tenants, faced with the threat of legal action over non-payment of rents, marched behind a coffin carrying a figure of a bailiff in effigy, which they gave a mock burial. In others the tenants’ opponents were ‘Moderate’ (i.e. Conservative) Councils, or

those run by former Labour councillors who had followed Ramsay MacDonald into the National Government. The policy of pooling rents across several estates so that some paid more to make up for others was a cause of tenant action elsewhere too (12).

Several Councils or private companies did resort to legal action, using bailiffs to try to serve summonses for non- payment of rent or eviction orders. There are several reports of tenants, local women, the NUWM, standing sentry on estate entrances ready to blow warning whistles at the approach of the bailiffs. This would produce an instant picket of tenants to bar their way. There were occasional arrests and outbreaks of violence for example in Stepney, Barrhead and Enfield when police baton charges were used to clear a path for the bailiffs. Nothing like this happened during the Sunderland rent strike although the tenants' committee stated that it intended to raise money for a legal defence fund (13).

The success of the Birmingham rent strike led to the establishment of the National Federation of Tenants and Residents, whose first national conference in July 1939 developed a Housing Charter and drafted a new Housing Act. This included increased subsidy for slum clearance, a policy also adopted by the Labour Party (14).

The tenant victory in Birmingham had other ramifications. It gave encouragement to others, and it seems reasonable to assume that the political activists at least on the tenants' committees on the Sunderland estates would have been aware of it. The public event of the mock funeral of a bailiff – symbolising the resistance to legal action – was used in rent strikes elsewhere. Twenty years after the event Sunderland Communist Party members still remembered the



coffin being carried on the rent strike demonstrations and this may have been a use of the Birmingham idea <sup>(15)</sup>.

### *Leadership and Wider Issues*

A letter about the strike in the *Sunderland Echo* complained that *'it is being turned into a political stunt...some extreme elements are conducting a campaign on this estate'*. The paper had already reported that *'W Booth, a prominent member of the National Unemployed Workers Movement'*, led the demonstration on the Hylton Lane Estate and that the one on Plains Farm had been led by *'Mr. J Dewar'*. 'Jock' Dewar was from Scotland and a member of the Communist Party in Sunderland as well as a committee member of the tenants' association and so it was probably the presence of these two individuals that prompted the letter, to say nothing of the banner reading, *"An Attack on One is an Attack on All"* in an *Echo* photograph. <sup>(16)</sup> A left political influence is visible in the several occasions Tenants' Committee members used the approach taken in Wal Hannington's book *The Problem of the Distressed Areas*, published by the Left Book Club two years earlier to support their case. Examples of the weekly budgets of real tenants, setting out just exactly what they had available to spend on what, were put forward to demonstrate what the effects of the 6d increase would be for people living on the margin. Jock Dewar was able to quote examples of how tenants were struggling to afford vital outgoings as things were, and said that *'The provision of new houses and fresh air doesn't make up for the loss of food'*. He was also able to put this in the context of the diet, income and health debates of the time, using the survey evidence from the Rowntree Trust, Dr. Boyd-Orr of the Rowett Institute, and the BMA to argue that the average tenant's income was already below that needed for an adequate diet <sup>(17)</sup>. By 1938 carrying a coffin to represent the result of malnutrition was also common on NUWM demonstrations

demanding additional winter relief.

The NEHA Secretary complained about the strike that *'there has been no outcry anywhere else, even where things are just as bad'* (18), and certainly there were no reports in the *Daily Worker* of rent strikes on NEHA estates elsewhere in the region. This may of course be coincidental, but possibly too it was because only the Sunderland tenants included political activists who would have been aware of tenant actions in other parts of the country, and who had access to good propaganda material about income, health and housing.

Besides this clear influence from the left it is noticeable how the women from the estates were fully involved at every level, including the leadership. The Secretary of Plains Farm Tenants' Association was Mrs. Isabella Orwin, and she with Mrs. Young and Mrs. Harty were members of the delegations that met councillors, officials and Labour Party groups. Mrs. Cotterrell from the Hylton Lane Estate Tenants' Committee was part of the deputation that led a march of 200 tenants to lobby the Estates Committee meeting at Sunderland Town Hall. On the previous day 300 women, *'some with perambulators, some with babes in arms'* marched from the Hylton Lane Estate to an open-air meeting to show their support (19).

The women also began to take up some wider issues that were having an impact on their domestic spheres on the new estates. Mrs. Cotterrell believed that *'ever since the tenants moved into the estate everything has gone wrong'*; she was concerned about the lack of shops, schools and other facilities, together with the costs of having to travel for everything. Tenants had to pay a 3d fare to the post office to collect a 10s old age pension, and 3d to get to the Public

Assistance Committee to collect a 8s benefit. This experience was not uncommon in re-housing schemes in the 1930s; the collapse in agricultural land values provided opportunities to build new estates on the outskirts of towns, but low-paid tenants then experienced further increases in living costs by having to travel everywhere. The women tried to take these issues up, too: Mrs. Orwin and Mrs. Young met the Sunderland Corporation Transport Manager in an unsuccessful attempt to negotiate concessionary fares for school journeys and shopping trips. <sup>(20)</sup> This sort of dispute, an example of what might be termed class struggle at the point of consumption rather than production, was about the household budget and a threat to the already difficult struggle the women had to manage the domestic spheres for which they were responsible

### *Lobbying Government*

At the recommendation of the Estates Committee a meeting was convened in July between the NEHA, Sunderland councillors and the tenants' committees. Jock Dewar pointed out that the Ministry of Health had specifically stated that tenants re-housed from overcrowded or slum conditions should not be financially penalised by their move; he argued for a sliding scale of rents so that the unemployed would pay less than the better off. The NEHA agreed to approach the Commissioner for the Special Areas to restore their earlier level of subsidy, and similarly the Council agreed to send a deputation to the Ministry of Health to argue this case, and to try to ensure that the future re-housing developments planned for Sunderland would attract enough central government funding to keep the rents affordable. In the short term the NEHA undertook to investigate the possibility of reviewing the maintenance charge element of the rents for the houses and new flats, in the hope of being able to withdraw the latest rent increase.

The tenants maintained their campaign and when the result of the discussions was reported back to the Council two days later women were escorted from the public gallery after shouting '*we're not going to pay*'. The Left Book Club Theatre Guild came from Newcastle to provide a street theatre performance of a short play written about the rent strikes in London, to an enthusiastic reception. (21).

Later that month and into August local politicians and senior figures in the NEHA lobbied on the tenants' behalf. A cross-party delegation of North East councillors and MPs met the Minister for Health to discuss the financing of the NEHA. The Minister stated that legislation to increase any subsidy to the NEHA was impossible in the current parliamentary session, but he would '*consider their case carefully*' – which seems to have left the Chairman of the Sunderland Council estates Committee in an optimistic mood (22).

In August the NEHA opened 512 flats in 9 blocks in the East End of Sunderland, which became known as The Garths. The new Commissioner for the Special Areas officially opened the flats; he would not meet a delegation from the rent strikers but councillors made their case to him, and argued for increased subsidies to extend slum clearance and keep rents down. '*It is no good providing houses at rents people cannot pay...the average labourer's wage in Sunderland is £2 9s a week, and if the rent is 12s there is little to live on*'. Sunderland still had a large number of unemployed of whom a good many were long-term, and the major re-housing schemes still needed to meet the town's needs could not go ahead in the current circumstances. A few days later Lord Ridley, Chairman of the NEHA, met the Minister of Health and argued that new legislation was needed to restore the subsidies for slum clearance to their 1930 levels. Unless this was done re-housing in the areas of high unemployment would

have to stop, because the rents would be too high. The Minister undertook to '*see what could be done*' (23).

### *The End of the Strike*

It is not clear how the Sunderland rent strike was concluded. Press coverage dries up after the declaration of war in September 1939 because the pages of the *Sunderland Echo* became completely dominated by war issues: evacuation, air raid precautions and conscription. *The Daily Worker* was similarly dominated, and it had the additional task of making space to support the sudden Nazi-Soviet alliance. Also, the *Worker* clearly relied on local contacts or volunteer correspondents to supply news from their areas and these were not always either forthcoming or consistent. The strike was still talked about by Communist Party members in Sunderland some twenty years later, but not in the terms that would be associated with a victory (24). It is clear that the partner organisations of the NEHA were sympathetic to the strikers' cause, and that there were some efforts to find accounting ways to reduce the local rents burden, which may have worked. Possibly the strikers accepted the difficulty of resolving the issue without additional central government funding and recognised that the NEHA was making genuine efforts to secure it. Possibly too it eventually just petered out as people transferred their attention to the new problems arising from the outbreak of war.

Whereas in other rent strikes the opponent – be that a private landlord company or a Local Authority – was straightforward, in Sunderland this was less so. The Council was a partner in the North East Housing Association; it was not the sole decision maker in whose gift it would be to settle the dispute after the traditional process of lobbying. The NEHA in turn had to lobby central

government for the necessary funds, the release of which was the policy both of the National Housing Charter Campaign and the Labour Party. As the Sunderland councillors had made clear, the reform of working class housing in the North East could not continue without resources from central government. Otherwise, the tenants simply could not afford the rents. The war meant that a government response could be postponed.

But there are two ways in which the Sunderland rent strike can be said to be a success. After two months of their action no less a person than Lord Ridley, the government appointee tasked with chairing the NEHA, was in a face to face meeting with the Minister for Health and in effect putting the tenants' case. It is hard to imagine that this would have happened without the strike. Secondly, among the raft of emergency legislation introduced when war was declared was the 1939 Rent Restriction Act. This pegged rents at August 1939 levels in the private sector and for properties not owned by local authorities. The Council did not own the Sunderland estates and so presumably they were covered by the Act, and the tenants would have been spared the further increases they feared. The National Federation of Tenants and Residents believed that the Act was '*a tribute to the strength of the tenants' movement*' which had shown the government that it could expect the same unrest as had broken out between 1914 and 1918 if rents rose as they had during that war (25). The Sunderland rent strikers had been part of that movement. They may have been '*the people lowest on the social scale in the town*' but through their well-organised collective action they had made their voices heard in the corridors of power.

*(My thanks to the NELHS 'First Tuesday' Discussion Group)*

*Notes*

- (1) *Sunderland Echo* June 5<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (2) *Sunderland Echo* June 5<sup>th</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (3) *Fourth Report of the Commissioner for the Special Areas* (London, HMSO September 1937 p.21)
- (4) Branson, Noreen, and Heinemann, Margot, *Britain in the 1930s* (London, Panther 1973); Booth, Alan E, 'An Administrative Experiment in Unemployment Policy in the Thirties' *Public Administration* vol.56 Summer 1978 p.139-58.
- (5) Euan-Wallace, Captain D, *Report of Investigation into the Industrial Conditions in Certain Depressed Areas: Part II, Durham and Tyneside* (Ministry of Labour, London HMSO 1934 p.103-4)
- (6) Burnett, John, *A Social History of Housing 1815-1985* (London, RKP 1993 p.240)
- (7) *First Report of the Commissioner for the Special Areas* (London, HMSO 1935 p.32)
- (8) *Second Report of the Commissioner for the Special Areas* (London, HMSO February 1936 p.45-6)
- (9) *Third Report of the Commissioner for the Special Areas* (London, HMSO October 1936 p.92-3)
- (10) *Fourth Report of the Commissioner for the Special Areas* (London, HMSO September 1937 p.135)
- (11) *Sunderland Echo* June 5<sup>th</sup>, June 8<sup>th</sup>, June 9<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (12) For example *Daily Worker* June 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (13) *Daily Worker* June 8<sup>th</sup>, 28<sup>th</sup>, August 17<sup>th</sup> 1939; *Sunderland Echo* June 8<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (14) *Daily Worker* July 17<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (15) *Daily Worker* July 14<sup>th</sup> 1939. Information from Mr. William Hunt Vincent, of Sunderland. Mr. Vincent joined the Sunderland branch of the Communist Party in 1958.
- (16) *Sunderland Echo* June 5<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup> 1939. Information from Mr. William Hunt Vincent. W. Booth had been active in the Sunderland

NUWM for some time; in 1935 he had chaired an NUWM, CP, ILP and trades union meeting in Sunderland to protest about the introduction of the Unemployment Assistance Boards (*Newcastle Journal* February 2<sup>nd</sup> 1935).

- (17) *Sunderland Echo* June 5<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup> 1939. On diet and health in the 1930s see Branson and Heinemann op.cit.
- (18) *Sunderland Echo* June 9<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (19) *Sunderland Echo* June 8<sup>th</sup>, 9<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (20) *Sunderland Echo* June 8<sup>th</sup>, July 29<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (21) *Sunderland Echo* July 11<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>. 1939; Watson, Don, *To the Head Through the Heart: the Newcastle Left Book Club Theatre Guild* (Bulletin of the North East Labour History Society no.23 1989 p.3-22)
- (22) *Sunderland Echo* July 27<sup>th</sup> 1939
- (23) *Sunderland Echo* August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> 1939
- (24) Information from Mr. William Hunt Vincent
- (25) *Daily Worker* September 4<sup>th</sup>, 7<sup>th</sup>, 1939



**The 1911 Seamen's Strike the North East at the  
Centre of a Europe-wide dispute**  
*David Byrne*

*Recent visits of the 'Tall Ships' to Tyneside prompted me to return to the year 1911 – just around the date when the last of the big commercial sailing vessels were still an important part of the world merchant marine – and to a period when the North East coast as a whole was one of the most important locations of global maritime capitalism and its workforce. My original interest in that year derived from an examination of the ethnic composition of the North East's marine labour force in a period before the mass employment of Yemeni men as firemen when most non-British immigrants were Scandinavian or German as well as the large numbers of men from Shetland, Orkney and Ireland who were employed as seamen or firemen <sup>(1)</sup> in this area. Indeed the British immigrants included my Welsh grandfather who generally sailed from the Tyne subsequent to his marriage.*

In 1911 the number of British (which term at this point included Irish) seamen was put at about 135,000 in the press. We cannot get an exact figure from censuses since so many would be at sea or in a foreign port on the census date. For example my grandfather appears in no census so far as I can see during his whole adult

life and at the date of the 1911 census was off the West coast of South America. It was generally estimated that only about 15% of seamen were in a UK port at any one time and in 1911 there were approximately 3,000 seamen, firemen and sea officers recorded by the census in South Shields. My interpretation is that they had to be physically present, even if on a vessel, to be recorded. We cannot say that the port was home to 20,000 seamen since most unmarried seamen, whilst often having a port they regarded as 'home', had no permanent address ashore and usually resided in seamen's boarding houses when not signed on to a vessel. However, there is no doubt that at that time the North East Coast and South Shields in particular was the base of a large part of the UK seagoing labour force. This included the 'weekly' coastwise seamen who were paid weekly, found their own food – hence the signs which decorated South Shields butchers' shops describing them as 'Family and Shipping Butchers', and were much more likely to be married men with families in the town. My estimate based on census birthplace data is that about 30% of the South Shields seagoing labour force was not British or Irish and was comprised largely of men from elsewhere in Northern Europe with some from Mediterranean countries including Malta. At this time there were very few Yemenis in the port. They were to enter later during the First World War.

It is important to note that the seamen's unions led by Havelock Wilson, the founder of what was to become the National Union of Seamen (later Seafarers) always recruited non-British seamen, although they charged a premium for membership which was reduced depending on the number of years sailed in British ships and becoming zero for those with five years service. Charles Lindley, the prominent Swedish Trade Unionist and labour leader, was one of Wilson's first recruits. This was plain good sense given

the international character of the seafaring labour force and had considerable implications for the conduct of industrial action.

In June and July 1911 the North East coast was the epicentre of a major strike which was organized across Northern Europe and which resulted in a victory for the seamen. This event is well recorded in labour history but does not really form part of the popular historical culture of the region, perhaps because it was subsumed into the experience of the First World War when the international alliance disintegrated and Havelock Wilson became the most active of prominent pro-war trade unionists. Reading through the press reports of the strike as it went on it also becomes apparent that the seamen's strike was the catalyst for widespread, simultaneous and subsequent, but also much less organized and genuinely insurrectionary, disorder in port cities, particularly but not exclusively Liverpool. When 'Tall Ships' are presented as a 'consumer cultural commodity' on post industrial Tyneside, it seems appropriate to return to the actual experience of seamen as organized workers in conflict with bosses. The bosses are still around even if the British seaman is a rare bird these days, but the seaman is not and the grossly exploited men – and women – from Eastern Europe and the global South who fill that role today would benefit from the kind of organization which was put together in this region and succeeded in winning many of its objectives in 1911.

### *1911 – The Industrial Context*

There are a number of issues which we have to address to contextualize the 1911 strike. Perhaps the most important and the driver of the others was the actual development of maritime capitalism in the UK in general and in the North East in particular over the preceding thirty years. Essentially there was a massive

increase in the tonnage of the merchant fleet which reflected a general increase in the size of vessels and a shift from sail to steam, not only in liner trades which worked to timetables but also in tramp shipping of bulk goods. The North East coast shipping industry had its origins in the coasting collier trade and local owners generally specialized in tramp vessels but by 1911 tramps were often very large vessels engaged in global transport of bulk goods, especially coal. In the 1870s and 80s small capitals could be the basis of entry into ship owning. Indeed the old system of owning vessels in parts – usually 64ths – was still common and quite small capitals could be invested in this way <sup>(2)</sup>. Moreover, although there was a well established process of certification of deck officers, the route to that profession was through service as an apprentice towards the grade of Able Seaman (A.B.), and it was still usual in North East shipping for officers to have had sea time as an A.B. before taking their examination for second mate.

The net effect of this was that some of the largest shipowners in the region, and indeed globally, had started as seamen. For example Sir Walter Runciman, as he was in 1911, had gone to sea as a boy, worked up rapidly to ship's Master by the age of twenty- three, and bought a vessel of his own in 1885 which he initially commanded himself. By 1914 his company had forty modern steamers at sea. Another route into ship ownership was by starting on the purely commercial side as an office boy as Sir James Knott did <sup>(3)</sup>. In 1875 at the age of twenty he began with the purchase of a single collier brig. By 1914 what had become the Prince Line comprised forty five modern steam ships. Knott sold the Prince Line to Furness Withy in 1916 for £3 million. These North East shipowners were highly visible significant personalities across both the shipping industry and local and national politics. In 1910 Knott was elected

as Conservative Member for Sunderland and Runciman's son, also Walter, was the Liberal MP for a Yorkshire seat <sup>(4)</sup>. This personal visibility coupled with the claim to humble origins and achievement through their own efforts was an important part of these men's public persona.

The point is that as the shipping industry grew so massively and the tramp trades began to be carried by modern high value large vessels, what had been a relatively small and crossable divide between seamen and shipowner, became instead a gap between workers on the one hand and immensely wealthy and powerful capitalists on the other. In this context it is interesting that what was eventually to become the National Union of Seamen was founded not on the West Coast of the UK where a substantial part of shipping was from an earlier date in large regular liners with fairly rigid distinctions between hands, officers and owners, but instead in Sunderland in 1887 by Havelock Wilson, like Runciman a seaman who swallowed the anchor – Wilson had a second mate's ticket – but did so by setting up a café business rather than moving into shipowning. At that point the gap between café proprietor and shipowner whilst no doubt quite large was not what it was to become. It is important to note that Wilson actually preceded the shipowners into Parliament by becoming Liberal MP for Middlesbrough in 1890 and holding that seat until 1910. Thus political and industrial divides were cross cutting at this period.

Another factor in the development of the union on the North East coast was that the regular weekly trades coastwise remained important. Weekly seamen who generally sailed colliers from here to the Thames and other Eastern and Southern markets for coal were regularly back at home and were contactable and available for

regular organization in a way in which men on longer foreign going voyages were not.

We should also consider the role of firemen – the merchant navy term for what the Royal Navy called stokers. In steamships, whilst deck crew generally took to sea at an early age as specialists, firemen could be recruited from any set of strong general labourers including coal miners. So for example John Simpson Kirkpatrick, the man with the donkey who fills an iconic role in relation to ANZAC participation in the First World War, went to sea from his South Shields home as a youth of seventeen as a fireman having previously worked as a milkman. He jumped ship in Australia and worked as a cane cutter, cattle musterer, again fireman, then for a longer period as a coal miner before returning to coastal shipping and finally enlisted in the Australian army at the outbreak of war with the primary objective of getting back to Tyneside! Kirkpatrick's biography in many ways is typical of many firemen and indeed seamen. The first thing to note is that most seagoing workers in the ranks were young. The second is that many moved into and out of the sea as other job opportunities presented. Many left the sea on marriage and Kirkpatrick's move into mining was a common one then and later. One of the great myths of popular labour history is that occupations were stable and held for life. On the contrary many people changed jobs and did so often. This meant that experience of union organization could be carried over. The role of the 'young and daft' also always seems to be significant. As we shall see the 1911 Strike in South Shields coincided with a massive strike at Harton Colliery begun by the putters – the young men – over a personal issue. In 1911 not only had North East maritime capital become globalised but so had the labour force in complex ways across the English -speaking world.

*The Seaman's Union and the Shipping Federation*

Havelock Wilson had been a member of the Australian Seaman's Union prior to his return to Sunderland and seems to have been motivated in establishing the UK union by that experience. The first version of the Union established in 1887 – 'The National Amalgamated Sailors' and Firemen's Union' – had some initial success in strikes in a range of UK ports but in 1890 the Shipping Federation was founded to confront both it and the newly organized dockers in the aftermath of the 1889 London Dock Strike.

The Union fought and lost a range of defensive actions in the early 1890s, often having recourse to expensive and unsuccessful legal action. In 1893 it went into voluntary liquidation in order to avoid bankruptcy and was refounded in 1894 as the National Sailors' and Firemen's Union. It struggled throughout the early years of the new century but by 1910 was in a stronger position in terms of membership. That said it was by no means dominant even in all UK ports. For example in Hull there was an autonomous and separate local union and union membership was patchy across the UK. However, the North East coast in general and South Shields in particular, seems to have been very well organised with high union membership. Local variation extended beyond union membership. There were different rates of pay for seamen shipping out of different ports. Hull and South Wales seem to have had pay rates 10-20% lower than those prevailing for men signing on in North East coast ports which reflected both relative union strength and a history of north east economic militancy. It also probably reflected the availability of well- paid colliery employment because most of the North East ports were also colliery towns.

The whole industrial climate of Northern Europe at this point

was one of hard confrontation between capital and labour. In 1908 Anton Nilson, then a twenty one year old building worker, later a prominent Swedish communist, had bombed the Amalthea which had been sent as a depot ship for English strike breakers being used to break a dock strike in Malmo and this had been organized by the UK Shipping Federation. <sup>(5)</sup> The Malmo strike was defeated but the general mood of antagonism to capital was evident.

The Shipping Federation itself was not representative of all UK shipping interests. In 1911 it was dominated by the tramp firms and most liner firms did not join until the 1920s. However, it was plainly an organized and powerful body with European connections. It is worth noting that Runciman senior in his autobiography <sup>(6)</sup> considers that shipping firms were coerced into the Shipping Federation by the Protection and Indemnity Associations – long established mutual insurance clubs – which required membership of the Federation as a condition of membership of PI schemes. It seems that the large liner companies simply insured directly outside this system. The Federation had successfully reduced seamen's wages by 10s in different ports across the UK so to a degree the strike was an attempt to recover lost ground.

Wilson and the interesting figure of Father Hopkins played a key role in organizing a countervailing Europe wide 'International Committee of Seafarer's Unions' <sup>(7)</sup> which was to coordinate action in 1911 across the UK, Germany, Belgium, Holland, Denmark, Norway and Sweden. This organization seems to have been extremely effective in eliminating the sort of international European strikebreaking that had occurred in Malmo three years earlier. Hence the significance of the shipowners' threat and subsequent efforts, to import Chinese labour. This seems odd in



view of the unpopularity of the use of non-union indentured Chinese labour in the South African gold mines which had been a significant factor in the massive Liberal election victory of 1906. In effect the shipowners were lining up national imperialist ideology against themselves.

Although Hopkins is described on the website of the religious community he founded as ‘helping to settle’ the 1911 strike, it is plain that this radical Christian socialist figure played a large part in organizing and initiating it although as a ‘moderate’ and respectable figure he also brokered the final settlement in the North East . He had been port chaplain in Calcutta and had helped to organize the UK and US unions in that port. Again like Wilson’s role as café proprietor, Hopkins’ as a port chaplain meant that he was available ashore on a constant basis to organize the union and keep its structure intact. He seems to have been widely liked by seamen, whether religious or not, despite his ‘sky pilot’ role. It is worth remembering that in the early years of the twentieth century, religion had a much more salient role in popular consciousness, even in the UK, than is the case today and Hopkins’ religious status was a considerable asset (8).

Both Hopkins and Wilson were natural ‘conciliators’ in terms of their objectives for the UK union and the international association. They actively sought corporatist solutions to the conflict between marine labour and marine capital and key demands in the strike were for the establishment of a conciliation mechanism. The frequent recourse of the NUSF to legal process demonstrated this kind of orientation and after the First World War the NUS was to become in effect the company union of the Shipping Federation, a status it retained until, again under North East leadership, rank and

file seamen took it back in 1966 <sup>(9)</sup>. However, in 1911 there was definite and radical conflict.

*Before, During and After the Strike*

It is perhaps worth noting that the summer of 1911 was particularly hot in terms of weather as well as politics with temperatures reaching 100 degrees Fahrenheit by August. Locally the first episode I can identify in relation to the strike was a meeting on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1911 when Madame Sorgue – la citoyenne Sorgue – a prominent French anarcho-syndicalist of aristocratic origin, addressed a meeting in South Shields market place declaring the support of the French working class for the UK seamen <sup>(10)</sup>. Interestingly other speakers made great play on the employment of Chinese on British ships. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of May the Gazette reported that there had been a violent confrontation associated with the signing on of Chinese seamen in Barry. Indeed throughout the strike the South Wales ports were to be the main locale of anti-Chinese agitation and violence. On the 18<sup>th</sup> of May Father Hopkins was reported as presenting the demands of the International Committee of Seafarer's Unions to the International Shipping Federation (Ltd) which seems to have been founded as a pan-European employers' organization in 1909. The demands were for a Conciliation Board to be established and for a 10 shillings per month increase in wages or proportionate increase for petty officers across all grades of seamen. This would mean a wage for £5-10-0 for an Able Seaman. Other contemporary stories show that at this time a qualified male teacher's initial salary was about £7 a month with £5-18-0 paid to a female teacher. To set things in context Harold Nicholson notes that at this time Winston Churchill, the Home Secretary, was spending £80 per year on 'finely woven pink silk underwear'. <sup>(11)</sup> Other demands were for a manning scale for

each department of a vessel i.e. for a guaranteed number of hands to do the work according to the vessel's size, for the abolition of medical examination by Shipping Federation appointed doctors, for the abolition of engagement of men in the Shipping Federation offices, for the right of men to have some wages when in port during a voyage, for the right of men to have a union representative present when signing on, for hours of labour and overtime rates to be fixed, and for improved forecandle accommodation.

On the 31<sup>st</sup> of May Wilson returned to South Shields from Droitwich Spa where he had been recuperating and launched at attack on the shipowners, declaring that: 'The workman's one common enemy was the capitalist who was grinding labour down.' He also referred derisively to the Federation's threat to bring 2,000 Chinese from Liverpool to striking ports, declaring that he knew Liverpool and there were not 200 let alone 2,000 Chinese strike breakers to be located in that place. On the 1<sup>st</sup> of June Walter Runciman made a speech at the launching of his new vessel. Referring to the threatened strike he said:

'... there is no danger today of an important strike taking place among the seamen. And why is that? Because the seamen have no real grievances: and if they had I should be one of the first – seeing that I sprang from a seafaring stock, and I am always proud to acknowledge that I still retain that kindly feeling to the class from which I sprang, to meet them on the subject of such grievances.'

The Gazette's leader of the same day echoed these sentiments that: 'no more foolish course in the interests of the bona fide seamen of this country could possibly be adopted than that which is threatened by the representatives of the Sailors and Firemen's

Union, of declaring a general strike on some unspecified day in the near future.’

The leader argued that whilst a Conciliation Board was acceptable, one on which the workers’ representatives were elected by the workers was not. It also asserted that: ‘Foreign seamen are indeed much more likely, judging from experience, to hasten over to take the places of any British seamen who go on strike rather than to furnish funds for their maintenance.’ The leader writer also considered that there would be a breach between weekly coastal seamen and the foreign going monthly paid men with the former being much less likely to support the strike. This reflected the more regular employment of the weekly men and by implication the greater likelihood that they would have family responsibilities. Subsequent comment referred to the likelihood that the strike had been called to correspond with the Coronation Naval Review so that naval reservists would be otherwise occupied and there would be a shortage of seamen.

The strike began on the 14<sup>th</sup> of June with the White Star and American Lines at Southampton conceding the wage demands on the 16<sup>th</sup> of June in order to ensure the sailing of the ‘Olympic’ on her maiden voyage. However, the line’s manager asserted that others of the company’s vessels would be laid up on arrival in their home port. In South Shields the Union had attempted to organize a sports camp and carnival but this seems to have been something of a fiasco with very few paying spectators for the events and a disgruntled ice cream vendor being refunded his admission charge. From the very beginning of the strike there seem to have been vessels which paid the wages demanded in order to get to sea although on the 17<sup>th</sup> of June four weekly firemen were brought before the Magistrates’ court on the charge of having deserted their

ship after signing articles and refusing to go aboard again unless paid 35s a week – an increase of 5s. Two of the men were identified as natives of Malta, one was local and one was a Hamburg German. All four men were compulsorily returned to their ship. One of the magistrates was a member of the Shipping Federation and Union representatives protested vigorously at this conflict of interests. On the same day the men held at Hull by the Shipping Federation on the depot ship ‘Sperer’ as strike breakers demanded to be set ashore and joined the strike. At about this point in the dispute the Shipping Federation started to introduce its own ‘ticket’ as an alternative to union tickets.

By the 19<sup>th</sup> of June more owners had conceded the pay rises demanded including the Tyne Tees Shipping Company which had conceded a rise from 31s6d per week to 35s per week. Generally ships were getting away with the wage rise conceded, but the other demands were not in play. On the same day 1,000 Tyne dockers, prop handlers (pit prop handlers), and boatmen went on strike on the Tyne for increased pay. Likewise Harton colliery struck because one of the putters was underpaid by £1 and 2,000 miners went on strike. Wilson spoke at South Shields market identifying the town as the centre of the strike but noting that it was operating in ports throughout the UK and across Europe. He commented on the legal limitations put on seamen like the four men sent back to their ship and asserted this made them ‘chattel slaves’ unlike the pitmen who could strike at will. Wilson was able to announce that the German, Danish and Norwegian owners had conceded the wage demands and that the respective unions had promised to strike if blacklegs were allowed to ship foreign owned vessels from their ports.

By the 20<sup>th</sup> of June the autonomous Hull Marine Seamen and Firemen’s Union was threatening to join the strike, there had been

a fight between police and strikers in Glasgow, and in Liverpool the Cooks and Stewards Union had joined the strike. In Cardiff a British seaman and two Germans were accused of attempting to murder Chinese sailors and Chinese were being shipped from Liverpool to Glasgow and West Hartlepool. The latter group were shipped on the steamer 'Harpalyce' at £3-10s per month. There were increasing numbers of dockers striking including those at Southampton and Glasgow. On the 21<sup>st</sup> of June things had 'hotted up' in Hull which was to be one of the most confrontational locales of the strike. Strike breakers fired from the 'Lady Brooke' as the ship was sailing and hit a picket in the abdomen as he tried to prevent it leaving. Subsequently the third engineer of the 'Lady Brooke' was charged with grievous bodily harm in relation to this episode. His defence was that he had only fired into the air to scare off the strikers. I have been unable to find the final result of his case.

Reports indicated that the strike was gaining ground in Holland. The first concessions on wages had been made on Wearside. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> reports indicated that a number of scabs recruited for the depot ship at Leith were general labourers from Perth who had never been to sea and had not been informed that they were being recruited as strike breakers. The strike had extended to Dublin. At Shields one load of scabs had been put on a ship, probably Runciman's 'Aviemoor'. Another had sailed crewed by second mates acting as ABs and being paid £2 per week. 2,000 dockers had struck at Goole. It was revealed that the Federation had the depot ship 'Largo' at Jarrow Slake but as in Leith the men on it were not seamen having been brought in from the Midlands and Leeds.

By the 26<sup>th</sup> of June Hull was closed down and the Hull railwaymen had pledged their support to the seamen and dockers.

There was more anti Chinese rioting in Cardiff. By the 27<sup>th</sup> of June the *Gazette* was describing the situation in Hull as ‘grave’ and 500 dockers had struck at Sunderland. Cathery, the Union’s general secretary, indicated that the weekly boats had almost all conceded the new rates of pay either in cash or by offering to pay for food. On the 28<sup>th</sup> 10,000 Liverpool dockers struck. By the 29<sup>th</sup> the strike was plainly biting hard and a shipowners’ conference held at the Great Eastern Hotel in London was condemning picketing and at the same time moving towards conceding a wage increase. The last two weekly boat firms on Tyneside conceded increased wages and at Hartlepool dockers struck. The police charged strikers in Hull who were attempting to get workers at Reckitt’s factory to come out. It seems that Hull was close to a general strike. More rioting occurred during that evening and night with a running fight between 300 police and strikers. On the 30<sup>th</sup> more strike breakers had arrived on the Tyne from the West Country but the tugboatmen had resolved not to continue carrying them to and from the depot ship. The Grimsby dockers struck.

By the 1<sup>st</sup> of July the North East shipowners indicated that they were prepared to concede £5 for the monthly boats and 32s8d for the weekly boats. 500 Metropolitan police had been dispatched by special train to Hull – for those of us who remember 1984, plus ca change! Wilson rejected the North East offer and asserted that those making it were the same owners who employed Chinese blacklegs in their vessels despite the fact that: ‘we have a Liberal government in office which was elected on the distinct understanding that they would clear the Chinese out of South Africa and what is good enough for that country is thought by some shipowners to be good enough for our shores.’ By the 4<sup>th</sup> of July settlements had been made at Hull and Goole, Liverpool, Grimsby and Belfast.

A key factor was the abandonment of the Federation ticket as compulsory and 500 were burnt in a demonstration at Hull, but the wages settlements there seem low at £4-10s for sailors, £4-15s for firemen and 32s6d for weekly seamen. This was an improvement on previously low Hull rates but simply brought Hull up to the North East coast rates prevalent before the strike. The dockers also received a rise of 1/2d per hour. Tyneside was still holding out for £5-10s per month.

On the 7<sup>th</sup> July two seamen in their thirties were charged with breaking the windows of the Mill Dam offices of the Shipping Federation in South Shields. . The Irishman was described by the police constable who arrested them as wholly sober whereas the Scot was somewhat inebriated. Both men were fined 50s or in default sentenced to two months imprisonment. On the same day a Shipping Federation official was summoned for enlisting seamen in Leeds, although not licensed by the Board of Trade to do so. 73 men had been recruited of whom only 6 had been to sea before. One Hull seaman was among them and laid information as to the case. The case seems to have been abandoned on the subsequent settlement of the strike.

On the 8<sup>th</sup> of July a settlement was achieved locally at Manchester and Salford. The estimated cost of the extra policing and stationing of troops there was £10,000 which suggests that there had been serious disorder but it was not reported in the Shields Gazette. The ILP sponsored a support meeting for the seamen at Newcastle

An important development on the 11<sup>th</sup> of July was the establishment of a subsidy scale by the Shipping Federation for laid up tonnage. That is to say ship owners received a payment for ships



they took out of active service. The intention behind this was plainly stated by the Federation in their public statements as reported in the press. They wanted to lay up enough tonnage to provide 'a substantial increase in the number of unemployed seamen' i.e. they were attempting to create a labour reserve to weaken union power. On the same date the Hull boat 'Argo' which regularly traded to Shields was obliged to pay the now general North East coast rate for weekly seamen and not the Hull rate despite being registered in the latter port.

On the 12<sup>th</sup> of July the separate Cooks and Stewards Union joined the strike demanding payments of £7-10s for Stewards, £6-10s for Cooks and £3 for Mess Stewards. On the 13<sup>th</sup> the North of England Steamship Owners Federation passed a resolution moved by Runciman rejecting recognition of the NUSF on the grounds that it was not a registered union. On the 14<sup>th</sup> a scab bosun who signed on for £6 per month instead of £6.10s was cornered by strikers in Sunderland and chased through the streets escaping through the back door of a shipping company office. On the 15<sup>th</sup> blacklegs trying to cross to North Shields were put to flight by strikers at South Shields Ferry landing and their belongings destroyed. Such destruction was a common tactic of strikers, especially against the Chinese in South Wales. Eight men got off the Federation depot ship at Jarrow Slack into a Union launch and joined the Union. Three crews signed on at Newcastle at the owners' rate of £5 per month and Grayson, the South Shields Union Secretary, addressing a meeting on Newcastle Quay asserted that: 'The men of Newcastle were a disgrace to the Port'. Another interesting development was that a meeting of shippers, primarily coal shippers, at Newcastle passed a resolution vigorously opposing the Shipping Federation's tactic of laying up laden ships. There was

now a falling out between shipping capitalists and their capitalist customers. The strike developed at Antwerp and there was serious disorder in that port.

On Monday 17<sup>th</sup> July, Johnson of the Social Democratic Federation presided at a mass meeting of seamen at South Shields addressed by Havelock Wilson. Wilson reiterated the Union's demands and his remarks on the issue of medical examination are worth quoting: '... the medical examination had been carried to such an extent that the men were really debased and robbed of their manhood.' On Tuesday 18<sup>th</sup> July Father Hopkins arrived at South Shields from Hull and was chaired through the streets by seamen. His arrival was to prove significant. On Thursday July 20<sup>th</sup> Cardiff was in an insurrectionary condition. There was a general strike in the port area, rioters seized barrels of stout and drank them and hurled frozen carcasses of beef at the police. The town was running short of provisions and Metropolitan police had been moved to Cardiff and accommodated in the American Skating Rink. 'Captain' Tupper <sup>(12)</sup> the Cardiff NUSF agent was arrested and charged with intimidation but released on £400 bail. Crucially Hopkins addressed a mass meeting in the Central Hall in South Shields where the strikers accepted a resolution to reduce their wage demand if the other conditions were met.

On Friday 21<sup>st</sup> July Cardiff saw sustained anti-Chinese rioting which included attacks on all the town's Chinese laundries. The South Wales ship owners began local negotiations as to wages and conditions. The North of England branch of the Shipping Federation accepted Havelock Wilson's earlier offer to allow them to examine the books of the union to establish its bona fide status and agreed that if they were satisfied with them they would

recognize the union. On Monday 24<sup>th</sup> of July, John Wilson a former miner and Liberal MP addressing the Durham Miners' gala urged the men not to strike in support of what was now a massive strike and lockout in South Wales with 80,000 men laid off. The Cardiff negotiations failed. At Liverpool the Mercantile Mariners' Service Association, one of the predecessors of NUMAST as an officers' union, demanded an increase in pay for officers since many of the local settlements for bosuns and carpenters meant that petty officers were now being paid more than junior officers.

By Thursday 27<sup>th</sup> July the North East coast and hence the national strike of seamen was moving towards a conclusion. The North East Federation had begun negotiations with Father Hopkins and was moving towards abandonment of the Federation ticket and wages of £5 for monthly seamen and 32s8d for weekly seamen – although higher wages had been obtained during the dispute. There was also a concession that men could choose to have a medical examination by their own doctor, but at their own expense. Cardiff owners had conceded recognition. These terms were confirmed on Saturday July 29<sup>th</sup> with the addition of recognition of the Union and a mutual agreement that there should be no victimization. The *Gazette* leader of the 27<sup>th</sup> had commented that: 'the best guarantee for peace is the existence of sound organizations on both sides.' On the same day 100 Chinese at Cardiff applied to join the Union but were refused entry. By Monday 31<sup>st</sup> July the seamen's strike as such was over and 140 men signed on under the new terms at South Shields. Hopkins was widely quoted as praising the moderation of the North East coast men and the restraint of the local police.

*Themes Emerging From the Material*

Historians will have to accept that I approach this material as a sociologist and allow me to develop themes from it in a sociological fashion. It seems to me that there are four of interest viz. the 'orderly' character of the dispute on the North East coast which was its epicentre and strongest base in contrast with disorder and semi-insurrection in other ports, particularly Cardiff, Hull, Glasgow and Liverpool; the successful pan Northern European organization of the dispute; the significance of anti-Chinese agitation again primarily outside the North East for the longer term future of international global union organization; and the significance of masculinity for the participants.

The 'orderly character' of the North Eastern strike clearly derived from the influence of Wilson himself over many years in terms of insisting upon respectability and organization and from the proto corporatist instincts of much of North Eastern capital. Spence Watson, a figure worth serious attention by historians, had developed a role in arbitration in mining which seemed to exemplify the approach of an increasingly organized and corporatist capitalist class. The *Gazette* leader calling for organized labour and organized capital reflected that. Disorder in the North East was sporadic, low key, largely directed at scabs and did not involve attacks on property. The relative absence of Chinese strike breakers may also have been important. Although the dispute did spread to dock workers again this was in terms of solidaristic support coupled with some sensible opportunism in relation to their own wage demands as opposed to any kind of insurrectionary syndicalism. The North East miners were not involved at all. The Harton strike was a typical piece of local libertarianism not connected to the main dispute at all. Above all else the North East lacked a downtrodden

and excluded marginalized proletariat. Tramp ship seamen were not Liverpool packet rats but a group with much stronger connections to the system that employed them.

In contrast in Liverpool and Glasgow there was a large marginalized maritime proletariat, perhaps more in the docks than among seafarers. The North East coast coal teamers and trimmers had a virtually guild form of organization which spilled over to the pit wood humpers and ordinary dockers. The less coherent the working class organization, the greater the potential for disorganized insurrection. In Cardiff Tupper was plainly a demagogue in a way Wilson was not in the North East and the Chinese issue was much more salient.

Of the successful pan-European organization the main thing to say is that it plainly derived in part from Wilson's sensible tactic of recruiting foreign seamen in British ships who carried trade union practices into their own national merchant fleets, and that it disintegrated under the nationalist impulses of the First World War particularly in the light of the unrestricted German submarine attacks on merchant shipping..

The Chinese issue is interesting. This was not simple racism since black 'British Empire' seamen, largely West African and particularly Barbadian West Indians, were admitted to the Union. It had much to do both with contemporary concern with the 'yellow peril' of opium smoking white slavers who massively outnumbered the 'European' race. Perhaps the most interesting single fact is the relatively small gap between Chinese and British wage rates – about 15-20% - in contrast with the massive gap that exists in contemporary globalised capitalism. The failure to admit

the Chinese to the Union in Cardiff at the end of the strike, which reflected local prejudices and Tupper's line, was a disastrous mistake in the long run. Previously Wilson had resisted US Union demands to exclude 'coloured men' from seamen's unions and indeed the racist practices of the NUS in the inter-war years only began after his death – he was much more an imperialist than a racist – but the principle of exclusion had been established.

I find the masculinity theme particularly interesting. These were seamen and the forced medical examination was a challenge to their male role. It seems to have echoes of forced examination of women who were suspected of prostitution. The asserted objective of the owners was to exclude consumptives from the crowded conditions of forecastles and this may well have been justified but the men seem to have perceived it as related to sexually transmissible diseases and wanted to be dealt with by their own doctors and not inspected like stock. The version of solidaristic masculinity that underpinned the strike seems to have a lot in common with Australian 'mateship' which is not surprising given the historical context and global reach of many of the participants. This is another theme worthy of further examination.

#### *A Note on Method*

This article is based on a restricted set of sources, primarily the day to day reporting in the *Shields Gazette and Shipping Telegraph*. It would be interesting to run through other press reports and the Lloyds List, for the same period. Although the method was largely dictated by availability and access, it serves to demonstrate how the dispute proceeded in different ways in different places at a time when news had to be disseminated to people in print and/or at mass meetings. The other advantage of reading through the

local press is that other things are also reported – sports meetings, divorce cases – lots on those, criminal cases, catholic conferences, and so on. Plainly on Tyneside although the dispute was important it was also simply a part of everyday life. In more insurrectionary locales, things may well have been seen and reported differently.

### Notes

- (1) The usual merchant navy term for what most people would call stokers. The full term was fireman / trimmer to indicate the role in moving bunker coals in the stokeholds.
- (2) Small shopkeepers, publicans and skilled workers in the early and mid nineteenth century were quite likely to own 64ths. The system was a risk spreading mechanism.
- (3) Knott's biography asserts that he qualified as a barrister which is possible and as a Master Mariner which seems impossible given that he was not a seaman. He did however in later years own a yacht with a hold for his Rolls Royce.
- (4) This was the man who was later to tell Jarrow to work out its own destiny.
- (5) Yngve Tidman, *Spräng Amalthea! Arbete, facklig kamp och strejkbryteri i nordvästeuropeiska hamnar 1870-1914* (Lund University Press, Sweden, 1998) [Sink the "Amalthea!" work, union struggle and strike-breaking in Northwest European and Scandinavian ports in 1870-1914.
- (6) Sir Walter Runciman : *Before the Mast and After* ( London: Fisher Unwin 1924)
- (7) This was UK centred and extended across Northern but not Southern Europe.
- (8) Runciman and several other shipowners were active and prominent Methodists and made much of this religious base.
- (9) There is an urgent need for an oral history of this dispute.
- (10) She had been gaoled in France for action in support of the French dockers.

- (11) J. Nicholson: *The Perfect Summer* ( London: John Murray 2006)
- (12) One website asserts that Tupper's family went on to found the Tupperware company but I have no further evidence for this and it may even be a joke.



## **Ouseburn in 1900-industry, labour and community**

### ***Mike Greatbatch***

*Today the Lower Ouseburn is being promoted as a leading example of culture based regeneration. Artist workshops, galleries, a centre for children's books and literature, and a riding centre now define an area once scarred by derelict land, scrap yards and a polluted river. Hardly anyone lives in the Ouseburn but lots of people like to visit. In 1900 the exact opposite was the reality. Dominated by a limited number of large scale heavy process industries, the area was thick with smoke and fumes as lead, glass, earthenware and iron works belched forth the sulphurous bye-products of coal-fired furnaces and boilers. Beneath this cloud of smoke there toiled a community dependent on an economy that created plenty of labouring and other unskilled or semi-skilled wage paying labour. This Paper describes the industries and the nature of labour in the Ouseburn in 1900, and offers an insight into some of the hazards that accompanied life in this crowded corner of Newcastle's industrial heartland.*

"It was a murky October night in Newcastle. The small, close rain was driving everyone indoors who was not obliged to be out, and making the others loth to loiter. From Ouseburn Bridge the scene would have justified the severe remarks that have been made

as to Newcastle's lurid appearance and filthy atmosphere. The gas lamps were few and dim, but they were scarcely needed, as the place was alternately glaring and dark from the fires of a huge forge close to the bridge, which flared up and were reflected in the dirty burn sufficiently often to light the few passers on their way" (1).

Ouseburn Bridge connects Cut Bank to Byker Bank and the 'huge forge' referred to in this December 1899 description belonged to the iron foundry of Spencer & Sons. Spencer's produced steel and iron forgings for Tyneside shipyards and by 1900 were specialising in the production of crank shafts for marine engines. The forge was bought by Spencer & Sons in 1889/90 and by 1900 was operating both day and night to satisfy orders. As many as 400 to 500 men and boys may have worked at the works in 1900, whose wage rates ranged from 20/- a night for forge-men to 4/- a night for the 'poor lad'. Day rates were 16/- and 3/6 respectively (2).

Spencer's foundry was one of a number of large industrial units operating in the Lower Ouseburn in 1900. They were concentrated either side of the Ouseburn between Byker Bridge (built in 1878) and the confluence with the River Tyne. This lower stretch of the Ouseburn is tidal, being flooded by the River Tyne at high tide, thereby making the freshwater burn navigable by river craft such as keels and wherries.

In the 1880s, Charlton describes how "keels may be seen lying and delivering coal into carts" above Ouseburn Bridge but by then these are more likely to have been the ubiquitous wherry (3). The wherry became the workhorse of the Tyne river tributaries, its shallow draft being ideal for navigating the silted channels of the

Ouseburn and similar streams that flowed into the Tyne. A number of images survive of these craft in action, two of the best showing wherries moored at Foundry Lane and Lime Street in 1899, with Spencer's forge prominent in the foreground, and coal being discharged just as Charlton described a decade and a half earlier.



Wherries, Lime St, Ouseburn

### *Wherries*

The men and boys who operated these craft called themselves watermen, a rather all embracing term for a job that required great skill and judgement. Powered almost entirely by the force of the tide as it flooded or emptied the Ouseburn, these men navigated up and down this narrow and winding channel, with its mud banks, foul water drains, and other hazards, whenever the tide allowed. Their wooden wherries would be piled high with sand, coal, clay, flint, iron bars or sheets of lead, all susceptible to shifting, or heavy

finished items like crates of earthenware, steel castings, anchors, barrels of paint or sacks of flour. Theirs was a skilled job, and one that was vital to the economic prosperity of the area.

A drawing from the early 1900s shows a waterman using a pole to navigate his wherry out of the Ouseburn. The backdrop features the Ship Tavern, whose publican Percival Bagnall is listed as a wherryman in the 1901 census <sup>(4)</sup>. Wherryman appear to have actually owned or shared ownership of the craft, whilst watermen were generally the labourers who provided the muscle for handling the cargo. Given that this was dangerous work requiring good judgement and knowledge of tides, channels and mud-banks, there may well have been much sharing of tasks and expertise whilst the wherry was at work. Whatever the relationship, employment on the wherries relied on tide and trade, so secondary employment as a publican or barman was good insurance against lean times.

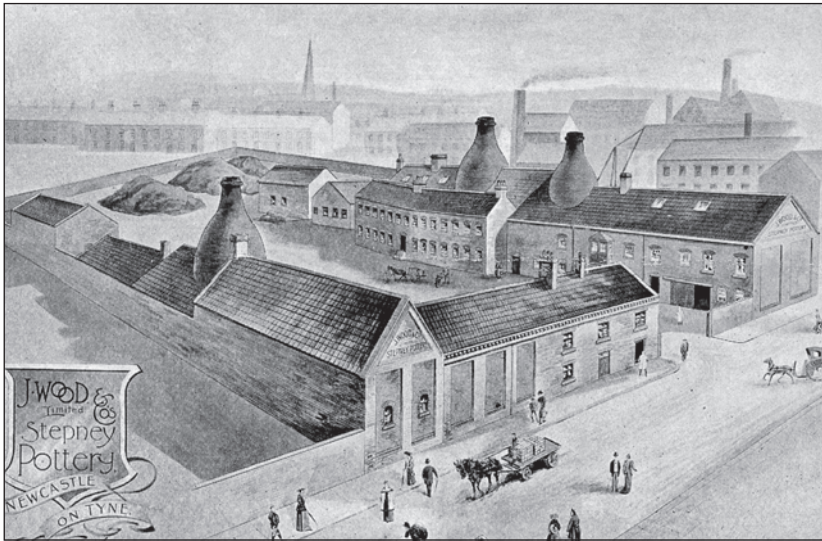
The process of 'removing sand and erecting walls' along the Ouseburn began in earnest in the early 1800s as industrial entrepreneurs engaged in trades that processed large quantities of raw materials sought a location that offered ease of access by coastal craft <sup>(5)</sup>. These included James, Hind & Co's white lead works (1801) and Robert Maling's Ouseburn Bridge Pottery of 1815.

The manufacture of white lead and earthenware were still important Ouseburn trades by 1900, as was the milling of grain and the manufacture of glass bottles. These trades had dominated the area since the early 1800s and before <sup>(6)</sup> but by 1900 the industrial base of the Ouseburn was more varied.

<b>Ouseburn 1900 – Major Employers (7)</b>			
Firm	Date Established	Products	No of Employees
J Spencer & Sons, Ouseburn Forge	1889/90	Steel and iron forgings.	400 to 500
C T Maling, Ford Pottery	1859 (Ford Street) & 1879 (Walker Road)	Earthenware, including dinner, tea and toilet ware, enamel ware, sanitary ware, jars for the meat, confectionary and druggists trades. For both domestic and export markets.	520 (both sites)
John Wood, Stepney Pottery	1874 (formerly Messrs Dalton & Burn, Stepney Bank)	Brown earthenware, gas refectors, lamp tops, white and printed dinner ware. For both domestic and export markets.	70
Messrs Proctor & Sons, Northumberland Mills	1866	2,000 sacks of flour per week.	50
Thomas Stokoe, Canvas & Sail Cloth Works	1839	Sailcloth, tarpauling, canvas covers, sail and roping twine.	80 to 90
R & F Harrison, Tanners	c1830	Hides, skins and leather products	n/a
James & Co Ltd, Lead Manufacturers	1801	White and red lead. Paint and pigments.	66
Liddle, Henzel & Co Ltd, Glass Works	1880	Glass bottles and jars	n/a

In addition to C T Maling and John Wood, other Ouseburn earthenware manufacturers in 1900 included Wallace & Co (Foundry

Lane) and Burnside Bros on Lime Street. Examination of the 1894 ordnance survey <sup>(8)</sup> reveals that these were small scale concerns, the Lime Street premises in particular. Wallace & Co seem to be occupying the former Phoenix Pottery site, one of the few that produced tableware. Over fifty earthenware manufacturers have been identified as active in the Lower Ouseburn in the 120 years up to 1900, producing every conceivable item from flower pots to teapots, pipes and sanitary ware <sup>(9)</sup>. By 1900 the trade had largely been reduced to just two major concerns, occupying huge sites where every stage of production could be concentrated <sup>(10)</sup>.



Wood's Pottery Advert

Significantly, these large pottery and earthenware establishments were noted for providing better quality jobs. The longevity of the trade in the area had created a workforce that had acquired plenty of expertise, and the scale of production, with its various sub-departments, had created opportunities for supervisory grades

whom the employers relied on for day-to-day production and quality control. Another important consideration is the opportunities Maling's and Wood's created for female employment. No evidence survives for J Wood & Co but we know that Maling's certainly employed younger women whose dexterity was increasingly important for production of the better quality tableware <sup>(11)</sup>.

Two other trades provided opportunities for female wage earners, the sailcloth trade and the white lead trade, the latter being amongst the most dangerous work in the Ouseburn.

Thomas Stokoe's sailcloth works on Lime Street had been in operation since 1839 and during the 1870s it was significantly enlarged and modernised by new owners <sup>(12)</sup>. Despite the increased use of steam powered vessels, many commodities including timber and grain continued to be carried by sailing ships. In addition to sail cloth, Stokoe's works also produced cloth for the tarpauling and water-proof covers demanded by ship builders, engineers, agriculture and the railways. The Lime Street premises included weaving sheds, warehouses, bleaching grounds and offices. They also produced the twine required by sail makers <sup>(13)</sup>.

In the 1840s this trade had attracted weavers from Lancashire and by 1900 Lime Street and the bottom of Stepney Bank still had numerous households whose members describe themselves as sailcloth weavers, cotton spinners, machine yarn winder, canvas worker, cover workers, and a 'bleacher in weaving factory'. Significantly, many of these are women, and where they are wives and daughters this would have brought a valuable second income to a household in which the menfolk are labourers or similar unskilled <sup>(14)</sup>.

The white lead trade was represented in the Ouseburn by two firms, James & Co dating from 1801, and Ismay's Northumberland Lead Works established in 1871. By 1900 these two were operating as one firm, James & Co Limited, having amalgamated in 1884. Production was concentrated on the former Ismay works site at the bottom end of Ouseburn Road, at the foot of Stepney Bank (15). White and red lead was used to make pigments for the paint industry, and their production involved a process that changed very little since its introduction in the late 1780s. This was the Dutch Stack method of corroding sheets of lead by placing them upon a bed of earthenware pots containing concentrated acetic acid, one stack of pots and lead upon another, up to twelve layers high. Insulated by leather and often packed with manure to encourage fermentation, the acid evaporated and turned the lead into a blue paste. Whilst unpleasant, this stage of the process was not as injurious to health as the next stage, known as the 'white bed', wherein the lead paste was dried in large ovens to create a white carbonate that could then be ground into a fine powder for mixing with oil to form the finished pigment (16).



Most of those who had the job of emptying these oven stacks were women. Labour in the white lead works was unskilled manual work, and women were employed because they could do it just as easily as men but be paid less. In areas like Heaton or Gosforth, girls could get work as domestic servants or dressmakers. In Ouseburn, where employment was overwhelmingly unskilled factory work and facing competition from their male



counterparts in a generally buoyant local labour market, working class girls often had little choice but to accept work 'in the white lead', especially if they were lone parents or members of a large family <sup>(17)</sup>.

The conditions under which these women laboured were brought to public attention in local newspaper articles in 1892. Emptying the ovens was especially bad.

"They go in with woollen mufflers over their mouths in addition to their coverings, and as they work the white lead flies and drifts and settles like fine snow, powdering everything. They must handle full 25 tons a day, when they are at this job. This furious exertion, which requires strong lungs and free fresh air, is carried on with the stifling and pitifully futile wad of knitted wool clapped over the mouth, which is open enough in texture to draw any kind of dust through, a thing that would serve as a kettle holder" <sup>(18)</sup>.

In 1891, the 13<sup>th</sup> March edition of *The Evening Chronicle* reported 'Another Lead Poisoning Case in Newcastle'. This was the case of an eighteen year old girl called Elizabeth Dowson whose inquest was held at the Mason's Arms on Cut Bank. She had worked 'off and on' for nine months at the white lead works, and had complained of pains in the head and stomach. She had vomited a green substance and was brought home from work in a fit, "from which she never rallied". It was reported that she took this work because "she could get nothing else to do". She came from a large family and her father earned just 18s per week <sup>(19)</sup>. The works foreman, William Liddle, stated that Elizabeth had been engaged in carrying lead. The jury concluded that she had died of the effects of lead poisoning.

In 1898, the firm of James & Co Ltd had been identified as one of three worst offenders for cases of lead poisoning in the country, having 32 cases out of 66 employees in that year alone <sup>(20)</sup>. Public concern and increased inspection by the Factory Inspectorate would improve conditions during the early 20<sup>th</sup> century but the works itself continued to be a feature at the junction of Ouseburn Road and Stepney Bank until the 1960s.

Harrison's tannery on Stepney Bank was one of a number of animal processing industries based in the Ouseburn at this time. The area was a favoured location for nuisance trades such as tanning, tripe, glue and slaughter houses because the steep sided valley topography provided easy evacuation of liquid waste direct into the burn <sup>(21)</sup>. Harrison's had as many as fifteen open-air tanning pits for treating the animal hides and removing unwanted hair, fat and flesh.

A complaint recorded in the Newcastle Corporation Minutes in January 1890 provides some indication of the smell created by such trades. Alderman Potter complained that he had reported a bad smell and on passing along Byker Bridge one Sunday he noted that this was still so bad "that it almost took away his appetite for dinner". The source of the smell was identified as that created by boiling japan (a source of tannin, from acacia bark), which was boiled in an open pot <sup>(22)</sup>. Following a visit by the Chief Inspector of Nuisances, Harrison's had begun to boil it in a pot with a tight-fitting lid, since when no complaint had been received except that from Alderman Potter <sup>(23)</sup>. Waste bark from the tannery was often dumped on land beneath Stepney Lane, a slope popularly known years later as "the barkies" by local boys and girls who used to slide down it <sup>(24)</sup>.

The quality of the water in the Ouseburn by 1900 had become a major issue of concern for both local employers and the Newcastle Corporation. A new housing estate on land in Sandyford was built in the mid-1890s and in 1896 the Sanitary Committee had instructed Henry Armstrong, the Medical Officer of Health, to report on “the sanitary condition of the Ouseburn between Crawford’s Bridge and the Tyne, and whether it is likely to be injurious to health”.

Crawford’s Bridge stands just below the point at which the Tyne high tide floods the `burn, and Armstrong questioned occupiers of business and other premises along that stretch of river affected by the tide. His report found that “black sludge, which gives off offensive smells notwithstanding the application of lime, is deposited on the bed of the Burn below the Ouseburn Bridge and onward to the river”. Of 34 occupiers of premises near the `burn below Crawford’s Bridge, 24 complained of smells and 10 did not.

Workers at the glass works of Messrs Liddle, Henzel & Co had voiced the most complaint. They worked adjacent to a sewer outfall below Ouseburn Bridge and “here the hands which are at work during the night say that the smell at low water, especially during the warm weather a week or two ago, was very bad indeed” (25).



Liddell Henzell workers

A second report on conditions above Crawford's Bridge recorded that "an outfall of hot liquid flows into the Burn from the Lead Works" and that higher up at the foot of Bryson Terrace "is the outfall of a Tripery, the business of which is apparently brisk, to judge from the mass of soft dirty matter (recently limed and not offensive to smell), which was lying on the stones at this point".

The application of lime might have masked the noxious smells but it didn't remove the source of the nuisance. Armstrong concluded that "the inhalation of sulphuretted hydrogen and other products of decomposing animal waste material lowers the vital powers generally, and is thus injurious to health".

Two years later Armstrong submitted a further report, this time on the prevalence of enteric fever in the Ouseburn, which had been linked to the use of the pail closet system of refuse removal. Pail closets were most commonly installed in tenements and flats, both types of housing being common in the Ouseburn and Byker districts where the outbreak in 1898 was concentrated. Outbreaks of enteric fever were generally associated with water and poor drains but in Ouseburn, "the foulness of which it is indeed strongly suspected to have been originally due", the disease was being spread through infected soil and human waste in the dry pail closets and privies. The most heavily infected area was between the Ouseburn, Byker Bank and Albion Row. Armstrong reported that east of the Ouseburn there had been 87 cases reported but west of the Ouseburn there had only been sixteen (26).

Under existing bye-laws, a landlord could choose to install either water closets or pail closets, and as the latter was less costly, they tended to install the pail closet. The bye-laws specified that one

such privy or closet could be provided for every twelve persons or every four holdings. Thus the law “authorised a condition of things especially favourable to the spread of Enteric Fever”. Armstrong demonstrated that where water closets had been installed the rate of infection was much less, and he now called for an urgent revision of the Tenement Bye-laws to encourage landlords to shoulder their responsibility for the health of the city.

Tenements were a common feature of the Ouseburn in 1900, and would continue to be so until their demolition through slum clearance programmes more than thirty years later. Most tenements appear to have been built for that purpose, whilst others evolved into this form of tenancy through sub-division in later life.

The Mill Yard stood at the very top of what we now call Stepney Bank but in 1900 was called Stepney Street. On the night of the 1901 Census the Mill Yard was occupied by 48 people living in 16 rooms. This tenement officially had nine flats facing onto a common yard with a passage connecting it to the street. Lower down the bank, a similar tenement called the Brown Jug Yard, named after a local earthenware product, was occupied by 61 people living in 27 rooms. This included sixteen children under the age of ten. Another purpose built tenement called Warburtons Buildings stood on a tiny plot of land at the junction of Stepney Bank, Lime Street and Ouseburn Road. In 1901 the census enumerator recorded 28 people occupying 14 rooms (27).

Although photographs of these tenements survive, it is really only when we examine the footprint of these premises on the 1894 ordnance survey that we get some idea of how small the rooms actually were and consequently how crowded these dwellings must

have been. Many were over fifty years old by 1900, often with tiny windows or none at all if you lived on the side that was built into the steep-sided bank of the valley side. Washing and toilet facilities were shared by all occupants in a common yard. None ever had electricity, not even during the 1930s and 1940s.



Warburton's Buildings 1935

Standing on its own close by to Warburtons Buildings was the Mill House, a 4-roomed dwelling occupied by Mrs Carr and her family. In 1901 Elizabeth Carr describes herself as 'caretaker' of the flour mill. Ten years earlier she was recorded as a 'bread sampler and baker' (28).

The Carr family were employed at the giant flour milling complex of Proctor & Sons. Proctor's had moved to the Ouseburn in 1866 to occupy a former flax spinning mill built during 1847-48. In the 1870s they invested heavily in new warehouses and this complex



of buildings survives today as one of the area's most significant architectural features (29). Sometime during 1899-1900, Proctor's seem to step back from the milling business, becoming agents whilst leasing their premises to the firm of Henry Leatham & Sons. Leatham's were from another river Ouse, in York, and it is their name that is associated with the business during the 20th century.

### *Conclusion*

So, what was it like living in the Ouseburn in 1900?

From available archive and pictorial sources the Ouseburn of 1900 seems pretty grim compared to today's standards. Even by contemporary standards, the area was renowned for its poverty of housing, overcrowding and environment. The proposal by Newcastle Corporation in 1900 to culvert the Ouseburn and fill the valley north of Crawford's Bridge would significantly add to the degradation of the local environment, making the area notorious as a tip for public refuse (30).

Nevertheless, newspapers in 1900 record that trade on the Tyne was good, with most areas performing well (31). All indications suggest that employment prospects in the Ouseburn in that year were generally good, even for the most inexperienced and unskilled. The construction of a huge new slaughter-house for the Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society created plenty of new jobs for those who could labour in the building trades, and the excavations associated with the Ouseburn Culvert scheme would shortly create plenty more job opportunities for the area's pool of unskilled labour (32). Only in the prolonged trade slump of 1908-10 do we find evidence for high unemployment and hard times in the Ouseburn.



Since 1998, the Ouseburn Heritage Project has interviewed a number of former Ouseburn residents and we are fortunate that this included two who were born not long after 1900. George Hill, born 1906, told me in 1999 about wherries coming “up the burn with silver sand for the glasshouse” who made “bottles and jars the old fashioned way, by blowing glass”. This of course was the bottle works of Liddell, Henzell & Co that didn’t close until the 1930s. George recalled various industries and pubs but his most detailed memories were of the “blacksmiths and the horsey men, different people altogether, they knew what they were doing” (33).

The ‘horsey men’ were the families who worked in the haulage trade, driving the block carts, wagons and chain-horses that worked the Quayside. In 1900 the haulage trade was concentrated in small to medium sized stables north of City Road, around Gibson Street, and the Stepney Bank area of the Ouseburn (34). Elizabeth Joyce, born 1910 in the Mill Yard, had particularly vivid memories of this community as her father, popularly known as Joicey, was well known for his handling of horses and his ability to cure them of ailments.

Describing the Mill Yard, Elizabeth told me how lucky her family was as they had two rooms in their dwelling, a bedroom and a kitchen. Her aunty lived downstairs and as Elizabeth explained, “I think there was a bit of the gypsy in her, but could she play music! She had an old melodian and on a Saturday night she would come out about 8.00 pm, not Sunday night because you went to school on a Monday, she could hear a tune and play anything, it was a gift. She would sit out on a stool in the yard and when tram cars came over Byker Bridge they could see into the yard, could see us all dancing, and they used to get off the tram car and join us”.

The Ouseburn in 1900 and for many years later might have been a place of toil, low wages, and poor environment but as a community it had strong ties shaped through shared hardships and an intimacy derived from crowded living and working conditions. As Elizabeth Joyce recalled when describing life in the Mill Yard before 1914, “we could play in that yard and we were safe. If anyone came who was strange, our mother was out like a shot” (35).

### Notes

1. “In the Lowest Stratum”, *St Ann’s Church Monthly* December 1899, p68. I am grateful to Pauline Allan for drawing this source to my attention.
2. This was the site of the famous Ouseburn Co-operative Works, inspired by the Rev Dr Rutherford between 1871 and 1875. See J F Clarke, *Building Ships on the North East Coast* (Bewick Press 1997) Part 2 pp21-22. Also reports in *The Newcastle Daily Journal* 1872-73. Details of employment and wages are from *Tyneside Industries* (c1890) and a notebook dated 1903 in (T)yne & (W)ear (A)rchives (S)ervice: 1992/1.
3. R J Charlton, *A History of Newcastle-on-Tyne*, (1885), p403.
4. Percival Bagnall and his two sons are recorded as ‘wherry-men’, 1901 *Census* RG 13/4787 Folio 103. The Ship Tavern survives today as ‘The Tyne.com’ public house. The windows give a clue to its former identity.
5. See references in the *Calendar of Common Council Newcastle upon Tyne* for details of permissions granted by the Corporation, who controlled navigation at that time.
6. The glass industry had been a presence just east of the mouth of the Ouseburn since the 1640s, and milling had been present through small scale water-powered mills since the 18<sup>th</sup> century.
7. Details from *Tyneside Industries* (c1890) and *Newcastle Illustrated* (c1900). Neither of these two useful publications is dated but their detailed descriptions of Newcastle firms suggest that they date from this period. Furthermore, *Tyneside Industries* tells us that the Ouseburn Forge “have

lately been acquired by Messrs Jno Spencer & Son Limited”, which we know was 1889/90. Details for James & Co from directories and D J Rowe, *Lead Manufacturing in Britain, A History* (Croom Helm,1983).

8. Second Edition, surveyed 1894 and published 1896. For Newcastle and Gateshead we are very fortunate in having a 1:500 scale edition. This is a really useful aid to visualising the Ouseburn at this time, especially when used together with contemporary photographs of the area.
9. I am grateful to John Kelly for having shared the result of a comprehensive survey of trade directories and other sources.
10. Wood’s Pottery on Stepney Bank occupied 3,500 square yards, whilst Maling’s Ford A Pottery on Ford Street occupied an even larger site that included 3-storey high warehouses. *Tyneside Industries* (c1890).
11. S Moore and C Ross, *Maling. The Trademark of Excellence* (Tyne & Wear Museums, 2<sup>nd</sup> Revision 1987), pp15-16. The fact that Maling’s provided a school for the children of their workforce may have less to do with philanthropy and more to do with securing the long term loyalty of semi-skilled labour in a competitive market.
12. Stokoe was the brother-in-law of the original founder, a Mr Egglestone, and didn’t become owner until 1851. Thomas Stokoe died in 1877 and the business was bought by Edward Stout and Alexander Laing. Laing had been Stokoe’s manager for almost twenty years, whilst Stout had interests in shipping. *Tyneside Industries* (c1890), p151.
13. *Newcastle Illustrated*, (c1900), p116. The tarpauling was done elsewhere, Stokoe’s providing the treated cloth. Customers for their cloth and canvas included Armstrong’s and Palmer’s shipyards.
14. 1901 Census. RG 13/47/87 Folio 25-29 and RG 13/4788 Folio 63.
15. The old James & Co site was closed and sold to Newcastle Corporation in 1905.
16. When the former Ismay site was excavated in 2002, various sizes of millstone grinding wheels were discovered, their grooves still containing brilliant white lead deposits. These stones have been cleaned and can

be seen today on the Ouseburn Farm site together with a sign for the Northumberland Lead Works. The terracotta pots for holding the acetic acid were found in great quantities throughout the site. These are likely to have been made locally by one of the earthenware manufactories; some years earlier at least one local firm was advertising these as a product.

17. My friend Alfred Brown, who grew-up in the shadow of this lead paint works, would talk about his various female relatives who had 'worked in the white lead'. See D J Rowe, *Lead Manufacturing in Britain* (Croom Helm, 1983) for details of the trade and employment conditions.
18. See article by Vaughan Nash in the *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 15<sup>th</sup> & 21<sup>st</sup> December 1892.
19. The Dowson family were living at 47 Cut Bank on the night of the 1891 Census. William Dowson and his eldest son George were employed as 'iron yard labourers'. Elizabeth would have been the oldest of six children. I am grateful to Philip Thirkell for this and other Census references.
20. Quoted in D J Rowe, *Lead Manufacturing in Britain*, pg226.
21. When the Newcastle upon Tyne Co-Operative Society Ltd proposed building a brand new slaughter house at the bottom of Stepney Bank in 1899 they specifically cited this as an advantage of the site. In his letter to the City Council, their Secretary, W J Howat, highlighted that "the drainage will be close to the outfall with steep gradients and in this respect the conditions of the site are exceptionally favourable". He adds that "it is intended to have an ample water supply for flushing and cleansing purposes". TWAS: T186/18809. This slaughter house was a major feature of the Ouseburn for more than 50 years after it opened in 1902.
22. Frederic Harris and Robert Postlethwaite, living in the Brown Jug Yard on Stepney Bank in 1901, describe themselves as a 'leather japonner'. 1901 Census. RG 13/4788 Folio 64-65.
23. Newcastle Corporation Minutes January 8<sup>th</sup> 1890.
24. The late Alfred Brown of Ouseburn Road told me how his mother had a fit after one particular slide because his trousers were stained a deep red-

brown colour that she couldn't wash out.

25. Armstrong's report is dated 11<sup>th</sup> May. Interestingly, the night shift workers at Liddell, Henzell & Co included women who complained that the smell caused nausea and vomiting. Reports of the Medical Officer of Health, Newcastle upon Tyne, *Newcastle Corporation Minutes* 1894-98.
26. 'Enteric Fever, in Byker and Ouseburn District', 21<sup>st</sup> October 1898, in Reports of the Medical Officer of Health, Newcastle upon Tyne, *Newcastle Corporation Minutes* 1894-98.
27. *1901 Census*. RG 13/4787 Folio 29, RG 13/4788 Folio 61-65.
28. *1901 Census*. RG 13/4787 Folio 29.
29. The original flax mill was designed by John Dobson and is now a co-operative of artists called 36 Lime Street. The 1870s period warehouses now house the Cluny bar and Seven Stories (Centre for the Children's Book).
30. Speech by Councillor Thomas Cairns, 19<sup>th</sup> September 1900. *Newcastle Corporation Minutes* 1900.
31. *Newcastle Daily Chronicle* 1900.
32. The Co-Operative Slaughterhouse would occupy a huge site at the corner of Stepney Bank and Lime Street. Built almost entirely of brick, it included killing shops, offices and a boot and shoe works. The 1901 Census for Lime Street records numerous men and boys giving their current occupation as bricklayer, bricklayer's labourer, or builder's labourer. *1901 Census*. RG 13/4787 Folio 25-29.
33. *Ouseburn Heritage Issue 6* (The Ouseburn Partnership, 2001)
34. The story of the 'horsey men' of Ouseburn is a paper in itself and cannot be told in detail here.
35. *Ouseburn Heritage Issue 4* (The Ouseburn Partnership, 1999)

## **Celebrating an Historic Birthday- Eric Hobsbawm at 90** *Willie Thompson*

Eric Hobsbawm was born in the year of the Russian Revolution and has continued to the year of his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday to produce outstanding historical work. To list his writings – or even his principal ones – would be impossible in the short space of this note, but he is best known for the series of four volumes covering world history from *The Age of Revolution 1789–1848* to *Age of Extremes 1914-1991*.

In the 1940s and 1950s he was part of the Communist Party Historians' Group along with renowned contemporaries such as Christopher Hill, Edward Thompson, Victor Kiernan, John Saville and others. Unlike many of the others he remained in the Party after the upheaval of 1956 though ceasing to take part in its activities. These events are recounted in his autobiography *Interesting Times*, published in 2002. He is currently Honorary President of the Socialist History Society.

The North East Labour History Society takes this opportunity to congratulate him on his 90<sup>th</sup> birthday and wish him many more productive years.

**The Edward Allen Memorial Lecture 2007**

*Joan Allen*

**Pressing for Reform Tyneside Chartism 1837-1867**

*Report by Win Stokes*

Dr Joan Allen started her lecture from the premise that nineteenth century Tyneside Radicalism remained a powerful force in local politics primarily because of the sophistication of a print culture sustained by successive generations of radical owners and editors.

During the eighteenth century Newcastle had been unique among provincial towns in supporting three newspapers which served not only the town itself but also the surrounding region and in a commercial centre with a relatively high rate of literacy, had a wide readership across the social spectrum..

While the different newspapers reflected varying shades of political opinion, from 1810 onwards the *Newcastle Chronicle* was associated with the cause of reform. In the run up to the 1832 Reform Act the unstamped press became more aggressively

reformist and when the call for reform was resumed in 1837 with the setting up of the Northern Political Union, publicising the cause once again became a major priority of the local press.

Dr Allen stressed the remarkable impact that the *Northern Liberator* founded in Newcastle that same year had on north east Chartism and the skills of its editorial team in serving not only the cause of political reform but all the needs of its readership. Within a year it had a circulation of 4000 copies a week

In the hands of its committed journalists, owners and editors it helped coordinate Chartist demonstrations and meetings, attacking capitalism and the new Poor Law while avoiding prosecution through satirical treatment of serious issues in the manner of a magazine.

Dr Allen argued that the paper was central to the revolutionary character that Tyneside Chartism assumed in 1839 and that with its suppression at the end of 1840 much of the local strength of that aspect of the movement drained away.

This did not mean that Tyneside radicalism was dead .In fact in the years immediately following 1848 Newcastle was one of the few places where new Chartists continued to be enrolled and the rallying cry of radical forces in the 1850s and 60s was ‘the Charter and something more’ This was the point at which the radicalism of Joseph Cowen with his background of contact with European revolutionary movements and his home base in Chartist Winlaton began to emerge in print. Dr Allen used her research on Cowen to good effect to demonstrate how Cowen had financed magazines and contributed to existing papers to keep the issues of



parliamentary and social reform in the public eye at a time when much press coverage was being devoted to events overseas.

On 2 January 1858 in the Chartist Hall in Nun Street Cowen launched the Northern Reform Union whose monthly journal the *Northern Reform Record* was designed to inform Tyneside workers about the aims of the Union and the political issues that affected their daily lives. The Union lobbied MPs, collected signatures for a monster petition in favour of electoral reform, and exposed the corruption endemic in 'open' elections. In Dr Allen's opinion the significance of this relatively modest publication in sustaining Radicalism on Tyneside has been underestimated.

But with the advent of popular journalism following the repeal of the Stamp Duty Cowen soon recognised that he needed an organ with wider appeal and acquired both the weekly and daily *Newcastle Chronicle* turning them into powerful political weapons in the service of radical ideas. It was the *Chronicle* that linked the Irish cause to that of the working class vote, which coordinated the massive pro reform demonstration held on Tyneside early in 1867 and ensured that the miners, denied the vote initially because of their non ratepaying status eventually joined the electorate to bring in one of the first two working men MPs at the 1874 election.

Dr Allen concluded that in the North East 'Without a sophisticated print culture, and the entrepreneurial activities of key local individuals the reform cause may well have been a lost cause.'

## ORAL HISTORY

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### Bernard Newbold



*Bernard Newbold spent all his working life in the coal mines first as a face worker then in various engineering jobs principally on dust detection and control. He started work just after the war in Lancashire coming to the north east in the early sixties. Bernard has always held strong left wing views partly, he says, 'inherited' from his father a CPer who was for many years Secretary of the Manchester and Salford*

*Trades Council. Bernard served for some time as a North Tyneside councillor but has been very disillusioned by the performance of the Blair government. You can read a full version of this piece on the web-site: [www.nelh.net](http://www.nelh.net)*

#### *The start*

I told my mother what I had done, [gone down the pit] . She went daft. She was born in South Wales, in Cardiff. This is where I was born, and, of course, mining then was a dangerous occupation in the valleys, explosions and all that sort of thing. Now, if my Dad had been home I don't know what would have happened but

he'd gone on a trip to Poland to supervise the Polish elections as a member of the TUC. While he was there he fell in an ice ruck and broke his leg, went into the hospital. Then he had the flu so he was away that period. So there was no comment from him. I've thought afterwards that it was a pity the TUC didn't organise the same sort of supervision for the last two American elections. That would have been very worth while.

At first I went for training at Oak Colliery, Oldham. I might as well have gone to Woolworths for all the good it was. We didn't really learn anything. The blokes there said we'd do some bricking but they'd got no cement or anything but they were smashing mortar off bricks on old board and wetting it. That was the state of affairs. I'll never forget Oak Colliery. It was 12 o'clock one day we were going down. We were sat at the top waiting for the cage. The cage came up and there was the hell of a rattle. Slates off the roof, lying everywhere. What had happened is the cage had reached the surface and fouled something. The rope had come off. The cage went down the pit and the rope had taken slates everywhere. That was the end of that shift. I felt this is one hell of an industry I've come into. I went into it because the coal industry had been nationalised in 1947. I'd been in an office before then.

So I started work at Bradford Colliery. It was a unique pit with two shafts both 3000 feet deep. That's one hell of a depth when you think of Northumberland with its 600 and 800ft. I know because I measured one of the shafts with a 100 foot steel tape, twice. The first time we were told to measure it because they were going to drive a horizon tunnel from our colliery to the next one at Ashton under Lyme, They wanted to make sure that they met. So I went down on a Friday night, when there was no production going on,

strapped to the top of the cage in a safety harness with a steel tape and another chap with a gong for up and down. He took the measurements as I shouted them out...900 feet, 998 ft and so on. All the way down the shaft were buntings, wooden struts where they could hang the pipes for pumping. Every so often a nail was already in this for measuring. We spent 4 hours going up the shaft like that and then went into the surveyor's office and reported that it was 10 feet out on the shaft sinkers. So the manager said, go back again and so we did. We went back again and got the same result – shaft sinkers were ten foot out.

The shafts were very deep but they were quite close together on surface. Someone had said what if there's an air raid and the Germans dropped a bomb between these two shafts? The blokes would be trapped underneath. So they built a strong room, a sort of cavern affair. It had steel doors on it. They filled it with water and tins of corned beef, anything they could find that would last. It was inspected every few weeks for mildew etc. They came to a point one day when they opened the doors, unlocked it and it had all gone, except the water. What had happened, you'd never believe this, but the miners had gone round the back and tunnelled in and removed all the edibles. You could say the management lived and learned. That wasn't repeated.

It was an amazing colliery. Anything that could go wrong, went wrong. There were two shafts. One of them had a cage for about 20 blokes per day and went down at the hell of a speed. The other had a steel bucket which held about 6 blokes with a sort of wish-bone thing over the top of it. The big cage went down at a hell of a lick. When we had a new bloke starting in the lab we took him down and when he got to the bottom he said it was just like when

he was in the parachute corps. We dropped like a stone. You would catch your breath.

The bucket that was horrendous. Because it had a spider on the top to stop it from weaving about. Sometimes the blokes were too lazy to put it on and then it would swing a bit. All the way down the Parker shaft there were landings from old workings and theoretically you were supposed to count them as you went but if you were busy talking and you forgot where you were, must be the next stop and you were zooming down. You'd think this is the end. I used to have nightmares years after I left Bradford Colliery. They came to a stage when the inspectorate came along and told the management to get a cage on this so they did for 8 blokes or 10 blokes.

Bradford colliery was called the coal factory because they recruited from the town. There were no other shafts or pits there. They went to the Labour Exchange and said send us 8 blokes, 10 blokes, 20 blokes, from any industry. We had all sorts of people were working there. People you would never dream would go down a coal mine. They didn't stay long. The only people you could really depend on for knowledge were several of the South Wales miners from coal fields there and quite a few from Geordie land. I didn't know where Geordie land was then, but they used to call one bloke Geordie Bell. They were the people who had the knowledge you required.

Going underground I started off first of all on haulage underground, tubs and everything, and then doing some sort of surveying where you put lines up for the roadways driven to follow the coal. It was done by having two strings that a surveyor might have set and then behind in the distance a bloke with a pit lamp

with a light saying ok, that way, that way. When it was ok you'd mark on the last ring and then put another string down to set you off forward again. That was what I was doing for a long while.

From that I went to the coal face, filling coal, and that in itself was a bit horrific but I managed all right but the pit was so hot. You used to go in to pit and if it was cold weather out you'd take your heavy coat off and hang it up. Then through the doors where it got warmer you'd take a bit more off. Then you'd go down on a man train 500 or 600 feet or so. There most blokes would gather on the top roadway but some would have gone down to the bottom roadway. We all sat there as you needed to get acclimatised for the heat. I used to get prickly heat like they do in the dessert. The temperature was about 90 degrees odd depending on the ventilation. All I had on was a helmet, a belt with my lamp on, no socks, shoes, no laces. The reason was that after working a while the boots filled up with sweat and when it got too much you emptied your boots. Those were the sort of conditions. It was a cruel period. They didn't look after the men at all. We were on a 6 day week when I started and we had seven days paid holiday a year. That was it and very often when you were working overtime you hardly saw daylight.

It was awful work. Reportable accidents were if you were off work for a week. In the Lancashire coal field at that time there were 1 in 4 workmen who had been off for that period. Twenty five percent would be off with something; mainly a hurt back or ripped open. My turn came about four years after I started. I was working on the face and somebody said we'd better get a bar under it. I was just getting a bar in over my head when the roof came in and buried me. It all came down, took the skin off me. It braised me and cut my back. The chap at the other end of the bar was a bit better

because I took the brunt of it, with my back towards the coal face. If I'd been at the face I think I'd have been dead. I was off straight away to the first aid room. The bloke said I'll take you to the baths and sponge you down carefully'. When he saw the damage he said 'I can't patch that up all I can do is get a roll of lint, paste it and roll it round you'.

*Pablo Picasso in Sheffield*

He said get right off home now to the doctors or hospital. But I wasn't going anywhere except Sheffield. There was a bus ride to a peace movement rally with Pablo Picasso speaking. I wasn't going to miss this so that day suffering from this injury and soreness I went to Sheffield to listen to Pablo Picasso. He was speaking in Spanish but it was just the fact that he was there. During the break where they collected money he did a sketch of a dove, signed it and they auctioned it and it went for £15. Fancy, a Picasso for £15!

Fortunately in 1951, the last big year I had there, I fell foul of the management and they took me off the coal face to punish me and put me on a loading point where coal came through. I had to push tubs trough. Then they must have felt sorry for me so they gave me another job, driving this roadway through broken ground. It's where there'd been a coal face but now they wanted a tunnel and so you had to be very careful. You needed plenty of timber at the top to support what roof there was. The beauty of that was I was earning something like £24 a week. My dad was earning £5 10shillings as a trade union organiser. I met blokes later who in 1952/3 were only earning about £6 a week.

That year I had a week in Paris and three weeks in Germany and went to the youth festival and even two weeks farming. The

government paid your train fare and gave you 2s and 6 pence an hour for farming. 'The open air for me! That was the situation then and often blokes would disappear for long periods. This bloke came in months and months after and he'd been boozing in Manchester and caught the first train to Stockport which was the Cardiff train. He fell asleep. When he woke up he realised what he had done and jumped out of the train. After walking some distance he came across a caravan. He wrenched open the door and a woman asked 'what do you want.' He said I'm lost and I thought it was empty and I might spend the night. He spent the night and stayed for 26 months.

So I went to the world youth festival in Berlin. We set off from Manchester, went through London and were put up by a Jewish family until we got the bus to Dover and the ferry to Dunkirk. At Dunkirk we were to board a Polish liner to take us to Gdynia because the West had decided to stop us so we had to go round, catch a train from Gdynia to Berlin. The French port authorities had decided not to let the ship in due to the blockade but the French miners threatened to strike so they let it in. It was a wonderful fortnight with teams from all over Eastern Europe, entertainers and singers. They brought in a grand piano and the leg fell off. The thing was it allowed me to meet representatives from the mining industry world wide. I spoke to the Minister of Mines. We were invited to Embassies for parties.. At the Chinese Embassy they asked me to go to China for two weeks to talk about my experiences in the mines in Britain.

The journey home was long, a hell of a journey. When we set out from Berlin they gave us food parcels, German sausages and salami. They were throwing these parcels to workmen but after



three days they'd have eaten the workmen. They didn't realise the journey. That was more or less the last adventure I had in the mining industry. When I came back I had to phone the colliery and give them a good excuse. They said they knew where I'd been. The whole pit was talking about it. Start back Monday.

*Right wingers in the pits*

Just after the war we had a terrific influx of displaced persons. That's what they were called. They had a special place a hostel in Leigh. They were ex army. They were all a bit funny. Some had SS tattoos or something like. They had been in the German army: Ukranians, Poles, Czechs. fighting against the Russians. The first thing they did when the iron curtain came down was run like hell. They had fought against the Red Army. They had slogans written underground, 'we're coming back' and things like that. They were awful people and some went to the scientific department. They were called the intellectuals. One of them, Ken Potch let slip that during the war he had been driving a car in Germany. He was a Latvian so what he was doing driving a car in Germany. They went to the colliery management and said 'that Bernard Newbold is a communist. Get rid of him'. I found this out from some of the officials. I know what might have happened. With the manager at that time, Mr Goddard, I had many debates about communism and socialism. What is this 'everything I've got I share with you?' That's right, what if I had a pig? Hang on, I've got a pig. My Dad was the secretary of the Manchester and Stockport Trades Council and would appear at anything anti-nuclear. His name was always in the paper and Mr Goddard would say 'I see your Dad has been at it again.' I think he thought that if he did anything the repercussions outside the pit would be embarrassing to him.

Soon I went to Wigan mining college to train as an engineer but it was really somebody to look after the colliery and all its mechanics, electrics and haulage. Things that Beamish would be proud of now. We could draw a diagram of a Lancashire boiler, the flue system, the rivets and the dead weight safety valve. When it came to mining practice the only thing we had in the Wigan area was a publication called the 'Art and Science of Mining' which was supposed to teach you how to work. One wonderful thing about the Mining College was that they had a brilliant bloke who taught geology, called Dr Billingham. He lived and breathed all the things you expect to see underground, fossils etc. he told you all the names and showed diagrams.

In a way you learnt more at the colliery. There were some men who taught you what to do, where not to go, to watch this, to watch that. It was all what you needed to keep you safe underground, to look after yourself.

### *Scientific department*

I wanted to get into the coal board scientific department. One day I was taking out my bait, or slap as we called it, from the Sunblest wrapper and saw an advert on the paper wrapping. 'Wanted by Coal Board Scientific Department someone interested in mining or mining qualification to carry out research into dust and dust suppression'. I got the job so I left the pit and took all my dirty clothes out of the stinking bath. You can imagine sweating all day, hanging them up to dry all night. You could have made soup out of the stench.

On the Monday I walked up the drive to a beautiful house that had been converted to a laboratory. This was Shade House. What a

change that was. A car was provided to go round the collieries only talking to managers and engineers. You would go to managers and saying we need to do such and such a thing. Can you do it without affecting production, was the reply. I think so. I travelled quite a lot. I think I got more in expenses than wages. My area started off in Burnley, and went down to Manchester, the Wigan coalfield and into North Wales, part of round Wrexham. First of all I had to get the rudiments of what we were doing; dust suppression and dust measurement. The surprising thing was that the Coal Board had everything about measuring dust. It was first class which had been taken from the South Africans. I think the reason was that they were able to do research we couldn't. If a bloke got killed underground they could take the lungs and wash them out and examine them to find out the dangerous things that went in, particles of dust and they could classify between silicon and coal dust and that's where we learnt a lot.

They also had very sophisticated instruments and equipment to measure dust, one called a thermal precipitator. It was a block of brass with holes to put cover slips in. The wire was heated up and anything that came down with the hot wire was always surrounded by a dust free space. It threw the dust particles onto the slips which were collected, taken to the lab where they were mounted on slides and the dust particles counted under a microscope. You could tell how much dust and coal rock was getting to them and it was on this basis that the coal board started their work on dust suppression. Unless you can measure dust you can't tell how much you are reducing it by. One time my boss, the dust suppression scientist, asked me to go to a certain colliery because the drilling engineer had invented something to draw air from the drill machine into something full of water that should suppress the dust collected.

We did this and we sampled it and brought the results back. We told him that without this equipment there was a certain level of dust and with it was twice as much. What it did as it sucked the air in it pushed the dust out in little puffs. The first thing he said was scrap this, you'll have to alter the figures. Anyway that was just an incident. That was our game.

One thing I had to do at this time was to go round various collieries. I had a note from Coal Board headquarters the collieries saying that this is Bernard Newbold. Give him a cap lamp and he will tell you when he goes underground. Let him go where he wants to go. This worked in the North West but I had to go in Wales. I had to go underground and see where the deputy's cabin was. He'd ask what do you want, boyo. I want to go to such and such a face. No problem Just wait and then there would be a stream of welsh and a wait. When you went in everything was near perfect. All were sprays on. I used to say it was a waste of time but was told if that's what the Coalboard ask you to do from London, then do it.

One shift I'll never forget. I got there about 5.30 one morning, changed and went down to the pit. Got into the cage. All blokes were packed like sardines and they were talking in welsh. They must have been talking about a welsh male voice choir practice. As the cage went down they started singing a beautiful welsh hymn or something. It was like a Hollywood film and the tears were rolling down my face. I'll never forget that episode. Fortunately we were all bunched together and all black. There in the North Wales coalfields I found the blokes were terrific. They would talk to you. Aren't you the man who's staying in Mrs Evans house? You'd set off walking to the pit and everyone would talk to you. They didn't know that I was Welsh.

I didn't realise how much I had picked up when I left the north west coal fields and came up to the north east and worked in the scientific department. Sometimes I had to go to Edinburgh to a lab there to have a discussion about such and such a thing. I said I wanted to go early as I wanted to go to the American consul to get a visa to go to the States. I set off on the train and was on my way to Edinburgh. I went through a tunnel where work was going on. I was amazed at what I saw. I thought these people don't know what they are doing. They were taking away the bottom of the wall because what they were heightening the tunnel due to EEC regulations to get bigger wagons through. They had taken the floor away and taken quite long stretches from underneath the wall. Any mining engineer would know not only do you have a weight down but you have side pressures too. When I got to the lab in Costorphine I told my boss that I was frightened for them. He said why don't you tell then and I said who am I to tell civil engineers what they are doing. I think it was a month or so afterwards that the tunnel collapsed and two or three people couldn't get out and they made it consecrated ground rather than go to the expense of digging them out. Then they immediately got land around that hill and laid a new track. That's what finished it. Before that I suppose they ran buses or something to the next station. That was the only time I felt like a mining engineer proper. Everything else was mechanics and electrics.

A lot was based on the part of the Coal Mines Acts which dealt with what to touch and what not to touch. Underground there was no demarcation between crafts. If the power went off for some reason fitters would undo the box and sort it out. Electricians would do fitting work. When the Coal Board had a big experiment

at the steelworks in Middlesbrough I had to supervise the fact that they were using Durham coal for their process because they said that Polish coal was gassing far easier and made far more solid coke for the steel in the foundry. One day we were there and a steel guard came off the side of a belt and they stopped the belt. I said, we'll put it back. They said, we're not touching that. They got on the phone to somebody who sent someone in a taxi to get a fitter at home to put this guard back. You could understand it because it is part of trade union history. They were leaned on so many times they had to stand up for their rights. It was the difference between the Coal board and British Steel.

At British Steel I had such an experience. The chap I was with who was looking after me asked if I would like to see smelting. They are going to run some iron off. So we went up onto a gantry where they were tapping the seam and channels to run some iron out and stood there for a while. Suddenly a figure loomed over me about twice the size of John Wayne and asked what I was doing here. He's a chap from the Coal Board come to see what coal we are using in the furnace. He said, I don't want him watching all this. I disappeared quickly. Just looking wasn't allowed. I was a stranger. That was it.

### *Strikes*

There was a strike caused by management persecuting a man called Michael Quinn for taking home a piece of coal. He was a giant of a man who could carry girders on his shoulder, a job that would take three men, one at each end and one in the middle. Coal Board property! For ex I went into the pit stores one day to get some pit boots. This was worse than trying to get money out of the accountant. All the stuff in the stores was the storeman's, not

yours. You went to get boots size 9. Haven't got any, haven't got any size 9. That was the first thing. So you asked how's your lad doing in the team at so and so. He's doing well, scored a goal last week. Wait a minute. Then he disappeared and returned with a pair of size 9s. This went on all over the coalfields. It seemed to be a regulation in the mines that nothing should be allowed out of the stores.

When I was stood there, in the corner of the stores, was a piece of coal, huge, wrapped in empty cement bags with detonator wire wrapped round it. First I thought it was like a piece for an exhibition in Lewis's in Manchester where they have a piece of coal and the walls revolving round it to make you think you were going down. It had a note attached to it saying taken from Michael Quinn at a 53 bus stop. Only he could have done that. The reason for that was that the North Western area was the only coalfield where you didn't get free coal. You paid for every bit you got. So when you went down you took the biggest bait box, you cut a piece of coal to fit, and by the end of the week you had 5 or 6 bits of coal. I think it was criminal to charge him with that, thinking of the product of the thousands of tons a day. To accuse a man of taking a 58lb. lump of it.

Soon after this episode was over the inspectors came to deal with the bucket affair. They said a that the bucket must be replaced by a cage controlled by a rolling gantry. Poor Michael Quinn was getting into the new cage when he hit his head on it and he fell about 200 feet and landed blancmange style at the bottom. When that happened the inspectorate came back and said the gantry had to be linked to the cage and a signal installed to tell people not to move the cage. Always after things happened they came up with elaborate explanations. They said they were keeping that shaft as it was as it

was going to be a coping shaft with hoppers of coal instead of tubs. At that time they weren't prepared to put a proper cage on. They were sorry later because in the other shaft, the big deep one, some rubbish and cloths with oil had caught fire. The bloke scarpered quickly and the flames reached the rope which caught fire and the cage went down 3000 feet to the bottom which made a hell of a mess. The other shaft only wound about 10 blokes up at a time and there were about 1000 blokes down so they wound one lot up, sent down tea, coffee and sandwiches. It was about 24 hours before they got the last ones out.. Michael Quinn's death brought about safer conditions. Everything happened at Bradford Colliery.

One day the manager came along and said, 'I want this all organising so no one has to touch anything in this engine house. When they come up it switches off and you can unhook the tubs and the empties ready to go down. He had it fitted out and the day comes to try it out. One of the workers was going to the engine house. No this is all got to be automatic. So when they came up it didn't switch off. The tubs came up, the engine burst into flames and there was molten copper everywhere and the district was stopped for weeks while they sorted it out.

I remember a strike in the fifties led by Jim Hammond who was the agent and representative of the Lancashire miners and a communist. He was sent to Wigan area, his area. for a big meeting and was told by Joe Gormley (Lancashire NUM leader) to end the strike and go back to work so we could talk about it. At the big meeting he was like something out of Shakespeare. He made a speech where he told the blokes to stay out but it sounded as if they had to go back. It was brilliant. They stayed out and got the concession that they could have free coal but pay for it Bradford



Colliery was more like a fun house than a colliery. The first week after the strike I went to the office to get my tax rebate and I got my full wages. I queried it but was told think of the strike we could have had. By then I was working for the surveyors so I got full pay. That was the big one in the North West. We won that.

The next one was 1974 where the miners came out for more money. Ted Heath said if you call a strike I'll call an election. Joe Gormley said we mustn't do that. The NUM Executive said we're not out for a new government, we're out to get more wages. And they stayed out. The result of that was Ted Heath lost the election, we got a rise and a new government. A very successful strike!

The great strike of 1984-5 was traumatic. It started off as an overtime ban. That overtime ban lasted a while then there was a strike proper. What ruined it was the deputies and overmen wouldn't come out which enabled the pits to tick over. In the other strike, the one that toppled Ted Heath, they came out on strike. When Arthur Scargill called everybody out it was different. Margaret Thatcher said no matter what it costs you are not going to win. The people working for the Coal Board, next in line to management, BACAM, (British Union of Colliery Management), were called to do a lot of work underground. Fortunately mine was quite good. I was in the workshops testing stuff going underground for safety. Non destructive testing, magnetic testing of steel for no cracks, that sort of thing.

I was sent to Murton Colliery checking self rescuers. These came in due to an incident in the Nottinghamshire coalfields where there was a fire in a belt and the blokes were all sat on the travelling car to get out and the carbon monoxide came and killed them all.

The Coal Board invested in everybody carrying a self rescuer filled with hauxalite to change the carbon monoxide to carbon dioxide. These were red hot and the blokes didn't like them and tried to dispense with them but the lesson was if you didn't use them you died. My job was to check them in the lab.

One morning there was a crowd of hundreds and hundreds of blokes round the pit. It was the morning that Macgregor, the new chief of the Coal Board, had decided to put buses on to take blokes across the picket line. They were waiting for these buses. So I asked where the branch chair or secretary was. I went and explained who I was and offered to disappear but he said no. Go ahead. It's your job that's fine. There are some blokes working underground, allowed to do this for safety sake. We're stopping that but we're letting them finish the shift. So they get a full day's pay. Some blokes are capping the rope every so often by the mining regulations. The rope attached to the cage had to be cut so many fathoms off it, threaded through, white metal poured in so it doesn't come out; We're letting them finish that. It would be stupid to leave half done, they'd have to start again, I wish someone had filmed this to show how sensible they were. With all the anti-miner propaganda. They wanted to keep the pit going for the future. That was that.

I was in every colliery in North East and Durham checking dust. Suddenly dust was taken off the scientific department and given to the management so I went onto two things. One was soil mechanics. I went on a special committee in London discussing and testing colliery spoils. They had no idea what the spoil heaps were, sandstone, mudstone, siltstone, all mixed together. They had no idea what they did but that it was very unstable material. After that I went into metallurgy and went into a team looking at breakages of

chain at the coal face, anything in metals breaking down. Anything like that. It was a cruel industry. One day I got a call in the lab. I've got a hammer here. Could you examine it for me? A piece flew off and hit a bloke. Any hurry? No. Was the bloke hurt? Well he lost an eye. How cruel. No hurry!

*Transcribed by Val Duncan*

## APPRECIATIONS

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### **Celebrating a generation of activists** *Frank Graham*



Frank Graham (centre) leading the parade of  
International Brigade Survivors in 1939

Frank Graham, who died in a Newcastle nursing home aged 93 on April 30<sup>th</sup> 2006, was an International Brigade soldier who later

became one of the most successful local publishers in Britain since the Second World War.

Francis Moore Graham was born in Sunderland in 1913, one of five children. His father worked in a draper's shop. Academically gifted, he won scholarships to the Bede Grammar School in Sunderland and then to King's College at the University of London. His course – Classics – did not prove to his taste and neither did the College. He spent more time in lectures at the LSE and became active in the student politics of the early 1930s. He threw himself into anti-fascist work, including the famous fight during Oswald Mosley's rally at the Olympia in London, and through this he joined the Communist Party.

Money pressures forced Frank to abandon his course and he returned to Sunderland, by then a town devastated by unemployment. He was active in the National Unemployed Workers Movement in the town and helped to organise local contingents for the 1934 and 1936 NUWM Hunger Marches to London. A police report to the Special Branch on the 1936 March described him as 'one worth watching'. He was always scathing about the more famous but 'non-political' Jarrow March in the same year.

At the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War Frank was instrumental in organising volunteers from Sunderland to join the British Battalion of the International Brigade. Around twenty Sunderland men served but Frank and three of his comrades from the local NUWM were the first of them to arrive in Spain at Christmas 1936. Frank fought through the ferocious battle of Jarama in January and February 1937, and in the trench warfare that followed, when British and Irish volunteers played a crucial role in preventing the fascists

under General Franco from seizing the main route to Madrid and achieving an early victory. But the casualties were enormous and Frank was deeply affected by the deaths in action of two of his close friends from Sunderland. He helped to bring one of their bodies back, in darkness, from outside the fascist lines. In April Frank toured England to speak at meetings of the various campaigns to support the Spanish Republic. He returned to the Brigade and took part in the battle of Brunete and the fighting around Villanueva de la Canada. By this time he was attached to the Brigade staff and acted as a reconnaissance officer, often on horseback, for British commanders Fred Copeman and Jock Cunningham.

He was seriously wounded at the battle of Caspe in March 1938. After leaving hospital Frank contributed to Republican radio broadcasts in Barcelona until he contracted typhoid; Sam Russell, a fellow Brigader and a journalist, negotiated his repatriation through a hostile British Embassy towards the end of 1938. On return to Britain he was a speaker at the commemorative rally for the North East of England International Brigade volunteers at Newcastle City Hall, which was attended by over 2,000 people.

The wounds Frank had received in Spain rendered him unfit for further military service and he spent the Second World War in manual jobs, including a spell as a Co-op milkman, on Teeside, where he also worked for the Communist Party. In 1945 he trained as a teacher and then taught for 15 years at Wharrier Street School in Newcastle.

Frank realised how little had been published on the history of the north east of England since the Victorian and Edwardian periods when he was teaching evening classes for the WEA. To

fill this gap for his class he researched and published a pamphlet on the history of Lindisfarne on the Northumberland coast. *Holy Island* appeared in 1958 and sold nearly 3,000 copies in 18 months. Frank realised that there was a market in the region for scholarly but popular and accessible accounts of local history and culture. Thus began Frank Graham the publishing firm, and this, capitalised by a shrewdly-run sideline in antiques and old prints, became his full time business between the 1960s and his retirement.

The first books were on the castles, battles and town histories of the area along with a number on the social and military history of Hadrian's Wall. But the range was always noted for its breadth, and it included railway studies and 17 books on coalmining and the history of the mining trades unions. They included the *Banner Book* and Ray Challinor's *The Lancashire and Cheshire Miners*. Another useful addition to local studies was the various *Miscellanies* he produced on social and political themes.

His publication of *Larn Yersel Geordie* by Scott Dobson was controversial. Some felt it just made a joke out of local dialect and culture. But it was also an extraordinary success: the first run of 3,000 copies sold out in 48 hours and a total of 81,000 copies was sold in the first year. Such successes made a number of solid achievements financially possible. These included republishing Victorian collections of northeast songs (some with new introductions by Dave Harker), thus preserving invaluable records of local traditions as well as unique social history resources. The unique contemporary illustrations in Thomas Hair's *Sketches of the Coal Mines in Northumberland and Durham* (1844), and the facsimiles of engravings by Thomas Bewick are other examples. Frank kept works by local writers Sid Chaplin and Jack Common in print, and

published the first studies of Thomas Spence. Other publications included two accounts of his own experiences in Spain and a re-print, in 1975, of the official *Book of the XVth International Brigade*, originally published in 1938 while the war was still in progress.

The books and pamphlets were generally illustrated, and to a very high standard, by local photographers and particularly artists such as Ronald and Gill Embleton. The publications received no grants or subsidies and did not take advertising. Wherever possible the printing and binding were also done in the north east - Frank saw no point in producing books promoting the history and culture of the region and then having them printed and bound in the south of England. Further, his pricing policy deliberately put most of them within the budgets of schools, libraries and tourist information offices as well as the general public.

When the firm was sold in 1987 it had published 387 titles (of which 103 were written by Frank himself) with total sales of over three million copies – a British record for local publishing.

Frank was a stalwart member of the International Brigade Memorial Trust and attended their annual commemorative meetings until infirmity prevented him. His views on the internal politics of the Spanish Republic, and on the Soviet Union, remained very much the same as those he had held in the Communist Party as a young man. Like all the surviving International Brigaders Frank felt great satisfaction about the growing interest in the Spanish Civil War in recent years. He was also fortunate enough to attend memorial meetings in Spain after the restoration of democracy and to experience the respect and affection in which the anti-fascist volunteers are held there.



He left Vera, his wife (and former business partner) of sixty-six years, two sons and a number of grandchildren.

*Don Watson*

### **Eric Neilson Walker 1921-2003**

Eric Walker died at the end of 2003. For over fifty years he had been an active member of the Labour Party but his political involvement stretched back to his teenage years in the 1930's when he had stood in the Bigg Market collecting pennies for Basque refugees. His Uncle Leslie devoted a lot of time to finding accommodation for the Basque children who came to Tyneside in



Walter Wilson Doreen Walden and Eric Walker at a Labour party event  
c.1960

1937. Leslie married Carmen Gil, the teacher who brought them from Santander. The Walkers were a family who welcomed refugees and played a large part in helping them to re-settle. This was very urgent in the late thirties. In 1939 Eric's mother befriended a Czech woman fleeing from the Nazi occupation of Prague. The woman, Mrs Dub, later wrote from Quito, Ecuador, thanking her for her help and sadly reporting that 'half a year has passed and my husband has not yet been able to leave Praha.'

Frederick Handel Walker, Eric's father, a veteran of the Great War, was an industrial chemist and an early environmentalist. He caused a considerable stir in 1911 by exposing his employers, the Newcastle and Gateshead Gas Company for tipping chemical waste into the River Tyne at Dunston. Eric remembered him as a free thinker who taught him about Darwin and Huxley and also passed on his enthusiasm for music, especially Beethoven. Both parents supported the Soviet Union. Fred was active in the British-Soviet Cultural Society organising a programme of speakers on Russian music and literature for wartime meetings at the Literary and Philosophical Society in Newcastle.

His mother, Edith Irene Aitkenhead, was a school teacher who shared Fred's socialist sympathies. She became founding secretary of the Tyneside Anglo-Soviet Friendship Society, entertaining delegations, visiting Russia and reporting back to Tynesiders on what she saw as the great experiment. Both parents came from long established Tyneside families. The Walkers had run an ironmongery on Northumberland Street and Eric's grandfather had been Organist at St Nicholas's Cathedral. The Aitkenheads were a North Shields family with strong maritime roots. Irene's father, a merchant navy skipper, died at sea when she was just one year old.

Her brother Thomas, an engineer, went through the Royal Naval ranks retiring as a rear admiral.

It is likely that Fred Walker's war experiences at Gallipoli and on the Somme had pushed him politically to the left for he was active in the Fabian Society and many inter-war campaigns. Both Eric's parents were keen members of the Peoples' Theatre from its very early days as was Eric from his youth. Fred had several times played the Executioner in *St Joan*, once witnessed by its author, George Bernard Shaw. Politics, in the widest sense was always part of his life. Eric remembered an episode in 1931. "I was a great eater. I always cleaned my plate. One day my father hit the roof. Don't make such noise, he exploded and left the room. I thought eating was something which should receive approval. I looked at my mother. She said, he's angry but not with you. I asked who is he angry with. It's a man called Ramsey MacDonald. I became curious, even then."

Eric won a scholarship to the Royal Grammar School where he performed excellently at academic work, rugby and athletics. In 1941 he was offered a place at Cambridge but decided instead to volunteer for military service. He remembered his time at Sandhurst in officer training as a great experience. He said, "not only were you shown how to ride a motor bike but were paid for it too". He was not keen on the corporals who 'set up map reading exercises where the co-ordinates happened to be cafes where they would sit and tick you off for seeking cups of tea when you should have been completing the exercise". After a period in reconnaissance he sought excitement and physical adventure, joining the Royal Armoured Corps. He took part in the Normandy landings in 1944. In 1945 he was posted briefly to training in Norway and then on

a jungle survival course but then in contrast was sent to Palestine although without any briefings on the political situation there. His varied war continued with a transfer to the 6<sup>th</sup> Airborne Division and finally as a training officer for recruits to the Airborne. The Palestine experience was truly formative. He especially balked at the treatment of Arabs, regarding the land settlement as theft. He developed life long support for the Palestinian cause.

When Eric returned to civilian life he decided not to take up his Cambridge place, electing instead to read History at Sheffield. With military service behind him he was a mature student. He was elected President of the Students' Union, busy in the Labour Club and a member of Rugby 1st XV. A letter to his father in 1950 indicates how politics was a preoccupation. The family were supporters of Konni Zilliacus the left wing MP for Gateshead. Though a 'Zillie' sympathiser, Eric disagreed with his support for Tito's 'breakaway' from Moscow on the grounds that though self determination was 'laudable in general', it had a tendency to foster dangerous nationalism especially in a part of the world where strife was endemic.

After teacher training he taught in County Durham. For an ex-officer and vigorous rugby player he had a curious dislike of being in authority. One of nature's democrats, he decided school mastering was not for him. In the early fifties he joined the new Youth Employment Service in Newcastle under the very authoritarian figure of Brenda Calderwood who was given to doing spot checks on her young staffs' appearance and behaviour. He retired in 1982 as Deputy Head of the service.

Meanwhile he had joined the Labour Party. On a journey from

London in army uniform he had bumped into Arthur Blenkinsop the new MP for Newcastle East. Blenkinsop was an old friend of the Walker family from pre-war days in the Peoples' Theatre and the Ramblers' Association. Both of these, and especially the latter, were life long 'homes' for Eric too. He credited Arthur with recruiting him to active politics though it seems unlikely that much persuasion was necessary.

After Sheffield he threw himself into organising. He was too old for the League of Youth and he found his first project in being the effective editor, main writer ('Crispin,' 'Midas', 'Javelin', 'Douvét', etc.) and business manager of Newcastle City Labour Party's monthly newspaper, *The Northern Star*. The paper ran for 35 issues (1951-54) selling up to 2000 copies per issue. But the paper was seen as a vehicle for the promotion of left wing ideas in the Labour Party and was to fall foul of influential right-wingers in the Party especially in the Transport and General Workers Union which instructed its branches to withhold financial support. The *Northern Star* played an important part in boosting morale when demoralisation was rife following the Labour Government's defeat in 1951.

It was also important in the struggle to keep ideas and debate at the centre of party life when many party leaders sought to marginalise them, prioritising electoral organisation above all else. The key issues of the day were the campaigns against German Re-armament, for the halting of nuclear tests, against the Suez adventure and, a little later, support for Anti-Apartheid. On each of these issues Eric steered firmly left. His stance on the latter ultimately led to his being invited to meet Nelson Mandela on his first visit to Britain after his release from Robben Island.

As an employee of the City Council, Eric Walker could not stand for election to the council but for the thirty years that followed he was one of the Labour Party's most diligent workers as Ward Secretary, Constituency Treasurer and City Party delegate. He was also a delegate to the national party conference and in 1955 he was proud to have moved the motion to place Clause 4 on the party membership card and later, to keep it there. He thought it was an important reminder that the Labour Party stood for public ownership at a time when 'revisionists' were trying to disown the principle.

For many years Eric acted as agent for Lionel Anwell's unsuccessful contests to win Fenham Ward in Council Elections. After Eric's retirement from the Youth Service he was free to stand for election. The unsuccessful agent became the successful candidate when he was elected for Moorside Ward which he served for a decade with the diligence and integrity he applied to everything. He was particularly pleased with his work for the Race Relations sub-committee which he saw partly as a piece with his youthful opposition to the Mosleyites before the Second World War.

In Doreen Walden Eric had a partner in life and in politics. Her family were old members of the ILP. Her father was an apprenticed engineer at Armstrongs, who had been fired in the 1920's, at the end of his time to avoid taking another journeyman onto the strength. Coincidentally in the ATS during the Second World War Doreen, like Eric had also served in the middle east, initially in Egypt. She travelled to Jerusalem in time to see the King David's Hotel blown up by the Ergun, led by a future Prime Minister of Israel, Menechem Begin. She sat in on a UN meeting in 1947 where partition of the country was being discussed noting the American bias towards the

Zionists in handing them the best land, almost as a reward for their effective terrorism. And like Eric she formed strongly pro-Palestine views. They were both to return to the area in the 1990's to meet up with Palestinians whose friendship had survived for fifty years. Doreen has been a most effective rank and file activist who recalls trailing round the ward (Sandyford) collecting 6d a month from 40 members and being subjected to door-step lectures on what was wrong with the Party.

Just a month before he died, Eric joined the North East Labour History Society's 'Radical Walk' round Newcastle. In tracing the activities of Spenceites, co-operators, chartists, engineers, suffragists and so on, he was covering ground he had written about in *The Northern Star* under the pseudonym, 'Crispin', fifty years ago. He had a strong sense of history and its importance in carrying the democratic flame from generation to generation. He was an unusual socialist, internationalist, active Old Novo rugger player, devotee of public ownership, mountaineer (individualist?), republican, ex-paratrooper and participant in Remembrance Day. The contrasting fields are perhaps best explained by a strong vein of loyalty to the people and associations to which he belonged: family, school, regiment, Labour Party and indeed, humanity. His final act was to donate his body to medical science. There wasn't a grain of opportunism in him. Towards the end of his life he developed a strong anathema to the policy and activities of the current New Labour government. Many years ago the late Paul Foot said of a labour loyalist he had interviewed, "Such decency! Such integrity! The bloody Labour Party doesn't deserve people like that." He might have been speaking of Eric Walker.

*John Charlton, 2007*



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



Joe Clarke

The post of secretary is a key one in any organisation and it is particularly important to have a good one when launching a new organisation. The NELHS was fortunate in having Joe Clarke in this post when the society was formed in 1966. Joe prepared and sent out the agendas, booked the venue, helped draft the constitution, took the minutes of first the steering committee and then the inaugural meeting of the fledgling organisation, and went on to be elected the group's

first secretary. It has been said that a football referee has had a good match when the crowd has failed to notice his presence on the pitch. It was this way with Joe Clarke: the smooth running of the organisation in its early days owed much to his quiet efficiency and personal skills. He was also a prime mover in the launching of the “Bulletin”, forerunner of the present Journal; and together with David Rowe he was its first editor. Indeed, he was responsible for running off the first copies of the Bulletin by hand on a spirit duplicator. We can add that Joe was often a speaker at NELHS meetings, and contributed to the society’s Bulletin and Journal . Dogged by ill health he was absent from many NELHS meetings in recent years, but continued his research and writing until the very end of his life.

Joseph Finbar Clarke was born on 4th June 1927 in Dublin, the son of Joseph Clarke, a newsagent, and his wife Mary Clarke nee Murphy. He once observed that he was not a particularly good Irishman because he had neglected to keep in touch with the “old country” as all good Irishmen were expected to do. He was educated by the Christian Brothers and said that some of the worst moments of his life were at the hands of a fierce Catholic priest who refused to allow English to be spoken during Irish lessons.

Joe had no objection to being taught Irish but thought the methods of teaching were counter-productive; he described these lessons as “a nightmare”. Joe’s father acted as an agent for de Valera’s Fianna Fail during the elections of the 1930s, and Joe remembered seeing piles of political literature stacked at home. He also recalled the poverty experienced by many Dublin families in the 1930s.

Joe moved to England in 1943 to work in a plastics plant in Rochdale, attending evening classes at Oldham Technical College where he obtained an Ordinary National Certificate in Mechanical Engineering. He then transferred to the firm's London factory to serve his time as a draughtsman. When he left the firm in 1954 the managing director in a testimonial wrote, "During the whole of the time he was in our employment, he carried out his duties to our entire satisfaction. He was a hard and diligent worker, of sober habits, conscientious and of the highest integrity".

Joe Clarke joined the Young Communist League (YCL) shortly after arriving in England and served as a full-time organiser for the YCL in the London and Birmingham areas between 1949 and 1952. He resigned from this post, and returned to his former job with the London plastics firm, after a disagreement with senior Party officials who had wanted him to remain in the Midlands area when he wanted to return to London. His disillusionment with the Communist Party was cumulative: the Slansky trial of 1952 proved to be his "Kronstadt" and he resigned from the Party in 1956. The move from the Roman Catholicism of his boyhood to Marxism, and then his break with the Communist Party in 1956, were traumatic events in Joe's life. Although he continued to take a keen interest in current affairs his years of political activism were over and he was content to immerse himself in his teaching and research activities.

He enrolled for an external B.Sc. (Econ.) degree at London University in 1956 and graduated in 1961. The previous year he had successfully completed the teachers' certificate in further education course at Garnett College, passing with distinction. His first teaching post was at the North London Day College. He

then moved to the Newcastle College of Education, followed by a lectureship at the Rutherford College of Technology, which was absorbed into Newcastle Polytechnic in 1968. Here Joe built up a team specialising in the history of science and technology, and was appointed principal lecturer in the subject. In 1968 he was awarded an M.A. degree by Newcastle University for a thesis on labour relations in the shipbuilding and engineering industries of the North East, a subject that became his major research interest for the rest of his life.

In 1968 Joe was taken seriously ill with Behcet's syndrome, a rare blood disease, and although he was never fully fit again his iron will carried him through. He continued to teach and research his subject. In 1971 he was part-author of *The North East Engineers' Strike of 1871*, and two years later he was co-author, with Terry McDermott, of a centenary history of the Newcastle and District Trades Council, followed in 1977 by *Power on Land and Sea – a History of Hawthorne-Leslie* plus a biography of Charles Parsons. In 1984 he published a centenary history of the North East Coast Institute of Engineers and Shipbuilders. Over the years he also contributed several entries to the *Dictionary of Business Biography*. Finally, in 1997 he published his magnum opus, the two-volume *Building Ships on the North East Coast*. He was working on a history of Hebburn at the time of his death.

Joe was an assiduous researcher and spent many hours beavering away in the local archives.. He was an active member of the Tyne and Wear Archives Consultative Committee 1975-86, and its successor the Archives Users' Group 1986-2003. After his retirement he became one of the "Wednesday Boys", an informal group of marine industries researchers who met every Wednesday

in Blandford House to discuss their work. Joe Clarke brought to his research and writing a rare combination of sources of knowledge, namely his industrial background, his qualifications in engineering and economic history, and his thesis on labour relations. Few people could tap into all these subject areas with confidence: but Joe could and in doing so he was able to put his own stamp on his work. Joe Clarke's books could not have been written by anyone else.

Joe Clarke died at North Tyneside General Hospital on 22<sup>nd</sup> July 2006, and there was a large gathering of family and friends in attendance at the humanist service held at Whitley Bay Crematorium on 31<sup>st</sup> July. He leaves his wife Margaret and their five children.

*Archie Potts*



Len speaking at a Tyneside Pensioners Association Rally

### **Len Edmondson 1912 – 2006**

The funeral gathering of Len Edmondson was a roll call of workers in Tyneside shipbuilding and engineering. Former shop stewards from Parsons, Vickers, Reyrolles, Smith Docks, Swans, Clark Chapman, North Eastern Marine, Readheads, Hawthorn Leslie and many others turned out to pay their respects to their comrade who had served with integrity and distinction as a shop steward and District Secretary and a member of the National Committee, the Executive Council and the General Council of the TUC for nearly fifty years till his retirement in 1977. They

gathered again at the memorial meeting held for him in Gateshead Civic Centre where they were addressed by the General Secretary of AMICUS and Baroness Quinn of Gateshead. Trade union organisation was the central preoccupation of his life but it was located within a firm commitment to democratic socialism.

Leonard Firby Edmondson died on Monday 20<sup>th</sup> November 2006. He was born in Gateshead in December 1912 in a working class household. His father was an unskilled factory worker unemployed for much of Len's youth. His mother was a shop worker before her children arrived. He was educated at Gateshead Central School where he achieved distinction in English, Arithmetic and book keeping. He left school at 15 and was launched onto the labour market in the depths of the depression. He recalled that there was a moment when his elder brother's wage of 19 shillings had to keep a household of five adults. His first job was for a haulage contractor where he said his life as a negotiator began when he was offered 5 shillings a week but pushed them up to 8 shillings. His attempt to go higher a few months later ended in the sack. After a spell out of work he secured an apprenticeship as a fitter at the Concrete Liner Company in Newcastle's Ouseburn district. That was in 1929 and in the twenty years that followed he worked in fourteen engineering shops on the Tyne and was a shop steward in nine of them. Depression and war made this an extremely tough period for trade unionism. He developed a reputation as a cool and very well informed negotiator.

In 1934 he joined the National Unemployed Workers Movement, motivated by anger at the government's Unemployed Assistance Bill. He called it the most vicious piece of legislation ever targeted at the unemployed. It sought to make swingeing cuts in benefit and

could subject the long-term unemployed to military discipline and petty regulation at special work camps, dubbed 'slave camps' by the NUWM. His two brothers were sent to such camps where one successfully organised a strike against the conditions there. Len recalled taking part in the massive demonstration from Windmill Hills in Gateshead to the Town Hall, forcing the Council to send a petition and delegation to parliament against the Bill. Len believed the national revulsion sparked by the Bill led to its most exacting clauses being ditched.

This activity took him into the Independent Labour Party, which had recently seceded from the Labour Party. Though he had sympathy for the 'great Soviet experiment' and was a member of the Friends of the Soviet Union, he chose the ILP rather than the Communist Party because he did not like their People's Front strategy of building alliances with allegedly progressive Tories and Liberals. At heart too he favoured a more libertarian approach to socialism. He joined the ILP in 1935 and during his time met the West Indian socialists George Padmore and C.L.R. James, whose writings he always admired. During the 1930s he was also a member of anti-imperialist India League, and heard Krishna Menon among others speak in Newcastle.

During that time he continued to campaign against unemployment but like so many of his generation the plight of Spain gave him a main focus. He did not go to Spain himself but was deeply involved in each of the campaigns: against the British embargo on arms to the republic, giving homes in the North East to Basque child refugees, and support for food ships to Spain. In 1939 he supported the ILP line opposing the Second World War, which he thought to be an imperialist one from beginning to end. As a trades



unionist he fought to prevent the government and employers using the war effort to undermine wages, working conditions and civil liberties for British workers.

He left the ILP in 1950, recognising that it could no longer be an effective force, and joined the Labour Party; it was always clear though where his emotional loyalties lay. In 1953 he became an elected full-time official of the Amalgamated Engineering Union, becoming a member of the Executive Council in 1966 and President in his last year, 1977. He was appointed to the Royal Commission on Legal Services in 1976. It lasted for three years. He said it produced a lot of worthwhile proposals all of which were dumped into the dustbin by the incoming Thatcher government in 1979.

After retirement from the AEU his political activity increased. He was Chairman of the Tyneside May Day Committee, a central figure in the Pensioners' movement and Anti-Apartheid. He also had a deep commitment to the plight of the Romany people although he had no family connection. He became a member of the Gypsy Council whose spokesman called him the salt of the earth; always ready to stand on the street in support of their cause. Regular attendance at the Appleby Horse Fair was one of his great pleasures as was the breeding and showing of Old English Sheepdogs, of which he was a local expert.

Towards the end of his life he was somewhat physically disabled but he still regularly turned out for North East Labour History Society meetings until early 2006 and usually made an interesting and useful contribution. His lively mind was not impaired. Len had joined the NELHS on retirement and in the words of our current Chair Stuart Howard became 'part of the fabric of the Society'.

Although he never wrote his memoirs he became the best living source of information about the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Tyneside labour movement. His name can be found among the credits in a number of books, articles and even theatre scripts. Countless students and researchers beat the path to his home in Low Fell where they were always courteously welcomed and treated to a wonderful monologue which could take in the General Strike, when he was a 13 year old message carrier, the unemployed workers' movements, party life in the Gateshead ILP, the Gateshead Progressive Players (forerunners of the Little Theatre), the campaign to end the ban on showing *The Battleship Potemkin*, the Spanish Civil War, an engineering apprentice's life, factory organising in the Second World War, the moment he heard news of Labour's 1945 election victory, German re-armament, Sunday Cinema and so on right down to recent asylum seekers.

Len was an internationalist, a republican and a democrat. He refused to stand through the National Anthem and all offers of honours were turned down, except those bestowed by the labour movement. He believed strongly in the importance of election of all union officials and the now, apparently 'old fashioned' idea of accountability through recall. He lived modestly surrounded by well-thumbed books. George Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*, Trotsky's *History of the Russian Revolution* and C L R James's *Black Jacobins* were particular favourites.

Len left a daughter Brenda and two grandchildren, a devoted carer Helen Harrison and a multitude of friends and acquaintances.

*John Charlton, Archie Potts, Don Watson*



Gateshead Local Government Branch

We fully support the North East Labour  
History Group Journal and wish it continued  
success within the Labour Movement

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## REVIEWS ARCHIVES SOURCES

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### **Illustrating a region in transition**

Jenny Uglow, *Nature's Engraver. A Life of Thomas Bewick*, (London, faber and faber, 2006) ISBN 978 0 571 22374 9, £20.

The craftsman has traditionally come low in the hierarchy of art and far behind the painter in oils or the sculptor, while subject matter, for long, dictated precedence, with great scenes from history, religious painting or portraits coming far above depictions of ordinary life. Size matters as well ; the miniaturist has his place but the vast canvas usually leads in the canon while the vignette comes far behind. Thomas Bewick is best known for his illustrations in books and his woodblock prints are small and precise, while they depict birds or animals or everyday country scenes. He is, nevertheless, numbered among Northumberland's greatest artists and is considered by some to have first place. That the competition includes John Martin, William Bell Scott, J.W. Carmichael, Henry Perlee Parker and the elder Thomas Miles Richardson is a testimony to the extent of his achievement.

The boy from Cherryburn, who never lost his delight in the countryside of the Tyne Valley and its animals and birds, nor his love for a way of life that was beginning to fade even while he was young, moved into the busy, inky and beery world of Newcastle printing and engraving and was ever a countryman, a craftsman, an un-business-like entrepreneur and a great artist. The polarities can be exaggerated: Newcastle was a bustling commercial town but a concentrated one and there was no great division between town and country or 'townies' and countrymen, nor yet, save in high society, between artist and craftsman, while the romantic notion that the artist was aloof from the profit motive was yet to come. His was no rags to riches story. His father was a relatively prosperous

farmer who owned a small coal mine, while Bewick in old age was no more than comfortably off. What his career demonstrates is that a talent, perhaps a genius, when it captures the winds of the pre-occupations of an age leaves an indelible impression of what becomes the past.

Bewick's working life began in 1767 when he was apprenticed to the Newcastle engraver Ralph Beilby at his three gabled house at Amen Corner next to St Nicholas churchyard. At a time when metal engraving seemed to have left woodblock prints as a vulgar medium more suited to trade than art, loftily dismissed by Horace Walpole as 'slovenly stamps', Bewick, in Jenny Uglow's words, 'transformed them into images of haunting depth and subtlety'. It was probably fortunate for Bewick that Beilby concentrated upon the more fashionable copper engraving, leaving his apprentice to get on with and experiment with the more plebeian craft. His genius was to combine his skill in drawing with the demands of wood engraving as he developed new techniques not only for cutting but for printing. Most of us know and admire the work and have some knowledge of Bewick's life but this outstanding biography takes us into the world of the workshop and to the heart of the craft. Drawing upon the immense knowledge of Iain Bain, Bewick expert and himself a woodblock printer, Jenny Uglow enables us to understand the arduous and complex process of creation.

Bewick approached even the most mundane of tasks with dedication – coal certificates, advertisements for travelling showmen or designs for the bar bills of public houses – but what turned a talented jobbing printer into a major artist was the combination of the milieu of the Newcastle of his time and the happy conjunction of his interests and ideas with major intellectual currents of the day.

Newcastle's major period of cultural and intellectual dynamism extended from the later eighteenth century through to the early decades of the nineteenth century and it is no coincidence that the greatest artists Northumbria has produced worked during these years. The town was a major provincial publishing centre, and this gave Bewick the opportunity to illustrate books. Early in his apprenticeship he was able to work on the engravings for Charles Hutton's *Treatise on Mensuration* and soon he was to find more congenial work in the growing popularity of books for children. Attitudes towards childhood were changing and there was a demand for books which made learning pleasant and

amusing: illustrated collections of nursery rhymes and fairy tales. Bewick, whose own experience of learning at his first school at Mickley had been grim, found himself working on illustrated alphabets and books such as *Cries of London*, *Robin Goodfellow* and *Cinderella* for Thomas Saint, a bookseller-cum- publisher. To all his work he brought accurate observation and humour and particularly to the depiction of animals.

The precision with which he depicted animals and birds was to bring him his fame. Here, he was in tune with a number of developments of his time, some of them contradictory. One influence of the Enlightenment was the desire to record and categorise the natural world. The eighteenth century's thirst for agricultural improvement and the desire to improve the stock of its animals, whether by breeding faster and stronger horses or fatter cattle, resulted in a demand for pictures of famous race horses or prize bulls. Gilbert White of Selbourne and George Stubbs respectively represented such trends. A contrary influence was also emerging in the romantic cult of the natural, a delight in the wild and the untamed. If a major aspect of Bewick's work represented the Enlightenment's desire for precision and cataloguing, this is combined with an unscientific affection and sympathy with his subject matter. The man who had spent so much of his boyhood closely observing animals and birds on the banks of the Tyne saw them not just as objects for study and his animals, in particular, have personalities. Following the priorities of the aristocracy and gentry, Bewick began his illustrations for *A General History of Quadrupeds* (1790) with the horse, while he saw the dog as only just below man at the head of the animal kingdom.

Bewick's love of animals gave him sympathy with another influence of the Enlightenment, a dislike of unnecessary cruelty. He raged against the practice of trailing performing bears around fairgrounds and campaigned against badger-baiting. His late print, 'Waiting for Death', of an old horse, neglected and half-starved after a lifetime of faithful service, epitomises this hatred of cruelty and ingratitude.

The deep affection with which Bewick depicted the ordinary and everyday scenes of his day, a farmer in his field, a tinker on his ass, a cottage with wood smoke curling from its chimney or the washing hanging on the line in a country garden was based on his fears that a way of life was passing. Like Goldsmith, whose books he illustrated, he bemoaned the enclosures of the commons,

especially the moors and heaths around Mickley that he knew so well. He was something of a northern William Cobbett in his dislike of the changes that economic development was bringing to the countryside: gentry who forgot their old paternalism, upwardly mobile farmers who aped their betters and cottagers, who lost their traditional rights to the commons and became mere wage labourers. Again his personal sympathies were in tune with contemporary pre-occupations. If many welcomed economic and social change and called it progress, others viewed it with anger and nostalgia. His aesthetics paralleled his thought as a preference for the picturesque, if untidy, cottage, heathland or a lone old oak, as opposed to a neat house, hedged fields or a well-organised plantation, gained ground.

The artist gives us many clues to the nature of another aspect of Bewick, his radicalism. He mixed in radical circles in the Newcastle pubs and at the workshop of the bookbinder, Gilbert Gray, and was a friend of the ultra-radical, Thomas Spence. Most radicals of the day combined a rationalist view of liberties and rights with a historical scenario which looked back to the past as a time of greater liberty, a time before the 'Norman Yoke', or a more recent time before the people's rights were eroded by enclosures, free trade, taxes and over-mighty government. Like Cobbett, Bewick was something of a Tory radical, though in later life, he described himself as a Whig. He quarrelled and even had a fight with Spence, not a fair fight because he was the larger and fitter man, over the question of private property, a concept dear to the farmer's son whose suspicion of government made him opposed to any proto-socialism. Jenny Uglow, describes Bewick as a 'radical of the 'Liberty and Property school'. A warm-hearted man, who would give generously to those who had fallen on hard times, without making judgements on whether it was their fondness for drink which was responsible for the fall, he, nevertheless, was steadfast in his belief that men and not the state should be responsible for themselves and their families.

Like most of us, he was inconsistent, both in his political views and his private life. He subscribed to the scheme for a canal between the Tyne and the Solway Firth (still-born, even though it was revived in the 1990s), which seems at odds with his dislike of change to his beloved Tyne Valley, and, although he railed against the establishment, he was on good terms with most of its local representatives. Like many radicals, he can be accused of being late in realising that the French Revolution was not analogous to the Glorious Revolution and

was a greater threat to the liberties he cared for than Pitt's reaction to it.

He was a generous, impulsive and quarrelsome man. He would probably have gone bankrupt due to his generosity had it not been for his more realistic wife, Bell. In an age when intellectual property rights were ill-defined, he fell out with business partners and collaborators, most famously with Ralph Beilby over the authorship of *Birds*. Beilby was mainly to blame for he seems to have continued to think of Bewick as his assistant and apprentice but Bewick was clearly a dreadful businessman who should have come to a firm agreement on the joint endeavour in the first place. This was, however, Bewick, a plain man, fond of his beer and tobacco and of convivial evenings in public houses, but one with vision, acute sensitivity and great skill.

Bewick's would have been a great talent whatever the milieu of his time and the opportunities afforded by it. Without the intellectual excitement and opportunities afforded by Newcastle's Enlightenment, a time when a relatively paternal and broad oligarchy was confronted by exciting new ideas, economic opportunities and radicalism, his might have been a talent destined to blush off-scene. As it was, this remarkable genius was able to find its readership. As Iain Bain has demonstrated, he had great ability as a water-colour painter, but it was the business and cultural life of the Newcastle of his day that enabled his success as a woodblock engraver and printer. His art and his personality are inseparable. We love Bewick for his skill, but as much for his sentiments and his down-to earth humour. Some of his views including his Deism embarrassed his daughter, who censored his *Memoirs*, while Victorians found some of his prints, a man pissing against a wall or another on 'The Pigstye Netty', coarse. Genius, without too much high-flown sentiment but with so much affection, humour and understanding, is to be highly valued and Jenny Uglow does it justice in this fine biography.

*Bill Purdue*

Jean V. Stirk, *The Lost Mills: A History of Papermaking in County Durham*, (Sunderland, University of Sunderland Press, 2006) ISBN 1 87357 85 9, xix + 236pp.

Published by Sunderland University Press with financial support from Durham County Local History Society, Jean V. Stirk's work on the history of



papermaking in County Durham has been crafted from painstaking research in the archives. This is commendable, but as a work of good history it is lacking; both in its depth of narrative and in the failure to locate the piece within the relevant historiography.

The book consists of an introduction and six chapters. The former introduces a number of themes that were important for the development and growth of the industry in the County – the market, raw materials, water, skilled workforce and finance. But these themes are not carried through in the main body of the text. Instead, five of the chapters are arranged chronologically with no apparent justification for the time demarcation of each chapter. This is lazy history. Each chapter has a short history of a paper mill, determined by its birth date. The earliest mills were likely to have utilised corn mills, and/or shared their premises with other water driven concerns.

The approach taken hardly grapples with the why of history, but offers us a myriad of pieces of information that seems to be included because the author found them in the archives and thought them relevant. What are we to make of ‘An undated bill or estimate for major items, such as wood for nine King posts, may well have referred to this re-building?’ ; or ‘A tithe map of 1839 defines the area of the Croxdale paper mill, but no mention is made of it in the accompanying Tithe Apportionment.’? The narrative is full of this antiquarian approach where statements of fact are made without qualification or explanation. Whilst there is some attempt at locating aspects of the work within the historiography of papermaking, there is much that might have been alluded to within current thinking on proto-industrialisation and the development of capitalism. It is difficult to see who the target audience might be for such a publication, certainly it has application as a gazetteer, but with no real narrative the audience is limited.

Nonetheless the research is commendable and it has laid a path for subsequent research into papermaking in the North East. There is a useful glossary of terms associated with the trade and the appendices on the longevity of each mill together with numbers operating at any time are good and useful.

*Ewan Knox*  
*Northumbria University*

### **Education as the key?**

Keith Flett, *Chartism after 1848: The working class and the politics of radical education* (London, Merlin, 2007) ISBN 0-85036-532-2, 218pp.

Over the past several years Merlin has published a number of books on the Chartist movement, including, in 2005, Joan Allen and Owen Ashton's study of the Chartist Press, *Papers for the People*. This is now followed by the volume reviewed here. Keith Flett is best renowned as a letter-writer to the press, but he is also a leading figure in the London Socialist Historians Group (not to be confused with the Socialist History Society!) and here he proves himself to be a very considerable historian and has produced a fine study of one of the less explored themes of labour history; an episode which he terms 'deflected defeat'.

The early English (and no less the Scottish and Welsh) working class was, in E P Thompson's famous phrase 'made' in the sufferings, struggles and agitation, often intense and bloody, of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, and in the 1830s and 1840s achieved its most advanced political expression, the People's Charter, with its demand for (male) parliamentary democracy.

A key turning point arrived in 1848 when the authorities inflicted a heavy defeat by blocking a mass demonstration in London and followed that up soon afterwards with the arrest of most of the main Chartist leaders. Conventionally, this is imagined to have been the end of Chartism, but in fact the movement continued vibrant for another decade, though never again attaining its previous heights.

Chartism itself was an amalgam of many different social groupings and outlooks, so not unexpectedly in the aftermath of 1848 much discussion took place and many initiatives were launched in the effort to find more effective means to achieve the Charter's objectives than the strategy of mass demonstrations backing up petitions to an unresponsive House of Commons. '... the twelve years which it took Chartism to die after 1848 also ensured that Chartist ideas, both pre- and post-1848 would continue to be the currency of much of the left and the labour movement until the new strategies of statist reform and syndicalism began to emerge in the 1880s and the 1890s.'

The centrepiece of Flett's discussion is the educational enterprises established in the 1850s by Chartists or Chartist sympathisers, mostly modest,

but occasionally very ambitious indeed. There was of course no state system of education at that point and a cardinal aim of the Chartist foundations was to offer learning opportunities outside the control of the churches, and with an anti-establishment emphasis and minimal fees. These schools were numerous and some proved very successful; their weakness was that they depended on funding by wealthy sympathisers.

Chartism as an organised force ended in the late 1850s but Flett is concerned to trace its continuing influence during the sixties in terms both of the negative lessons learned from its experience – what might be achievable and what not – and its veterans, who, adapting their tactics, continued to agitate within a changing social environment and a working class which was being reconfigured as older artisan trades declined and machine industry advanced and trade unions achieved more solid foundations.

Especially interesting in this respect is Joseph Cowen, the Newcastle radical publisher and eventual Liberal MP, who was at the centre of the organisations which won the major franchise extension in 1867, on occasion using tactics modelled on those of the forties. Cowen's Northern Reform Association was remarkably strong, and its HQ, according to Flett, quoting Nigel Todd, was 'located in Newcastle's imposing Grainger Street at smart offices', and 'beautifully lighted by pane and gas and as handsomely and completely fitted up as a merchant's office in Manchester' Though impossible to quantify, the influence of former Chartists and students from the schools and the working class educational network they gave rise to can't be ignored in considering developments in the 1860s such as the International Working Men's Association (founded on Marx's inspiration in 1864) and the establishment of the TUC in 1868, leading eventually to the creation of the Labour Party.

Another development of the 1860s was the emergence of the Liberal Party as a coalition of diverse class forces – including elements of the aristocracy – but whose hegemonic core was the industrial and commercial bourgeoisie. There was much argument and controversy in the organised labour movement over the appropriate degree of co-operation with or assimilation to a party that could be in a position to achieve at least some of Chartism's historic aims.

It was Gladstone's Liberal government which in 1870 introduced the famous Education Act, the first step towards a free compulsory education system (though initially neither wholly free nor compulsory). Some contemporaries and

later historians have regarded it as a ruling class instrument to suppress forms of educational provision outside their own control – and in the end that was indeed its effect – however the labour movement overwhelmingly favoured it, seeing it as an essential step towards democratic advance and the application of public resources to working class advantage.

Flett's volume concludes at this point. It is an impressive achievement (though the index is inadequate and sketchy) and contributes substantially to our improved understanding both of the politics of radical education and the post-1848 making of the English working class.

*Willie Thompson*

### **Ways of illustrating an industry**

Robert McManners and Gillian Wales, *McGuinness: Interpreting the art of Tom McGuinness*, (Gemini Productions, 2006) ISBN 0-9532217-2-5, pbk. £14.95

Tom Kelly, *The Wrong Jarrow*, (Middlesbrough, Smokestack Books, 2007 ISBN 0-9551061-7-6,) pbk. £7.95

In April 2006 The McGuinness Gallery in Bishop Auckland Town Hall held a major retrospective exhibition of the work of the artist in whose honour it was named – Tom McGuinness. The exhibition was scheduled to coincide with the 80<sup>th</sup> birthday of this celebrated North East artist. Sadly, McGuinness did not live to see this event, as he died in February 2006, but his family requested that it go ahead as planned in tribute to his art and his life's work. Also scheduled for launch at this exhibition was the latest book from McManners and Wales, 'McGuinness: Interpreting the art of Tom McGuinness', and this too went ahead as planned.

The authors were personal friends of McGuinness, as well as his biographers, having previously published *Tom McGuinness: The art of an underground miner* in 1997. They state from the outset that this latest book is not intended to be another biography, instead to take a different approach – seeking to *interpret* his art through a number of methods. However, it is impossible to separate the art from the man, and so in examining the influences and approaches the artist has

taken throughout his life, we cannot escape the feeling that it is biographical. This is not necessarily a bad thing. Indeed, it is usually more beneficial in analysing artwork to know the context in which it was created, the pressures and constraints under which the artist worked. If anything, it feels as though this book does not go deeply enough into the artist's background, and that to gain a more complete picture it would be necessary to read it in conjunction with the earlier biography.

There are two main sections to the analysis of McGuinness' work. The first explores 'Influences on the art of Tom McGuinness', and it is this which is closest to biography. It traces the development of the artist from his first hesitant attempts, drawing in chalk on the side of a coal tub, to his studies at Darlington School of Art, his visits to national touring exhibitions, and the fellowship of The Spennymoor Settlement Sketching Club. It goes on to chart his move into 'serious' art; exhibiting and selling his work, and shows how his independence as an artist continued to grow.

This chapter culminates rather abruptly, and then leads us directly into the second section; 'The Development of the Characteristic McGuinness Style'. Here, the artist's choice of media is considered, together with the different techniques he employed, such as etching and lithography. Direct reference is made to specific artworks or commissions to illustrate the points made, and they are tied to key events within his life. However, the reader cannot escape the feeling that these two sections might have been more coherent as a whole. Much is made in the 'Development' chapter of the effects that his experience as a working miner had on his art, as well as factors such as his Catholic upbringing and his home life – would these have fitted better within 'Influences'? It seems to be, in many cases, filling gaps left in the previous section, and it feels as if the authors have struggled to create two chapters where there was maybe previously only one.

The book is extensively illustrated, with some 60 full-page colour plates, and a number of additional drawings and photographs within the text. The quality of the illustrations is excellent, reproducing both colours and lines to a high degree. However, the artworks featured are exclusively McGuinness' work and particularly where direct references have been made to influences on his style and approach, including the artists Kathe Kollwitz, Albrecht Durer and Goya, or to schools of art such as German Expressionism, some images to reinforce these links might have been beneficial. Casual references scattered throughout the text assume a degree of knowledge on the part of the reader regarding the

history of art and to a reader more interested in McGuinness' work as a social history document this could be discouraging.

Perhaps the most surprising feature in this book, however, is the lack of actual text. The facing page of each major illustration contains a brief description or comment on the image, while at the back of the book there are exhibition lists, and useful glossaries of art and mining terms. But only about one fifth of the entire book consists of solid, in-depth textual analysis. This could be considered a missed opportunity. Tantalising references are made to exhibition reviews, with brief quotations from critics and tutors. It is good to hear McGuinness's own voice evident throughout the text, but he is usually cited in the third person – some more direct quotes would have lent an added authenticity, particularly as the authors were perhaps uniquely placed to utilise this resource. Overall, this book seems to read less like an analytical reference, and more as what would be expected from an exhibition catalogue. Perhaps this is intentional, as it was written with the retrospective exhibition in mind, and if this is the case then it fulfils its role excellently, providing just enough information for the casual observer, and whetting the appetite to find out more.

### *Poetry*

Complementing this monograph, although accidentally, is a book of poetry recently written by Tom Kelly. Entitled *The Wrong Jarrow*, after one of the poems featured, it offers an incisive view of life in the North East where, despite the best efforts of political correctness, images of cobbled streets, smoky pubs, and flat-capped men in huddled groups still persist to this day. Kelly describes towns and communities that have fought hard to throw off the shadow of Wigan Pier, and gives a voice to the people whom we see so often staring out of grainy black and white photographs. Some of his poems are remarkably brief – four lines at their most concise – while others construct a winding narrative which draws you into the lives of the people.

Kelly's other guise as a playwright shines through in the skilful way he constructs his characters, and perhaps nowhere more so than in the sequence of poems inspired by the paintings and drawings of Norman Cornish. A fellow member of The Spennymoor Settlement Sketching Club along with Tom McGuinness, Cornish's work explores the life of a working class colliery community at work and leisure; in many ways they are the archetypal 'pitman paintings'. Unfortunately the reader is only shown one of the images; *Two Men*

*at Bar with Dog* adorns the cover of the book, and the titles of the poems do not refer you directly to the source. However, to anyone familiar with Cornish's work the poems take you straight to their heart.

Deliberately avoiding description of the image in most cases, Kelly looks instead to the people who feature within them – what are their thoughts, their hopes, their dreams? Particularly where Kelly has used Cornish's drawings as inspiration – solid, robust images utilising the stark contrasts of black charcoal and white chalk – he has approached them with the same passion and curiosity as those blurred black and white photos. These are documents of a fading industrial past, given a new, angry voice in view of the continuing problems faced by the communities today. As Kelly aptly describes in the final stanza of 'Misty Day':

*'This is the moment before it goes,  
the time you will remember before the history bailiffs  
do a reconstruction brick by brick,  
rebuild a world, make memory of this.'*

(© Tom Kelly, 2007)

Marie-Thérèse H. Mayne

### **The price of coal**

A McIvor and R Johnston, *Miners' Lung: A History of Dust Disease in British Coal Mining*, (Aldershot, 2007) £60.

Much dedicated research went into the writing of this book. It provides a detailed record of a central issue in a calamitous period in the mining industry. It is partly based on oral testimonies of miners regarding the effects of working in a dusty environment and the interviews are reinforced by reference to the many reports and papers on the subject: scientific and medical works, miners' union views and committees reviewing the subject. The bibliography is extensive, amply demonstrating the authors' commitment to the subject. The authors do observe that oral interviews can be tinged with drama and hearsay but this does not diminish the value of recording such testimony at a time when the traumatic decline of the industry makes repeating such work unlikely.

The book highlights the struggle of the miners and their unions and their political supporters to get recognition of the consequences of breathing in dust. Miners demanded both legislation to limit the incidence of airborne dust, and adequate compensation for those who had been damaged by it. Those running the industry tended to blame the general poor health of those in and entering the industry, citing asthma, bronchitis and smoking.

Limited dust suppression was undertaken in the years before nationalisation and carried out more systematically afterwards. This resulted partly from complaints from the men and their unions but also from the management's awareness of the cost of losing trained miners and the steep rise in compensation claims.

The main means of dust suppression was the application of water, but water and men were not always compatible. Sprays at conveyor transfer and loading points did prove useful without interfering with working conditions. Water was also applied by sprays on cutting machines, drills and in deep hole infusion. However where dust suppression practices interfered with established working practice the former were often ignored. Face masks were tried but they were uncomfortable to wear and when contaminated by dust they were an obstacle to breathing.

There were periods in the late 1930's when dust was reduced by improved ventilation and an improved layout of workings and mining practices. On the other hand increased demand for industrial and domestic coal and higher productivity actually increased the incidence of dust. The introduction in the nineteen fifties of coal shearers which took out whole seams, even when fitted with sprayers caused a break-up of coal, producing more dust. These shearers sometimes cut seams containing stone bands, so liberating stone dust into the atmosphere.

Dust levels are best evaluated by measuring incidence before and after suppression measures are applied. The authors pay scant attention to the NCB Scientific Department which used the Standard Thermal Precipitator (STP). Airborne dust is drawn across a hot wire. The dust is precipitated onto glass coverslips on each side of the wire. The samples are carried in brass sealed containers. They are mounted and examined in the laboratory on a screen projected through a microscope, the particles between 1 and 5 microns being



counted. The authors regard the size range as medically significant, though casting doubt on the accuracy of measurement because of overlap of particles (stone or coal dust). In twenty years of experience of counting this was never raised as a significant issue. The particles could be identified as coal or stone dust and recorded. There was an elaborate training programme for counters with frequent checking at area, divisional and national level.

The authors place a greater emphasis on the work of the Pneumoconiosis Research Unit (PRU). Its main sampling instrument was the PRU pump which drew air through filter paper. The resultant density was intended to indicate dust levels but overlapping and particle fallout in transition were real drawbacks to this system.

The sheer volume of work reviewed leads to some repetition. Many of the nine chapters reiterate the findings from interviews and abstracts. It is not an easy book to read and digest. Nevertheless it is an important and worthy book on a subject which could easily be forgotten as Britain's coal mining story becomes increasingly confined to museums and heritage centres.

As outlined in this book the slow response of the industry to recognising the harm being done to the miners, together with the reluctance to take proper measures to combat dust, shortened many lives and ruined many more. The miners' reward for producing coal was a reduced lifespan confined to an armchair and often a wheelchair.. It was a disgrace to society.

*Bernard Newbold*

*The reviewer, Bernard Newbold, who is also the subject of our Oral History contribution worked in the mining industry from 1947 to 1986 as a screen hand on haulage, heading, drivage, coal filling and as a surveying assistant. From 1952 he worked for the NCB Scientific Department in the North Western Division and from the early sixties in the Northumberland Area. For much of his time he was specially concerned with the issues of dust suppression and dust measurement.*

### **Commemoration or Elegy?**

Alan Brett and Andrew Clark, *Sunderland – the Biggest Shipbuilding Town in the World* (Black Cat Publications 2005) pbk £9.99 ISBN 1 89956078 5

First let me declare a personal interest. I was born in Sunderland before the Second World War on a council estate populated mainly by the families of shipyard workers and merchant seamen. My father was unusual in working at Vane Tempest colliery. One of my earliest memories is of sitting on my father's shoulders watching a ship being launched from the yard where our next door neighbour worked. When we moved to a south Durham pit village my mother kept in touch with her former neighbour and as a teenager I acquired a boy friend from that same council estate with whom I witnessed several other launches, this time of vessels to serve the Greek shipping fleets. He went into the merchant navy and I went to college and the connection lapsed. It would have been impossible then to imagine Sunderland without its shipbuilding industry.

The book under review is a celebration of the achievements of Sunderland shipbuilding from the 1880s to the 1980s. Although essentially a pictorial record with evocative photographs supplied mainly by local photographer Ken Price, Sunderland Museum and Tyne and Wear Archives the relatively brief textual explanations manage to convey a great deal about both the lives of the workers and the histories of the companies that employed them.

Sections of text with headings such as 'The Life of a Shipyard Worker and his Family a Century Ago', much of it about housing and food prices, 'A Deadly Legacy', about the health hazards peculiar to the industry and 'Shipbuilding and Sunderland AFC' show that this is not just a nostalgia orientated collection of old photos

Although the general approach is chronological the availability of particular images has clearly dictated some of the textual content evoking digressions into the stories of particular ships and particular people. Some of the most impressive photographs are of the launches those amazing and emotional occasions when everyone concerned with the construction of a vessel and the many onlookers held their breaths as what seemed to be a towering monster slid slowly down the slipway and the displaced river water surged up. But unless the order books were full the rejoicing was always tempered by worries about continuity of employment.

Despite the celebratory tone of much of the book there is a recognition that the story is not one of uninterrupted prosperity and that because of its 'bespoke' nature shipbuilding was always an insecure business. In the post war slump of the early 1920s there were years when several of the leading yards built no ships at all and Doxford's the name that remains in the memory because of its reincarnation as an industrial park actually closed down for a couple of years. And the thirties were no better. In 1926 in the wake of the General Strike things were so bad that local initiative raised a 'Boots for Bairns' fund to ensure that Sunderland's children did not go barefoot. During the depression years of the thirties the Government introduced a 'Scrap and Build' scheme to encourage shipowners and builders to develop more modern types of vessel and replace the existing ageing merchant stock.

The Second World War brought a return of orders and prosperity but also the devastation of the centre of the town and significant damage to several of the yards. After the war a slump comparable to that of the 1920s was averted by contracts from the Greek shipping firms. The book contains a fascinating section on 'the Age of the Greek Tycoons' which is what I had witnessed as a teenager. One long established yard, Austin and Pickersgill's actually went into Greek ownership.

About a third of the book is devoted to potted histories of the fortunes of the various firms accompanied by photographs of the ships that they built. The concentration of so much activity in one town on such a relatively narrow river meant that despite the division of the workforce among the different companies the community was a very close one but also even taking into account the diversity of vessels produced dangerously dependent on what was basically a single industry.. The post war period had seen a number of amalgamations and in 1977 the industry was taken under Government control as part of the nationalised 'British Shipbuilders'. At the time this must have seemed a rational restructuring and in the short term enabled the adoption of more advanced technology and the introduction of improved health and safety and pension provision for the workers but it also left the industry dangerously at the mercy of changes in government policy and political ideology.

Possibly because the shameful story of the selling out of Sunderland shipbuilding for political ends by the Thatcherite government would sit uneasily in what is designed to be a commemorative account there is no textual

examination of it, not even a mention of how it was closed down, only a few poignant photos of cranes being dismantled. I found this a sad omission. Surely even in a commemorative volume the death of shipbuilding on the Wear merited an elegy.

As I write the cranes are being dismantled at the former Swan Hunter's yard in Wallsend bringing a virtual end to ship building on the Tyne and the demoralisation of another community. It is a depressing sight.

*Win Stokes*

### Keeping the memory alive

Derek Gillum, *Out Of Darkness Came Light* (Seaham), The People's History 2005) ISBN 1902527577, 128 pp, £9. 99

The demise of North east England's traditional industries leaves open the question of how they will be remembered and understood by future generations. There is a tendency in town halls and among government quangos to cast a veil over the region's industrial history in the interests of image making, marketing and 'going forward'. From this perspective, the smoke, the spoil heaps, and the poverty of the old past are seen as obstacles to the sunny uplands of a new future, symbolised by the shining palaces of the culture industry which every day it seems, sprout up from the loam supplied by the Heritage Lottery Fund. I have to admit, I am baffled as to how such establishments can effect structural change in the economy of the region, or replace deep seated cultural forms with more modern manners. I often reflect that, anyway, it is not possible to cast the industrial history of the region into the crucible of modernisation and expect it to melt.

Throughout its postwar history the region has endured an endless stream of top-down modernisation plans designed to restructure its economy and recast its image. Some of these, most notably aspects of the Durham Development Plan, have been countered by what was once described as an 'obdurate folk culture'. This consciousness, this resistance to those who do not value, or who are embarrassed by, the region's industrial past, people, and way of living, is not aligned or directed so much by political as by social and cultural forces. Its forms are micro and organic — local people pursuing local interests, the banner group, the local museum committee, the local history society, the family historian and local history publications. *Out of the Darkness Came Light* falls into the latter category. Published by The People's History at Seaham, this is not 'approved' history in academic style, this is organic history, this is street history, piecemeal, graphic, affectionate, self-referential. A pictorial history, in style and structure, not unlike history in the oral tradition which preceded it. The book is divided into six sections 'The Durham Coalfield', 'Men at Work', 'Colliery Communities', 'The Durham Miners' Gala', 'Pit Banners', 'Preserving our Heritage'. These topics are articulated by photographs, largely taken during the twentieth century, with supporting text which adds snippets of information, but possibly more importantly, attempts to identify individual subjects, a technique which not only brings us closer to them, but confounds the persistent

representation of working class people as 'nameless of the masses'. Many of the images of long gone colliery sites are interesting and informative, and there is a substantial section on pit banners. The images of miners and mining families, (the men at work often grouped together, squatting on their hunkers in a hostile place) penetrate into a cultural landscape which is now bulldozed over and built upon. Yet the recently taken photographs of the (growing) post-coalfield Durham Miners' Gala suggest that mining is not out of our system yet. So does this book. Some of our cultural modernisers won't like that.

*Stuart Howard*  
*University of Sunderland*

## ARCHIVES AND SOURCES - ARCHIVE REPORT

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### **Remembering slavery 2007**

The slavery and abolition activities this year have been a great eye opener for many north easterners. A not untypical comment back in January was that any enquiry here would be short. After all, the area faces east towards the Baltic and northern Europe. The main trading commodities were coal and timber. Bristol and Liverpool yes! Newcastle and Sunderland no! Nine months on such perceptions have been completely over turned. True there was no fleet of slave trading vessels leaving the Tyne or Wear for the West Coast of Africa, but there may have been some. On the other hand they were certainly leaving Whitehaven which whilst on the west coast is usually considered part of the northern region. A close economic relationship existed between it and Northumberland and Durham. However there is at least one direct link between the Tyne and the awful trade. Restraints for slaves such as shackles and neck collars are listed in the business papers of the Crowley family which owned the massive iron works at Winlaton and Swalwell throughout the eighteenth century.

If the direct links with the trade are of limited number and scale, that cannot be said of the wider question of plantation slavery and its products. The merchants and gentry of the region were deeply implicated. All of this information has come to light in the extensive search of archives in the region and much of the work has been done by volunteers assembled and encouraged by Sean Creighton the project manager who was appointed last autumn by the

project. At the time of writing it is not clear if Sean will have a contract extension but in any case the volunteers will continue their work. They are keen to recruit further volunteers warmly encouraged by the professionals in the area's museum and archive services. The project has fallen into two parts; slavery and abolition. That the north east played a leading part in the abolition movement is much better known. Men and women were enthusiastically engaged from the birth of the movement in the late eighteenth century, through the successful campaigns of 1807 to abolish the trade in the British Empire in 1807, the abolition of slavery in the empire 1833-38 to the American Civil War of the 1860's and beyond.

There is still some investigative work to be done at the Tyne and Wear Archives, the Northumberland Record Office, the Lit and Phil and Newcastle University's Special Collections and new volunteers will be welcome but the great challenge lies in those archives hardly touched this year. These include Durham County Archives and Library, Cumbria Archives at Carlisle, Teesside Archives at Middlesbrough and the Local Studies Collections at Newcastle Central, Gateshead, North Shields, South Shields, Sunderland and Darlington libraries.

Of course identifying the material is merely the first step to creating a fuller picture of the issues through articles, papers and books. The new archives group will be pleased to lend its help to anyone interested in embarking on their own projects. Anyone interested should contact this journal in the first instance ([nelh@blueyonder.co.uk](mailto:nelh@blueyonder.co.uk)).

*Where to look*

Tyne & Wear Archives, Blandford St., Newcastle on Tyne.

<http://www.tyneandweararchives.org.uk/>

Northumberland Archives, Woodhorn.

<http://www.experiencewoodhorn.com/archive.htm>

Durham County Archives, County Hall, Durham.

<http://www.durham.gov.uk/recordoffice/>



Cumbria Record Office, Carlisle.

<http://www.cumbria.gov.uk/archives/>

Teesside Archives, Middlesbrough.

No web-site but pages on Middlesbrough Council site.

Phone 01642-248321

Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle

<http://www.litandphil.org.uk/>

Newcastle University Robinson Library.

<http://www.ncl.ac.uk/library/specialcollections/>

Plus the local studies collections named above.

*Out of the area*

First it wise to use A2A (Access to Archives) which is the internet site linking most archives in the UK and which can be searched for key words. Of course there is still much material not available via the web. Most useful is the National Archive at Kew. London, which is a very efficient and inclusive place to work with excellent help facilities. The Crowley papers are at Suffolk County Archives at Ipswich and Newcastle's main West India Merchant John Graham Clarke's papers are at Gloucester County Archives, Gloucester, which whilst far off for most readers of this journal are also warm and friendly places to work.

## 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: Mike Cleghorn

Secretary: John Charlton

Journal Editor: Win Stokes (Vol 38)

Other Members: Ben Sellars (*Durham*), Don Watson (*North Shields*), Val Duncan, (*Tynemouth*), 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**

We can report another year of new members but again unfortunately the loss of some too, as measured by payment for the Journal! Sadly too we must report the death of Richard Brown, a long term member of the Society, a retired sociology lecturer at Durham University. He had done pioneering work on recording the memories of ship yard workers on the Wear. Ian Roberts' article in this volume on the women ship yard workers of the Wear serves as a memorial to Richard's work. We have also lost a great stalwart of the Society and the Tyneside labour movement for seventy years, Len Edmondson. We were privileged to be given the job of sorting and filing Len's enormous collection of papers. They will soon be available for scholars at the Tyne and Wear Archives when the mammoth task of cataloguing them is completed. Another member who is remembered in the Appreciations section of this issue is Eric Walker whose papers are also deposited at the Tyne and Wear Archive.

Our public meetings during the year were a great success. Following the AGM in September 2006, Katrina Porteous gave a captivating evocation of the lives of members of the North Northumberland fishing communities complementing her article in Volume 37. In November our past Secretary and Editor, Joan Allen, in the Edward Allen Lecture gave a most interesting account of the late Chartist and radical press of Newcastle. Then in late February Dave Harker gave a brilliant talk on the pitmen of Northumberland and Durham

interpreted through song and verse. Finally in May we had Mike Haynes from Wolverhampton, celebrating the 90<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Russian Revolution. He used a wonderfully varied collection of photographs, bank notes, share certificates (!) and coins.

Our regularly monthly meeting, First Tuesday continued to draw a decent attendance, good food at The Cluny and a lively discussion following autobiographical talks by Bernard Newbold (a mining engineer) and Arthur Scott (ship yard apprentice) and talks on Slavery and the North East, industry and labour in the Ouseburn in 1900 and the life of Jimmy Ancrum the Felling communist and unemployed workers' movement organiser.

We continue to make progress with oral history though slowly. As expected transcription slows the process right down. At present we have six substantial interviews in various stages of transcription. It may lead to a bumper oral history section in the next journal!

This year our Annual May Day trip took place in June! Thirty six members, a full coach load, spent the day at Woodhorn Mining Museum and Archives. Possibly the highlight of the day was a talk by Sue Wood, Keeper of the Collections. Sue gave a very clear and comprehensive account of the work of the Record Office and its exciting possibilities for researchers from the very experienced to the complete novice. This was the fourth annual trip and the new committee will be looking at a venue for 2008 at its first meeting in the autumn.

The Committee functions quite well but could do better. To the reader of the journal it will seem large. This because it is a committee of volunteers, so anyone who is willing is welcome. We are always looking for new members to join. The principal aim is to have a working group where everyone does a small job so that the various tasks are broken down.

Since the last Volume was published the web-site has had a big facelift. The long promised index of past articles is now available. The only part which has not functioned properly is the discussion page where we have had ongoing problems. Efforts are being made to sort this out at the time of going to press. We are working on the idea of a new feature; little biographies of men and women active in the north east labour and trade union movement. We would welcome suggestions of people who should be included and even better, the biographies themselves! We might begin by including all the obituaries and appreciations the journal has carried over the years.

**2007**

**SubscriptionSubscriptionSubscription**

Individuals (including overseas): £15

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Institutions:: £25

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## 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
2006	Elsbeth Gould

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 30<sup>th</sup> 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**

### **Radical Ramble 2007:**

We hope to hold it in Sunderland this year, probably on Sunday 21<sup>st</sup> October. Full details will be circulated and will appear on the web-site.

### **Journal Volume 39 2008**

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 REPORT 2007**

*North East History* has kindly published an annual summary of progress by the Workers' Educational Association in the North East, and the following notes summarise highlights of 2006-07, reflecting steps taken by the WEA to relate adult learning to contemporary concerns.

As a social movement engaged in promoting and delivering adult education, the WEA has offered an astonishing range of courses and learning experiences throughout the Region. These extend from courses in woodworking for women in South Tyneside – maintaining a commitment to break down barriers facing women – to reclaiming a derelict allotment through a horticulture course for adults with learning difficulties as well as local community volunteers in Redcar. Some WEA provision on Tyneside pushed forward in popularising science and scientific controversies, and a WEA group in Bellingham gained an Awards for

All grant to publish their groundbreaking research on the emergence of State education in rural Northumberland.

Underpinning much of WEA course provision is a programme determined by WEA voluntary members through their local branches. During the year, the Association strengthened its involvement with voluntary members through meetings and conferences that demonstrated a high level of enthusiasm, and a willingness to take on board difficult issues connected with implementing equality of opportunity in adult learning.

The voluntary membership also took to the streets! WEA members launched a 'Right to Learn' campaign in the North East, aimed at modifying Government funding policies which are having a detrimental impact upon adult learning. Over a million places for adult learners have been axed during the past two years as funding moves into narrow tram tracks shaped by the skills strategy and the Leitch Report. The result is that provision geared towards community development, widening participation in adult learning and extending adult liberal education is seriously at risk, and with rising enrolment fees may exclude many from life long learning, or restrict adult liberal education to the better off.

WEA members took a petition onto the streets of Newcastle during Adult Learners' Week and received strong public support for the call to properly safeguard adult education funding with a more balanced policy from Government. WEA groups, and others interested in the issues, have lobbied MPs and the petition is now being widely circulated.

Supplementing the campaign, and embedding the WEA more centrally into the adult learning landscape of the Region, a regional conference on the theme 'Is there a skills target for imagination?' was held in April 2007. This attracted over 100 participants from across the WEA 'community' of tutors, staff, students and members as well as from the wider adult education world.

Using conferences to explore key questions was also evident during Fairtrade Fortnight. The WEA came together with The Co-operative and the Newcastle Fairtrade Partnership to hold a regional conference on the purpose of Fairtrade and the complex questions that it provokes. How can good employment practices be guaranteed by Fairtrade, are there limits to the kinds of products that Fairtrade can credibly embrace, what are the implications when major



supermarket chains such as Tesco become involved with Fairtrade, can school co-operatives survive as vehicles for Fairtrade when chocolate is replaced by fruit were just a few of the questions raised and discussed.

During 2007-08, the WEA will launch its 'Green Manifesto', focussing upon the Association's contribution to dealing with sustainability. This initiative will be reflected in WEA course provision and in working practices as well as in awareness raising. It will be a fascinating departure, and not least in the North East where the WEA's regional office moved back to central Newcastle after a gap of several years 'exile' on a fairly anonymous and remote commercial estate. Making the regional office accessible for meetings and courses and ensuring that it is used in an environmentally friendly manner is a chief aim of the coming year.

There is now a new dynamism about the WEA in the North East, and a growing recognition of the contribution that the Association can make in a period when national and global developments are opening up a period of political change.

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## ENTHUSIASMS

As editor I have to confess that I have not asked around as much as I should and I am sure that there is a lot of research going on out there that I ought to be aware of.. Please if you read this and have a project that you want to tell us about use the website [www.nelh.net](http://www.nelh.net)

As a historian for over twenty five years interspersed with many other activities I have been researching early joint stock companies in North East England. Apart from railways, constructed under the terms of Acts of Parliament there is very little official documentary material available for such undertakings until after the 1840s and even then it is patchy yet this is the period in which Political Economy was becoming the accepted theory and in which the notion of Capitalism as an 'ism' was being forged. The study is tentatively entitled **Capitalists, Speculators and Adventurers** ( the last term has a query to it. It should really be 'undertakers' but what would that look like on the back of a book 'entrepreneur' is anachronistic but may have to serve) Anyway it looks at how this first espousal of free market economics worked out in some of the companies set up in the North East after the deregulation of banking and company formation in 1825-6 and attempts to assess the impact of these developments on the work force and on labour relations. This is Labour history from a different angle but serves to illustrate the intrinsically exploitative nature of the system from the outset and has eerily Thatcherite overtones. Anybody who knows of any company papers in private hands that date back to pre 1850 please contact [me.win@clarence8.fsnet.co.uk](mailto:me.win@clarence8.fsnet.co.uk).  
Thanks

*Win Stokes*

## **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 2007-8**

### **The Annual General Meeting**

Wednesday 26<sup>th</sup> September

Lit & Phil 5.45 p.m.

The AGM will start at 6.15 and will be followed by

Malcolm Chase

University of Leeds

on

### **Chartism**

● ● ●

Wednesday 28<sup>th</sup> November

Lit & Phil

6.30 refreshments, 7 p.m.

Jill Liddington

University of Leeds

on

### **Rebel Girls: their fight for the vote**

● ● ●

Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> February 2008

Lit & Phil 7.00 p.m.

Paul & Marie Therese Mayne

### **Ford Madox Brown: artistic genius or bourgeois lackey?**

● ● ●

Thursday 10<sup>th</sup> April 2008

Lit & Phil 7.00 p.m.

Holger Nearing

University of Sheffield

### **CND: 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the first Aldermaston March**

● ● ●

Wednesday 11<sup>th</sup> June: To be arranged

**north east labour history society**

I would like to join the society

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*north east history*



## north east history volume 38

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- **Beginnings of District Nursing in Newcastle-upon-Tyne and Northumberland from 1883**
- **The Life of Labour Pioneer Lisbeth Sim**
- **Women's War Work in the North East Shipbuilding Industry**
- **The Sunderland Rent Strike of 1939**
- **The 1911 Seamen's Strike**
- **The Ouseburn 1900: industry and labour**



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**