

# north east history

Volume 43 2012



Ray Challinor

Nigel Todd

Katarina Friberg

Kath Connolly

*Chartism and Co-operation in the North East*

*The Wallsend Owenites*

*Trade, Gender and Membership-Co-operative  
Policy and Practice in North East England and  
Southern Sweden in the late 19th and early  
20th Century*

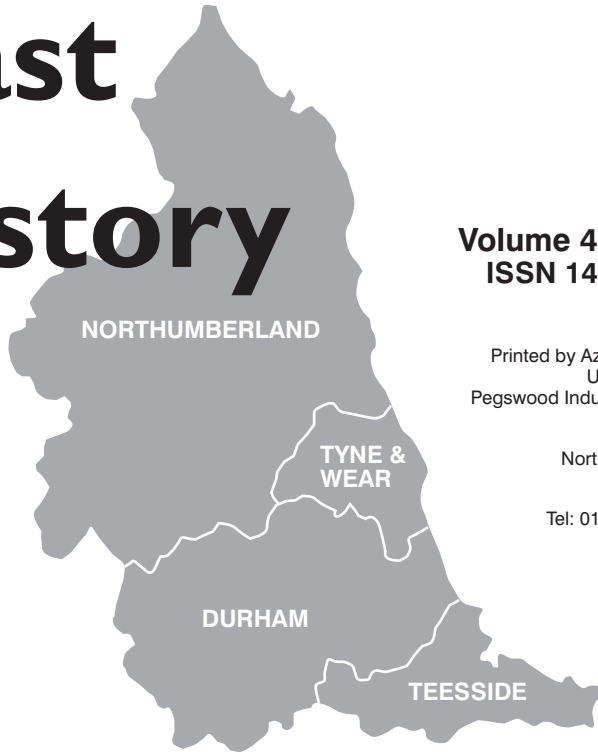
*A New Rochdale ? The Sunderland Poor Store*

journal of the north east labour history society



*north east history*

# north east history



**Volume 43 2012**  
**ISSN 14743248**  
**© 2012**

Printed by Azure Printing  
Units 1 F & G  
Pegswood Industrial Estate  
Pegswood  
Morpeth  
Northumberland  
NE61 6HZ

Tel: 01670 510271

**journal of the north east labour history society**

**[www.nelh.net](http://www.nelh.net)**

*north east history*

Editorial	5
Covers Notes & Acknowledgements	12
Notes on Contributors	15

**Articles**

**Co-operatives in the North East**

Chartism and Co-operation in the North East	Ray Challinor	18
The Wallsend Owenites.	Nigel Todd	25
Trade, Gender and Membership-Co-operative Policy and Practice in North East England and Southern Sweden in the late 19 <sup>th</sup> and early 20 <sup>th</sup> Century	Katarina Friberg	42
A New Rochdale? The Sunderland Poor Store.	Kath Connolly	57

**Coalfield Communities**

Easington Colliery:	Harry Barnes	76
Growth of a Community 1911-19.		
The Vane Tempest Vigil: A Case Study into the Complexity of Gender and Class in Collective Action. (2011 Winner The Sid Chaplin Labour History Trophy)	Deborah Smith	95
The Durham Miners' Gala: From History to Heritage.	David Hopper	113

**Specific Interest**

Hartley Pit Disaster January 16 <sup>th</sup> 1862. (Poem)	Keith Armstrong	129
The Trial of Alexander Whyte, 1793.	Peter Livsey	132

**Recollections**

Tyne View - A Journey Around the Port of Tyne. Before.	Michael Chaplin	143
--	-----------------	-----

*north east history*

**Appreciation**

The Story of Val Duncan's Political Life. Vicki Gilbert 152

**Interview**

Lee Hall: For Social Justice and a Better Future. John Charlton 157

**Reviews**

162

**At the Back...**

Secretary's Report 191

North East Popular Politics Project Report 194

Committee 206

Sid Chaplin Memorial Trophy 207

Constitution 208

## REVIEWS...

EDITED BY WILLIE THOMPSON

Ariel Hessayon and David Finnegan eds., **Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century Radicalism in Context**, Farnham, Ashgate, 2011 (*Win Stokes.*)

John Bohstedt, **The Politics of Provisions: Food riots, moral economy and market transition in England, c 1550-1850**. Farnham, Ashgate, 2010. (*John Charlton*)

Jennifer Newby, **Women's Lives: Researching Women's Social History, 1800-1939**, Barnsley: Pen and Sword Family History, Barnsley, 2011. (*Sarah Rennie*)

Joseph M Fewster, **The Keelmen of Tyneside: Labour Organisation and Conflict in the North-East Coal Industry 1660-1830**, Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2011. (*John Charlton*)

Ellen Phethean (ed.), **Hook into the Past: The Story of Mat Making in North East England**. Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2011. (*Stuart Howard*)

Marshall Hall, **Newcastle between the Wars – Byron Dawson's Tyneside**. Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2011 (*Steve Manchee*)

Sandy Hobbs and Willie Thompson, **Out of the Burning House: Political Socialization in the Age of Affluence**, Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011. (*Don Watson*)

Martin Bashforth, **The 11<sup>th</sup> Durham Light Infantry: In Their Own Names**, Amberley Publishing, 2011. (*Roger Hall*)

Stephen Landells, **Rescues in the Surf: the story of the Shields lifeboats 1789-1939**. Tyne Bridge Publishing in association with Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums, 2010) (*Win Stokes*)

**Reviews: "Close the Coalhouse Door:"**

**Popular Politics at Northern Stage Theatre.** (*Judith McSwaine*)

**Theatrical Treasure.** (*Sandy Irvine*)

## EDITORIAL

On behalf of the Journal's Editorial Collective, it is my privilege to edit the 2012 volume. As a member of the Society since the late 1960s, it has made me reflect upon the changes in the articles and format of the Journal; transformed over the years in both scale and scope. It has maintained the research, analysis, historical exposition, and oral history, but now also encourages interested volunteers, labour movement activists, 'amateur' and local historians, library and museum professionals alongside academics to contribute articles. We are truly for anyone interested in the history of the working folk of the North East.

From the informal **First Tuesday** sessions, there has been a ferreting out of lost sources producing a synthesis of local and national histories and the richness of the personal aspects of history. This has been enhanced by the fresh ideas about the direction our Society should take, especially with the development of the **North East Popular Politics Project, (NEPPP)** reaching beyond the surface history. All of this has had an impact on the contributions to our Journal. This is why I feel it is a privilege to follow those other editors from the past and to play my part in its production.

This year it has two basic themes, the Co-operative movement in the North East and the Coalmining Communities, together with the usual format of other articles and reports.

**CO-OPERATIVES IN THE NORTH EAST:** With 2012 designated as the UN International Year of Co-operatives, it is fitting that the history of Co-ops is a theme this year. These articles remind us what a remarkable contribution the Co-ops have made to the life of working people. I myself benefited from their education resources when working at Gateshead Co-op in the sixties. I am also reminded of the brief pamphlets produced for the Northern Area Co-operative Members Education Group in the early

1990s by Archie Potts (our current President) and the late Ray Challinor, (previous President), a link with our Society. All this and the articles show conclusively that the running of small, medium and large scale enterprise is not confined to the capitalist class. Working men and women have *that* ability through their collective organisation and development together with their added social and democratic ethos.

The article by Ray Challinor, which first appeared in the Journal's 1982 edition, draws upon the interconnection between the radical social reform movements in the early Victorian North East: Chartists, Co-operatives and socialists and the interplay of ideas and overlap of individuals. In reading this, one can sense the separate and distinct philosophies, the debate between social or political ideologies, radical or revolutionary reform; particularly the fact that it was the Chartists in the North East not the Owenite socialists who initiated the Co-operative retail outlets. But as Ray concludes.... "*by the 1850s Chartism had lost most of its mass support.....it was left to other forces in society to assist in the development of the Co-operative Movement on a much bigger and surer basis.*"

My thanks to Don Watson, NELHS secretary for sourcing and transcribing this article.

Nigel Todd follows on from that period by showing the growth of the Co-operative Movement and its' changing identity in the second half of 19<sup>th</sup> Century Tyneside. In this article, you find all the great radicals, former Owenites and Chartists, in the period Joseph Cowen called "militant democracy". From the Co-op Movement's launch in Blaydon in 1858 we follow the social, community and organisational developments: from retail to the co-operative operations like the Ouseburn Engineering Works and an Industrial Bank through to the main element of the article, Co-operation and education in Wallsend, a rapidly growing industrial town.

The "*bigger and surer basis*" is, in many ways, the subject of the article from Katarina Friberg. In a comparative study of the Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society and Konsumentföreningen Solidar, Sweden



in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, retail society membership policies, governance and practices are studied. It shows the effect of these in terms of exclusivity, openness and gender. Attention is drawn to how underneath the neutral open membership rules there were mechanisms that favoured men. In the campaigns to change this, specific reference is made to the Women's Co-operative Guild in England as a campaigning body for open membership, which links neatly to the next article.

The Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG) was responsible for important radical changes both to the membership of the movement and the wider community. Kath Connolly's article explains this and is, furthermore, a testament to the achievements of the **NEPPP**. As the coordinator of the Co-operative Movement volunteer group and an active participant, she researched the article and also made an initial presentation at a **First Tuesday** session, then wrote up the material on the Sunderland Poor Store (1902-1904). This showed, as she says in her introduction, the WCG was "*an influential and radical organisation of mainly working class women*". Their poverty campaign, the Co-operative settlement, the Poor Store and their closure, are fully documented in the article.

**COALMINING COMMUNITIES:** The communities in what was the Durham coalfield are still known as the Coalmining Communities. With the pit heaps landscaped and pit head winding gear relegated to museums, it might be thought that the past had no resonance within these communities. However the heritage of the mining past continues to have a powerful presence in the North East and particularly in these mining communities. Like the Co-ops., most North East families have a link to our mining past. The Beamish Museum, especially with events like the reenactment of the Silksworth Colliery strike and the eviction of miners from their homes in 1890, the Community Banner Committees and of course the Durham Miners Gala itself are keeping this heritage alive. These articles add to this.

The history of the early growth of one such a community, Easington

, in Harry Barnes' article continues from his piece in last year's Journal (Vol.42 ). From the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century to just after the first world war it was to become a "fully-fledged pit village", a close working class community. This was not merely a demographic shift, but the development of a strong sense of identity. The full flavour of life in such a community is given, from the social, the class struggle and the solidarity to the domestic. On the latter aspect one paragraph outlines the fact that the rigours of the pitmen's life at that time was mirrored by that of the women in the community.

The next article moves us to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the struggle continues with women from a variety of backgrounds joining in a community's struggle. The author, Deborah Smith, was a worthy winner last year of the Society's Sid Chaplin Award with her submission, of which the next article is an edited version. In her research into the women's vigil at the Vane Tempest Colliery, Seaham, during the first six months of 1993 until its closure in June of that year, she clearly indicates the complexity of gender and class in collective action. The vigil, a pit front camp against its closure, was a women-only group inspired by the Greenham Common Peace Camps. In describing the extending political and feminist ideology, and direct activism of the participants, she underlines the forging of links with other women activist groups. She then evidences gender stereotyping and its effect. Explicit in this thought provoking article is a challenge to continue to examine of the historic role of women in collective action.

The final article in this section considers how the Durham Miners Gala was pivotal in the historic development of the union, the Durham Miners Association (DMA) and community solidarity. The Gala, or the Big Meeting as it was and still is known, was a beacon for the miners' union in Durham. Dave Hopper takes us from it's early celebration of working class solidarity in 1871 to the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when no coal mines are left in Durham County. Even though the industry has gone, that solidarity is still significant in the the villages in the former

coalfield, and in fact the North East, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The Gala has extended the attendance, not only to the banners and recommissioned banners of the coalfield community Banner committees, but also the whole Labour Movement.

### **SPECIFIC INTEREST:**

Keith Armstrong's Poem, *The Hartley Pit Disaster January 16<sup>th</sup> 1862* is taken from the commemorative book, *Still the Sea Rolls On*, marking its 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary. The poem gives voice to the devastated community. This greatest of mining disaster, where 204 perished after being buried alive in an avoidable catastrophe, destroyed the lives of a generation of sons and husbands.

Peter Livsey last year offered his initial investigation and study for discussion at a **First Tuesday** session; the refined research is presented here in this article. It is the most interesting story of the arrest and trial of the baker Alexander Whyte in 1793 in Newcastle. The British establishment was panicking. The French revolution and the after effects of seditious libel charges against Thomas Paine was the background to the arrest. The arrest, trial, the eventual 'not guilty' verdict and the after effect which sees the establishment having got what it wanted, is a story which has a contemporary feel.

### **RECOLLECTIONS:**

For me it is indeed a privilege that Michael Chaplin has given us, as an article for the Journal, the Introduction to his new book '*Tyne View - A Journey Around The Port Of Tyne*'. In this introduction to his book, which celebrates the importance of the River Tyne to the Tynesiders, their work, community and culture, he recollects the influence of it's environs on his father the novelist Sid Chaplin. To a degree it completes the trilogy of Journal articles by his mother Rene (Journal Vols. 39 – 41).

**APPRECIATION** is the way the Society records the life of Society members who have died since the last Journal. Val Duncan's life is suitably celebrated in this appreciation of her political life, by her friend and comrade Vicki Gilbert. As the Society's Secretary, Val will be remembered for not only the work she carried out on our behalf, but fondly remembered by many, including me, for her help and friendship.

**INTERVIEW.** Lee Hall. John Charlton interviewed Lee Hall on his latest project, the new production of "Close the Coalhouse Door", a co-production between Northern Stage and Live Theatre. (See **REVIEWS**)

**REVIEWS** this year are, as usual, on a wide variety of subjects. The Editorial Collective thanks those colleagues who have given time to so ably review books and, in this instance, two reviews of the play, "Close the Coalhouse Door". My thanks are extended to Willie Thompson, our Reviews Editor, who made sure the selection to be reviewed would be of interest to all our members and readers.

**'At the back...** is the usual Society matters.

**Secretary Report** Don Watson gives an overview of the Society's year  
**North East Popular Politics Project Report.** John Charlton updates last years report showing great progress. To illustrate the oral history part of the project, the report includes a piece by John Stirling which underlines the fact that personal testimony is important for anyone interested in the history of working folk, bringing experiences that would otherwise go unrecorded into the public domain.

**And finally** the usual list of those who give their time and skills to make the Society work. And, of course, membership forms ... why not get a work colleague, friend or member of your family or your organization/branch/institution to join.

*north east history*

In preparing this volume my thanks to John Charlton and the 2011 editor Sandy Irvine and particularly Margaret Mound for her excellent proof reading and more in assisting this “apprentice” editor.

One final reflection. The study of labour history is to be put in the presence of people of heroic stature, some of whom “history” overlooks, but for me it is to feel history, a cause, come alive.

As Walter Crane, headlined his political cartoon in *The Labour Leader* 1894.

“the cause of labour is the hope of the world”.

**John Creaby**, on behalf of Editorial Collective:

John Charlton, John Creaby (editor 2012) , Lewis Mates, Paul Mayne (Society Chair), Ben Sellers. Win Stokes, Willie Thompson, (reviews editor), Don Watson (Society Secretary).

## COVER NOTES AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### **Front Cover: THE BANNER OF THE WOMEN'S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD.**

This is a national banner of the Women's Co-operative Guild (which changed its name in the mid 1960s, to what we now know, the Co-operative Women's Guild, CWG). I am grateful to Colette Harber, General Secretary of the CWG for permission to use this photo.

Founded in 1883, the CWG was a pioneering organisation for working class women. At a time of dual exploitation, exploited at home and at work, and no public voice, this was an organisation, truly radical and feminist, which gave them this voice. It became a powerful means of educating them.

It is inspiring to note their early action against sexual prejudice, calling for the vote, maternity benefit, child care, and demanding easier divorce. With regards the latter, such was the culture of the time, the majority on the male dominated Co-operative establishment withdrew their funding and demanded they desist from making such a demand. They stuck to their principles, even though it had a dire effect on their finances. Eventually the establishment gave in. They were (and are) eminent campaigners for peace and in 1933 produced the first White Poppies. This was not started as disrespectful of the Red Poppy Appeal which appeared at that time. As many had lost or had injured husbands, sons, brothers, lovers due to that conflict, it was a symbol for peace and no more war!

The CWG has a long history of being the voice for women, peace and co-operation.

For info. [www.cooperativewomensguild.coop](http://www.cooperativewomensguild.coop)

**The Back Cover: FOLLONSBY (WARDLEY) LODGE  
RECOMMISSIONED BANNER.**

The reproduced Banner was inaugurated in Wardley on 18th June 2011 and had its first showing at the 2011 Gala. The success of bringing the Banner back to life is due to the efforts of Dave Douglas: a miner, academic, but mainly a miner : a socialist. Raised in the Wardley Coal community and at first working in “Wardley’ seams”, he went via other pits, Ruskin College, and university education to being awarded a post graduate degree, always though remaining a miner. Using his research and linking to his local community, a Banner Community and Heritage Group was established supported by the Gateshead Local Authority. This is what has been happening across most of the old Coal Communities, Banner Groups keeping the working class culture alive.

Now working closely with the local primary school where the Follonsby Banner has been on permanent display in their school hall, the children are engaged in the mining community heritage project. School events have been arranged; history walks to pit sites, to the graves of Tommy Hepburn and the 1812 Fellinging pit disaster victims. The children could connect with these victims as many were the same age, had the same names and local community connections. The children and parents with the school have commissioned there own ‘Lodge banner’ as part of the project, with it being paraded at the Durham Miners Gala 2012.

An excellent history booklet \* was produced for the inauguration event. This not only gives the stories behind this intriguing banner, but also the individuals whose images appear on it, Lenin, Keir Hardy Arthur Cook , but particularly the local Follonsby Pit working class giant George Harvey. Space doesn't allow me to give worth to this But contact details follow: to support Follonsby (Wardley) miners lodge banner association or to purchase the \*Follonsby Lodge Banner History (£10 post paid.) contact Dave Douglass at: [djdouglass@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:djdouglass@hotmail.co.uk)

This photograph was taken at the inauguration ceremony on 18<sup>th</sup> June 2011.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

### **Articles.**

#### **The Wallsend Owenites.**

Image: North Road Church, 1871 courtesy of Lynda McQuillan, Wallsend Methodist Church'

#### **A New Rochdale? The Sunderland Poor Store**

Photos: courtesy of the London School of Economics :Margaret Llewelyn Davies Collection

#### **Easington Colliery: Growth of a Community**

Photos: courtesy of Durham County Record Office

#### **The Vane Tempest Vigil: A Case Study into the Complexity of Gender & Class in Collective Action.**

Photo: courtesy of Jean Spense personal archives

#### **Durham Miners Gala**

Photos: 1925 courtesy of George Robson. Other Photos courtesy of Ken Rowley.

#### **The Trial of Alexander Whyte**

Image; courtesy of Newcastle City Library

#### **TYNE VIEW - A JOURNEY AROUND THE PORT OF TYNE:**

Before Photos: courtesy of Charles Bell.

#### **Appreciation; Val Duncan;**

Photos courtesy of Bill Duncan, personal archives

#### **INTERVIEW: Lee Hall**

Stage Photos: Courtesy of Keith Pattison



## NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

**Harry Barnes** was born at Easington Colliery into a mining family. A railway clerk, national serviceman, adult student, university lecturer, MP and, now retired, lives in Derbyshire.

**Ray Challinor**, a respected academic was a much loved, leading light in the area's left wing politics from his arrival from Lancashire in 1970. For many years was President of the North East Labour History Society and published numerous articles in North East History. Ray died in 2011.

**Michael Chaplin** has written extensively for theatre, radio and television. His memoir of the most beautiful picture house in Britain, 'Come and See - The Beguiling Story of the Tyneside Cinema' appeared last year.

**Kath Connolly** is a volunteer with our North East Popular Politics Project and has coordinated the group of interested Co-operators . She is currently serving as an elected member of the Durham Area Committee of the Co-operative Group.

**Katarina Friberg** is Lecturer in History at Linnaeus University, Växjö/Kalmar, Sweden. Her research interests include studies of organisational practice and theory, social movements (in particular the Consumer Co-operative Movement) and town planning. In 2008 she was Leverhulme Research Fellow at Teesside University, Middleborough.

**Vicki Gilbert** was a design Technology Teacher in South Tyneside for over twenty five years. She has been a political, trade union, Co-operative and CND activist for most of her life. She helped form and is a member of Tyne & Wear Left Unity, Keep Our NHS Public, Stop the War and now,

North East Womens\* Voices and the Making Waves Choir.’

**Dave Hopper** is currently General Secretary of the Durham Miners Association. A coal miner all his working life, in Wearmouth Colliery, becoming a lodge official. In 1985 was elected General Secretary of the Durham Area of the National Union of Mineworkers until the last working pit was closed. He heads up the organizing of the Durham Miners Gala.

**Peter Livsey** was Senior Inspector with Durham Local Education Authority. He was very involved in the 2007 Remembering slavery project and is a key member of the North East Popular Politics Project. His previous article on Newcastle in the 1790s was published in NEH 2010.

**Deborah Smith** graduated from Newcastle University in 2011 and won the Sid Chaplain Memorial Prize the same year. She is currently working within the NHS.

**Nigel Todd** is a co-operative activist based in Newcastle upon Tyne. A recent North East Regional Director of the WEA, he serves on the Board of Governors of the Co-operative College and was Education & Member Relations Officer of the former North Eastern Co-operative Society for a number of years.

# **NORTH EASTERN AND CUMBRIAN CO-OPERATIVE PARTY**

**SISTER PARTY OF THE LABOUR PARTY**



## **POLITICS FOR PEOPLE: THE FEELINGS MUTUAL**

“Cooperatives are a reminder to the international community that it is possible to pursue both economic viability and social responsibility.’ UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, at the International Year of Cooperatives 2012

From our History we learn.....in the Present we act.....  
for the Future that is better

**FOR ALL**

**To Join Us and for further Information contact:**

**Peter Smith, Region Secretary**

Tel: 0191 213 2102 Mob: 07548 381543

EMAIL: PSMITHQTD@ANOTHER.COM

## CHARTISM AND CO-OPERATION IN THE NORTH EAST.

Ray Challinor

The highpoint of North East Chartism coincided with a burst of Owenite socialist activity in the region. The two movements were complementary and competitive. Both appealed to the disgruntled, those seeking to accomplish radical change, but they possessed separate, distinct philosophies. Not surprisingly, when their paths crossed it led to disagreement as often as it did to agreement. Representatives of the two organisations were in the habit of holding public debates. The Owenite socialists argued that the fundamental evil was the existence of a class society; the political system was a product of this evil, not the cause. Chartists, on the other hand, saw the State as the immediate enemy. Parliamentary legislation, such as the Poor Law Amendment Act and the food taxes, cruelly hurt working people. They would only be abolished once the masses could elect their own representatives to Parliament. By raising other, less urgent issues, Chartists thought the socialists divided and weakened the forces striving for change. Arguments about property, sexual morality and theology tended to distract, making people less concerned to win the Charter; to which the socialists replied, it was necessary to understand the laws of human nature before it would be possible to make changes for the better.

The Owenites had a much smaller following, confined to the more intellectual section of the working class. They had established branches of the Universal Community of Rational Religionists by 1841 in Newcastle, Sunderland and Darlington, as well as having little knots of adherents in Gateshead and South Shields. The branches enjoyed a rich internal life,

with numerous debates, lectures, socials and even a tea party where four special types of bread were eaten.<sup>1</sup> The Owenites did not strive to have the immediate impact or the mass support secured by the Chartists. Rather they saw conversion as a slow, gradual process: people would eventually be won over by the force of rational argument and the personal example they set.

In their relations with the Chartists, the socialists sought to maintain a dialogue while criticising aspects of Chartist policy with which they disagreed. Hence they deplored the use of violence for political ends, but nevertheless called for clemency for the leaders of the Newport Rising. They invited two prominent Chartists to open a social function of the Newcastle branch. On another occasion, they invited a Chartist speaker to address them. But such overtures were always liable to be rebuffed: a Sunderland meeting, where socialists had passed a resolution calling for reconciliation with the Chartists, shortly afterwards ended in confusion when a violent row broke out with Chartists in the audience!<sup>2</sup>

Even so, the Owenites soon discovered their approach secured results. Several prominent Chartists joined their ranks. Gamsby, of Lambton Street, Bishop Wearmouth, left the Chartists and became secretary of the Sunderland socialists. Richard Ayre, a leading figure in Newcastle working class politics, tried to remain active in both organisations. The same was true, at least for a time, of George Binns and James Williams. They were both of considerable stature in the Movement. In 1840, Binns was so popular that he was elected to the six-man committee of the National Charter Association. The influence of the two men is described by R.G. Gammage in his book on Chartism: 'Williams and Binns kept the County of Durham in a perpetual state of agitation. There was scarcely a day in the week that did not witness one or two meetings. Where rooms were not to be obtained the broad canopy of heaven served for a covering, and a large number of meetings were thus held in the open air.'<sup>3</sup>

The authorities, angered by their activities, arrested George Binns at Darlington in April 1840. Along with Bragg, manager of the local Co-operative Store, he faced charges of obstructing the Market Place on Easter

Tuesday. Binns claimed the bye-law under which he was arrested had been meant to deal with carts, cattle and dogs, not to prevent public assembly. This did not stop him being sentenced to three months' imprisonment. Enduring the ordeal with fortitude, he found time to fling defiance at his persecutors in the form of a poem published in the Northern Star. <sup>4</sup>

Almost immediately on his release from Durham gaol, George Binns returned to resume his agitation in Darlington and South Durham. In his absence, he discovered that the Co-operative Store, which had been used for Chartist meetings and organising activity, had grown increasingly popular with the town's inhabitants. As a consequence it had become very prosperous. <sup>5</sup>

This good news probably did little to mitigate Binns' anxiety. Hardly had the prison gates clanged behind him than he had to face, along with his colleague Williams, other, more serious charges – those of sedition and illegal assembly. They arose from a meeting Williams and Binns had addressed at Sunderland Town Moor on 15<sup>th</sup> July 1839. It had taken place in a highly fraught atmosphere: Parliament had just rejected the first Chartist petition, with its 1,300,000 signatures; the authorities had arrested many of the Chartist leaders, including Julian Harney and Dr. John Taylor, two of the North East's delegates at the Convention; and the Convention had called upon working people throughout Britain to reply by the adoption of ulterior measures, such as withdrawing money from the banks, exclusive dealing and a general strike. The meeting's purpose had been to rally Chartist supporters in the area. Tremendous cheering came from the crowd when miners from South Durham, who had commandeered a railway train, arrived to swell the numbers. Undoubtedly, feelings were running high throughout Durham County. When Harney was arrested at Bedlington in Northumberland, he was taken to be tried at Birmingham by a rather circuitous route, which included going to Carlisle. Perhaps the authorities adopted this stratagem because they feared there might be attempts to secure Harney's release had he travelled through the industrial parts of the North East. <sup>6</sup>

Williams and Binns were fortunate that they came before Durham Assizes only in July 1840. In the intervening year relative tranquillity had been restored. The authorities could afford to take a more lenient attitude. Indeed, they were anxious not to make martyrs. So the two men were both found guilty. Both were given six-months sentences, but Binns' was suspended for two years.<sup>7</sup>

Chartism may have suffered a severe setback in 1839, yet in some respects it nevertheless had made progress. Admittedly, Britain's rulers had not conceded the vote. They had remained unmoved, despite the mass meetings, petition and illegal drilling with arms. While the general strike had proved abortive and the run on the banks ineffective, there was one of the ulterior measures that helped to implant an important idea in working class consciousness that had significance for generations to come. Co-operative retail trading ventures sprung up in various parts of the region.

Interestingly, the Chartists, not the Owenite socialists, were usually responsible for initiating them. Robert Owen himself reacted rather unenthusiastically, as G.J. Holyoake states in his account: 'When Mr. Owen first came over from America, he looked somewhat coolly on these "Trading Associations", and very candidly declared that their mere buying and selling formed no part of his grand co-operative scheme'.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, his followers in the North East never believed the socialist millennium would be borne in on slices of bacon or pounds of butter. In contrast, the Chartists had a much more sanguine attitude. As Thomas Devyr told a Newcastle meeting, co-operative businesses would have their directors democratically elected, and therefore would be an example of Chartists principles in action.<sup>9</sup> Other advocates argued that co-operative retailing would cut prices, which would make working people more affluent. Concomitantly, as wealth and activity grew, so would political influence. James Williams envisaged that, with increased co-operation and less competition, they would also become more enlightened and culturally aware. They might also win seats on town councils.<sup>10</sup>

In the first few giddy months, almost everything seemed attainable. It was calculated that if all people living in Tyne and Wear paid a shilling each week, it would bring in a regular income of between £200,000 and £250,000. It would, as Devyr pointed out, be sufficient to transform the whole nature of society:

‘They could accomplish almost anything. They could purchase coalfields to employ men persecuted by the present tyrants; they could build ships, employ sailors, and give the famished of London a cheap fire. If any of them through disease or misfortune came to destitution, it would be easier for the company to locate him in a neat little cottage with a garden of vegetables, fruit and flowers instead of sending him to the tender mercies of the philosophic Whigs’ scientific skill and to solitary confinement. Let this system be carried out on an extended scale and it would sweep social misery and political tyranny from the face of the land and make idle schemers do honest labour for their living.’<sup>11</sup>

Three weeks later, addressing a public demonstration organised by the Co-operative Joint Stock Bank, Devyr went on to hold out exceedingly enticing prospects before his audience:

‘By combination, the workmen of Tyne and Wear could shortly become possessed of more money than the whole of their oppressors put together; could have their own estates, their own coalfields, their own ships...’<sup>12</sup>

Amid great expectations, the North East Joint Stock Provisions Company began trading. At first, the response was exceptionally warm. Branches started up all over Tyneside. Demand was buoyant. Each week a Company agent journeyed to Morpeth, where he bought £500 of beef to be sold in the stores. As custom grew, other butchers were compelled to stop trading; grocers and cheese-mongers generally felt the lash of this new competition.<sup>13</sup> Chartists looked on, quietly satisfied, at the difficulties of the shopocracy, which helped to buttress the conservative Establishment. Retailers who were hostile to Chartism soon discovered themselves victims of exclusive dealing, where workers only patronised co-operative stores and pro-Chartist shops.<sup>14</sup> In some mining villages



housewives organised a strike 'to have no more provisions except at a scale of prices set by them'.<sup>15</sup>

Yet, a little over a year later—in October 1840—the North East Provisions Company ran into grave economic problems. With the splendid vision of what they hoped to achieve through co-operation still fresh in their memories, many supporters felt extremely bitter. They looked around for a scapegoat. One of the most vocal critics, William Cook, of the Bluebell Inn, Gateshead, went so far as to hint that Richard Ayre had been guilty of financial irregularities.<sup>16</sup> Almost certainly, however, the causes of the catastrophe lay much deeper than personal deficiencies: more important were the inadequate amount of capital available, the over-ambitious plans and the absence of proper accountancy. On top of all this, there was the hostility of the authorities. The police harassed co-operative activities and arrested some of the leading members.<sup>17</sup> Obviously, this created strains not usually experienced by normal businesses.

The collapse of the Chartist trading venture did not result in a return to the position which previously prevailed. Rather it meant fragmentation, the proliferation of a large number of tiny enterprises run by the workers themselves. These utilised the knowledge and skills acquired during the ill-fated project. From the Chartist standpoint, these new developments were a mixed blessing. It was undoubtedly good for working class families to buy their provisions more cheaply and, perhaps, have better quality. On the other hand, the involvement of quite a lot of their leading members in managing and running these small co-ops sapped the strength of the political organisation. George White, who had been Newcastle's delegate to the Chartist Convention in 1840, claimed they had weakened themselves by starting an extensive system of co-operative ventures, 'the attention of their most active members being almost solely engrossed in weighing tea and sugar, and measuring potatoes, they neglected the public meetings. The splendid spirit of Chartism, which previously existed, was allowed to die away'.<sup>18</sup> Frequently, in the next few years, the same criticism was heard. For instance, Ernest Jones, the most popular speaker at North East Chartist

meetings in the 1850s, stoutly maintained that they had to achieve political power first and co-operation second; to do it the other way round would be to put the cart before the horse.<sup>19</sup> Yet, despite such opinions being expressed, a strong tendency in North East Chartism clung to its belief in the value of co-operation and sought to promote suitable projects.<sup>20</sup>

The problem was that by the 1850s Chartism had lost most of its mass support, its vitality, its ability to foster new ventures within the working class. In the third quarter of the nineteenth century, therefore, it was left to other forces in society to assist in the development of the Co-operative Movement on a much bigger and surer basis.

(This article first appeared in North East Labour History no16 1982)

## Notes

- 1 *New Moral World* 27<sup>th</sup> February 1841
- 2 Ibid 22<sup>nd</sup> May 1841
- 3 R. G. Gammage, *History of the Chartist Movement* p. 32-2
- 4 *Northern Star* 9<sup>th</sup> May 1840
- 5 *Northern Liberator* 23<sup>rd</sup> May 1840
- 6 A. R. Schoyen, *The Chartist Challenge* p.73-5
- 7 R. G. Gammage, op cit p.181; *Northern Liberator* 1<sup>st</sup> August 1840
- 8 G.J. Holyoake, *The History of Co-operation* p.73
- 9 *Northern Liberator* 12<sup>th</sup> October 1839
- 10 Ibid 7<sup>th</sup> September 1839
- 11 Ibid 12<sup>th</sup> October 1839
- 12 Ibid 26<sup>th</sup> October 1839
- 13 T. A. Devyr, *The Old Book of the Nineteenth Century* p.163
- 14 *Port of Tyne Pilot* 14<sup>th</sup> December 1839
- 15 *Tyne Mercury* 14<sup>th</sup> July 1843
- 16 *Northern Liberator* 10<sup>th</sup> October 1840
- 17 ibid
- 18 *Northern Star* 2<sup>nd</sup> September 1843
- 19 R. G. Gammage op. cit. 357-8
- 20 *Northern Star* 13<sup>th</sup> July 1850

## THE WALLSEND OWENITES

Nigel Todd

The day before the centenary of the birth of Robert Owen on 14 May 1871, the Newcastle Daily Chronicle, owned by the prominent Tyneside Radical Joseph Cowen, published a lengthy editorial celebrating Owen as inspiring ‘the onward path along which we have been travelling.’ Owen, a ‘great and good man’, was described as the guiding influence behind many movements for reform, despite being ‘assailed by bigotry and intolerance ... in the name of religion’. He had been ‘the persevering advocate of universal education, when education had few friends.’ And Owen’s pioneering efforts in establishing infant schools, his insight that ‘crime was the product of ignorance and neglect’, and his fostering of the Co-operative Movement with its ‘material and educational advantages’ were all listed as lasting achievements. Owen, it was said, ‘did not live in vain’ and ‘no one now questions’ that his belief that social circumstances shape human behaviour ‘contains a large amount of truth.’<sup>1</sup>

### **THE OWENITE ‘DIASPORA’**

These were bold statements, even in the setting of a widespread political and industrial ferment that gripped Tyneside in the early 1870s. Yet they had deep roots in an Owenite heritage informing not just individual activists, such as Cowen, but also the co-operatives. Though long finished as an organised movement, Owenism could still count adherents in the 1860s and 1870s constituting an informal Owenite intellectual ‘Diaspora’, especially among co-operators who regarded Owen’s ideas as a formative influence on their own Movement. For the latter, Owen’s championing of the value of education in ‘the system of co-operation, not only in the work of distribution, but in that of production’ underpinned their principles and ambitions.<sup>2</sup>

The dispersal of Owenites and their 'fellow travellers' over the 1840s-1870s into 'separate channels: trade unionism, practical co-operation, social science, spiritualism, free thought (which after 1850 was known as Secularism) and the new women's movement' was well described by Barbara Taylor in her book *Eve and the New Jerusalem* that focussed principally on women.<sup>3</sup> Men also followed the Diaspora, including a robust Tyneside fragment. Joseph Cowen, for example, has already been mentioned. He regarded Owen's methods as 'dreamy', but Owen's portrait had been one of those displayed to inspire people at the huge garden party held by Cowen to celebrate the radical Blaydon Mechanics' Institute in 1859.

There were others, too. Cowen's friend, John Elliott, a former Chartist and a Tyneside detective folk-hero, controversially became Gateshead's chief constable in 1863. As 'a follower of Mr. Robert Owen, who laboured so assiduously to popularise the maxim that man is a creature of circumstances', Elliott invented an early form of social enquiry report, used with the local magistrates when he considered that poverty and illiteracy had contributed to the criminality of those he prosecuted.<sup>4</sup> Others included Charles Haslam, another one-time Chartist and later a Newcastle chemist and restaurant owner, who had known Owen in Manchester at the end of the 1830s. Haslam was central to Secularism on Tyneside in the 1860s and 1870s.<sup>5</sup> W.E. Adams, Cowen's crusading editor of the *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, was another who had glided into the fringes of Owenism in the 1840s and who retained connections with ex-Owenites such as George Jacob Holyoake.<sup>6</sup>

It was Holyoake and the Co-operators who provided the main bridge between the Owenite period and the rest of the nineteenth century. Many leading Co-operators, like Holyoake, had been deeply involved with Owenism, including E.T. Craig, E.O. Greening, Lloyd Jones, William Pare, and several of the Rochdale Pioneers, and they remained significant in the Co-operative Movement as it grew during the second half of the century. As elsewhere, several North East co-operative societies owed

something of their origins to reading groups that studied Holyoake's book, *Self-Help by the People: History of Co-operation in Rochdale*, published in 1858, and the author maintained frequent contacts with the area, notably through Cowen, and then in the active republican and secularist movements of the early 1870s.

On the other hand, the Owenite Diaspora also represented an adaptation to the changed conditions of mid-Victorian Britain. Now, Owenite ideas shaped more limited social reform, leaving behind the ideal of self-supporting Villages of Co-operation and communities as the basis for a New Moral World. This was evident even in the more radical Co-operators' commitment to the value of education, where they faced an incomplete and uneven framework of charity, church, colliery, and private enterprise schools catering for working class children.

## **CO-OPERATION AND EDUCATION**

The Rochdale Pioneers adopted the Owenite zeal for schools and education, providing 'a school for young persons' between 1850 and 1855. This had to close when the Industrial and Provident Societies' Act was amended in 1855 in a way that made provision for education technically illegal, and it was not until 1862 that the authority to spend co-operatives' money on education was clearly restored.<sup>7</sup> Yet the aspiration did not fade away. Although the legal restriction probably dissuaded numbers of new societies from including education in their original objects, members of the Rochdale Pioneers' Society worked hard to keep the flame alive, with Abraham Greenwood telling a co-operative gathering in July 1860:

'in time they expected to behold a people's college, where they could send their children to be educated, and they would neither be sent to one charity school or another (Loud applause). He felt that in course of time they would be able to engage first-class teachers, and give their children a first-class education.'<sup>8</sup>

Adverse trading conditions, accompanying the Lancashire 'Cotton Famine' produced by the American Civil War, prevented the Rochdale

Society from re-opening a school, though one of the founding Pioneers, William Cooper, was optimistic in November 1866:

‘We also entertain the hope that the day is not too far distant when Schools will be established in connection with the [Rochdale] society, to educate the rising generation of Co-operators.’<sup>9</sup>

Sadly, Cooper died two years later at the early age of 46, and while Greenwood continued to promote education within the Movement, his energies were largely required in building up the Co-operative Wholesale Society.

Fortunately, education had other allies, and not least Henry Pitman, editor of the influential monthly magazine, *The Co-operator*, from 1860. Many societies got around the legal ban on spending money on education by distributing copies of *The Co-operator* to their members as ‘propaganda.’ And Pitman gave editorial prominence to the whole range of Co-operative principles. In 1865, the year when he made a speaking tour of North East co-operatives, most issues of the magazine contained a lead feature stressing education as good in itself. In the spirit of adaptation, Pitman argued that societies should take the lead in campaigning for a national system of state schools by organising petitions and deputations. Whilst displaying a degree of over-confidence in the potential power of the Movement to head a growing national discontent about the piecemeal provision of education – a pressure for reform that led to the foundation of the National Education League in 1869 to promote non-sectarian schools - it also marked a change from envisaging schools run directly by Co-operators.

## **WALLSEND**

One of the societies that subscribed to *The Co-operator* was at Wallsend whose secretary, Robert Douglass, wrote to Pitman in November 1865:

‘The ‘Co-operative Dialogues’ you sent were distributed amongst the members, with the request that when read by them they would give them to some person unacquainted with Co-operation and the benefits to be derived therefrom, and a recommendation to read ‘*The Co-operator*’, 12

doz. of which we take every fortnight. A resolution was unanimously passed [at the Society's 13<sup>th</sup> quarterly meeting] that we subscribe 1d. per member annually to the Editorial Fund. Enclosed you will find P.O. order for £1. 1s., our number of members being at present 250.' <sup>10</sup>

The Wallsend Industrial Co-operative Society had its origins in 1861, as Robert Douglass explained in an earlier report to *The Co-operator*:

'In November, 1861, a few working men of this village, with much difficulty, got up a meeting to try and impress on the minds of their fellow workmen the utility of bettering their condition by Co-operation. 30 names having been taken down as subscribers, and a room got for holding meetings on Saturday evenings, after toiling for the space of six months we found we had raised a sum of £86. 12s. We took a dwelling-house, the only suitable place we could get, to commence a grocery and provision store.... We opened on 1<sup>st</sup> May last, to the great disappointment of our shopkeeping neighbours and other opponents of the Co-operative movement who kept firing upon us with unabated fury until we held our first quarterly meeting, when they found that their shot had taken no effect on either our ship or crew, for every man was still at his post, with our ship in first-rate trim.' <sup>11</sup>

Douglass was astute about the opposition. The original members had to deflect ferocious hostility from their competitors and local cynicism, so much so that children were sent furtively to pay the members' initial subscriptions in a room above the Duke of York public house so that their parents could avoid disparaging 'banter'. There were obstacles in renting shop premises, until the sympathetic Charles Adams, who acted as a property manager for a colliery company, offered a shop at Long Row. Douglass recalled that 'Mr. Adams was subject to great insults and was very much censured by the opponents of the Society.' But Adams knew his Co-operator friends very well. As a former coal miner who had become an 'efficient' self-educated teacher after an accident, Adams had taught Douglass and some of the others as children at his colliery school. Even so, parts of the initial activity necessarily displayed a 'cloak-and-dagger' flavour. The first consignments of flour, for instance, had to be sent 'from

the mill in strange carts, as there was always a risk of the miller losing his trade if it became known who the merchants and millers were who had the audacity to supply the store. An intimation to this effect was made known to some of them previously.’

A mixture of antagonism and disbelief was not uncommon, but Douglass and his colleagues had to contend, as well, with the hard circumstances of Wallsend as Tyneside’s ‘wild west’ town that did not always make for social solidarity. Wallsend was growing rapidly based on coal, chemicals and shipbuilding, but housing and public health conditions were primitive, and there were few school places before the 1870 Education Act. Opposition to improvements was fierce and generally driven by manufacturers keen to minimise their rates bills. Yet the social pressures were accumulating as the recorded population rose from 6,715 in 1861 to 10,458 by 1871.<sup>12</sup>

In some ways, the formation of the Wallsend Society was typical. Led by a few working men – in this case enginemen and pressers from various oil works and the shipyards – the first foodstuffs were collected in a handcart from Newcastle and wheeled to Wallsend where the ‘shop’ was run by volunteers. Mistakes were made, of course, and one of the original members later recalled, jokingly, that ‘when they first began to purchase, they bought sugar that no one could use, tea that no one could drink, and butter that no one could eat.’<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, experience and dedication won through, combined with a passion for social change and an acknowledgement that ‘the commencement of a co-operative society was in itself an education to all who were identified with it.’<sup>14</sup>

The Wallsend pioneers evidently developed very competent people among their leaders. Chief of these was Robert Douglass. Born at Wallsend in 1831, Douglass began working life as a Tyne waterman and then as crane engineman removing ships’ ballast at the Carville Shore. At the age of 30, he learned an entirely new trade, serving as manager and secretary of the Society for the next 37 years, as well as spending 21



years as an elected member of the Wallsend Board of Health and then the Urban District Council. When he died in 1900, his obituary recorded that 'his name has been synonymous with Co-operation not only in Wallsend but generally in northern co-operative circles.' A particular reference was made to his 'commercial integrity' and 'administrative ability.' He was known for 'simple tastes, frugal habits, and mild pursuits' namely gardening and his rather soft dogs. Regarded as 'ever ready to assist' others, he was seen as someone with a 'strong personality' and a man for whom 'organised religion had ...little or no appeal.'

Douglass was not alone in his scepticism about religion. Another principal initiator of the Society, Thomas Blenkinsop, who served as treasurer, trustee and cartman, and general operational problem solver, until his death in 1891, 'made no pretensions to piety' either. Together, they were a classic double act. The 'reserved, genial and kindly' Douglass, a bachelor who preferred to live quietly with his brother and other relatives, made a fine contrast with Blenkinsop, an 'ardent' member of the Wallsend Cycling Club, and a 'character' of 'ponderous physical proportions, brusque in manner, and unceremonious in deportment' who, once met, was not easily forgotten.<sup>15</sup>

A key point to register about Robert Douglass and the Wallsend Co-operative Society was their wider vision for Co-operation than simply shop keeping and paying dividends. In 1873, the Co-operative News noted, tellingly:

'This society may be said to take the first place among the stores in Northumberland. They do not merely confine their attention to the sale of tea and coffee, butter and eggs, but seek to elevate the social and intellectual condition of the members.'<sup>16</sup>

## **THE MILITANT DEMOCRACY**

Context was significant, too. Reforming zeal placed Douglass and the Wallsend Co-operators at the heart of Tyneside's distinctive 'militant democracy' in the early 1870s. This was a dynamic episode shaped by

a mixture of industrial militancy, political radicalism, Irish nationalism, and Co-operation that had been germinating since at least the middle of the 1860s. It spanned the trade unions' Nine Hours League that won shorter working days across the British engineering industry in 1871 after an intense struggle with the Tyneside employers. Strikes and disputes broke out in other trades, and there were overlaps with political campaigns for abolishing the monarchy and promoting Secularism (with republican clubs and Secular Society branches formed in villages and towns around Newcastle). The National Education League that had a strong branch at Newcastle in 1869 (with Cowen at its head) held meetings in surrounding districts, and there was local sympathy for the Paris Commune. In addition to a vibrant Irish agitation for Home Rule and the release of Fenian political prisoners, there was a considerable demand to win the vote among the miners who had been left out of the 1867 extension of the household franchise due to their housing tenure arrangements. Women added to the mix in 1872 by boycotting butchers who had increased their prices in the mining villages of Northumberland and Durham, revealing, as their mass campaign swept the coalfields and into Tyneside, an ability to organise meetings and demonstrations that articulated an acute awareness of the politics of women's rights.

At the centre of the agitations stood Joseph Cowen. In fact, he coined the phrase the 'militant democracy' at a meeting connected with the national Co-operative Congress held at Newcastle upon Tyne in April 1873. Cowen, chosen to preside over the Congress, marshalled all his political stage-management skills and press resources to make the event absolutely spectacular. During the Congress, and at a coincidental trade union rally of 200,000 people on Newcastle's Town Moor, held in support of the miners' claim for the franchise, Cowen argued that the 'militant democracy' required strong trade unions, a co-operative economy to end the divide between labour and capital and a parliament elected on a wide suffrage (which, for Cowen, like Holyoake, included women as well as men).

Co-operation was fundamental to the 'militant democracy'. The Movement's North East launch took place in 1858 at Blaydon, where Cowen had read chapters from Holyoake's book about Rochdale each week to potential Co-operators. It reflected the rapid growth of the consumer co-operatives in the North East, numbering over 43,000 members in Northumberland and Durham by 1873. And within fifteen years of Blaydon Co-operative Society opening its doors, co-operation was marking out a niche in industrial production. Producer co-operatives appeared in cabinet making, tailoring, corn milling, printing, coal mining, shipbuilding, brush making, gas and lighting, and dairying. Then, in the hothouse of the Nine Hours Strike, a large, high profile co-operative engineering works was started at Ouseburn, Newcastle, in July 1871, managed by Cowen's associate, Dr. John Rutherford, a popular local educator and Radical.

To help fund the producer co-operatives, and particularly the Ouseburn Engineering Works, Cowen and Rutherford appealed to trade unions and co-operatives to come forward as investors. 'The Wallsend Society became the first of many to respond', earning its chairman barbed criticism from a hostile newspaper that portrayed him as 'an honest if simple minded gentleman' because he advocated that co-operatives were right to limit each member to one vote instead of weighting votes in favour of the largest investors.<sup>17</sup> A corollary of the Ouseburn Works was the creation of an Industrial Bank to process and direct investments, and Wallsend's Robert Douglass became one of the Bank's directors.

The story of the 'militant democracy' and the co-operative adventures of the early 1870s is fascinating, but it has been told elsewhere.<sup>18</sup> For present purposes, it is sufficient to note these developments as the broad milieu in which the Wallsend Society grew and flourished.

### **THE WALLSEND 'OWENITES'**

By April 1873, the Wallsend Society had almost 1000 members, substantial reserves and share capital, and was profitable enough to pay a members'

dividend of 2s 6d for each pound of purchases in its shops.<sup>19</sup> The Society was planning to build new central premises in Long Row that would contain, at its opening in 1876, shops for grocery, drapery and millinery, boots and shoes, hardware and furnishing, as well as committee rooms and offices, a library, reading room and a hall seating 600 people.<sup>20</sup> It was an impressive record made more interesting by the concern for elevating 'the social and intellectual condition of the members.'

The Society had started to buy land and build houses for sale 'at cost price' for its members in 1868, partly to utilise surplus share capital, but improving social conditions may have been an extra motivation (offering allotments on land bought by the Society was a clue). In doing so, it was not unusual. Many other North East co-operatives soon became active in house building, though Wallsend may have been one of the earliest, and certainly saw itself as 'a pioneer of house building and allotment holders in the Co-operative Movement.' Forty-three houses had been erected by 1876. Robert Douglass and his brother, William, eventually took one of the later houses at 6 Industrial Terrace, and Douglass credited Charles Adams with teaching him the skills of 'land survey and measurement' at school which proved so useful subsequently.<sup>21</sup>

The Society had been circulating *The Co-operator* but felt that a more substantial commitment to education ought to be made. Accordingly, an education committee was elected in October 1870 charged with opening a library and newsroom. Their discussions to frame 'rules and regulations' led to a ban on alcohol, smoking, games and Sunday opening. There was also a tussle with a sitting tenant at the house that was rented for the library, delaying the newsroom for three months, but ultimately the new library began during the evenings at 119 High Street West in July 1871, and the newsroom was opened by Dr. Rutherford in October. Books were found from the remains of a defunct local library and from book sales, and a librarian was appointed at a salary of £5 a year. Over 800 books were stocked by 1873 and three daily and thirteen weekly newspapers together with magazines were available in the newsroom. Pointedly, one

of the first items bought to decorate the new library in 1871 was ‘a bust of Robert Owen.’<sup>22</sup>

In embracing education, the Wallsend Society was fairly distinctive in the North East. Most societies were too small to do more than circulate *The Co-operator*, or its successor the *Co-operative News*, and gradually open newsrooms, but some, including Newcastle, showed little interest in education until later in the century (or even into the next century). Wallsend, however, quickly emerged as one of the ‘big four’ North Eastern societies that regularly spent hundreds of pounds on members’ education – libraries, classes, newsrooms, lectures, social events - each year from the 1860s-1870s. The others were Blaydon, Jarrow and Sunderland.<sup>23</sup> Where Wallsend was strikingly unique was in opening an elementary school and combining this with the creation of a Co-operative housing estate.



### **THE WALLSEND CO-OPERATIVE SCHOOL**

The proposal to open an elementary school emerged from a mutual improvement class (or discussion and lecture group) set up by the education committee in November 1871 – ‘from it sprang the idea of starting



*Wallsend Co-op School now Kingdom Hall  
Blenkinsop Street Wallsend*

an elementary day school.’<sup>24</sup> Holyoake had suggested in 1870 that any organisation, not just churches and charities, could claim a Government grant for a school, and the 1870 Act made this more feasible (if highly unusual). As Wallsend had no school board and, as usual, there

was little rush to set one up, there was an opportunity for independent action. Interestingly, the Wallsend Co-operators were in touch with the National Education League that held a public meeting in support of its programme at the 'new Temperance Hall, Wallsend' on 16 April 1872. It was addressed by John Burnett, recently the secretary of the Nine Hours League, and James McKendrick, a well-known Co-operator from the Ouseburn Engineering Works episode.<sup>25</sup> Wallsend's Co-operative day school seems to have opened in the same hall the following month.<sup>26</sup>

The Temperance Hall in Blenkinsop Street was part of the Primitive Methodists' new chapel, erected in 1871 on land owned by the Wallsend Society. Described rather grandly as being of 'Gothic [style] of the early English period', and built with red bricks and stone dressings, the building was

'used by the education committee formed in Wallsend under the financial guarantee of the Co-operative Society, for the purpose of a day-school, under the management of a certificated master, and on the non-denominational system as advocated by the national education league.'<sup>27</sup>

The education committee's endorsement of a school had resulted in a circular to parents inviting interest in sending their children to the school, and 'nearly 300 children were promised to commence with.' This convinced the committee, and the mutual improvement class, to jointly seek financial support from the Wallsend Society's next quarterly meeting in April 1872, asking 'for a guarantee for the payment of salaries and other expenses.' Approval 'was readily given', which was quite remarkable. Co-operative members' meetings were often loath to spend money on ventures that could detract from dividends, but possibly the 'militant democracy', clear evidence of demand, and the Owenite tendencies of influential members, combined to make a difference.<sup>28</sup>

The Society met the costs of the school that was formally opened with 130 children on 1 July 1872. To claim the Government grant, Robert Douglass acted as 'correspondent for the school.' The first teacher, Alex McClintock from Dumbarton, was appointed at £90 a year, or a quarter

of the Government grant, and a Miss Pullen became 'the infant and sewing mistress' and responsible for the 'teaching of the girls.' It looks as if the school had its own committee for the first month, but then control passed to the Society's education committee.<sup>29</sup>

Frustratingly, the story of the school is one of conflicting fragments. Neither the school log books nor the school inspector's reports have survived, and the Wallsend Society's records for the period have vanished. Part of the story may be found in positive accounts published by the Co-operative News and Cowen's Newcastle Chronicle. The News, keen to encourage other societies, said in January 1873 that:

'The different educational departments in connection with the society, namely, reading room, library, and elementary day school are progressing satisfactorily. This fact we note with much pleasure, and commend to the attention of other societies. Co-operation exists not for the pecuniary advancement of its members merely, but for their moral and intellectual elevation as well.'<sup>30</sup>

Other evidence presents a chaotic picture. The official history of the Wallsend Society, published in 1912, drew on oral history from 'the late Mr. Jos. Bormond, who was secretary to the education committee at this period', and from 'reading the school log book and the inspector's reports.' School discipline was considered 'lax' and 'it was impossible for the master to work so large a school without a qualified assistant or pupil teacher.' The inspector threatened to reduce the Government grant unless the school improved and staffing was increased (the school received only 2s 0d in grant in 1873, though it had 143 children on the roll). McClintock was dismissed, his successor being recruited only with difficulty, and he then had to be 'dispensed with when the school was struck off the Government list in 1874.' The Society's education committee carried on with the school for another year, but 'after many vicissitudes, it was decided to close it on August 6th 1875' due to rising costs and the refusal of the new Wallsend School Board to accept a transfer of the school.<sup>31</sup>

It is impossible to piece together the whole jigsaw, but a few questions could be posed if only for the record. Would Government inspectors have been objective in assisting a school managed by working-class Co-operators in the midst of the 'militant democracy'? What other vested interests were seeking to determine the future of schooling in a town that was deeply divided along class lines? Was 'lax' discipline unusual at this time when children were not used to the routines of the school day (Chief Constable Elliott, in nearby Gateshead, had to station constables in school yards to keep order) and many schools struggled to find trained and qualified teachers in the early 1870s? <sup>32</sup>

Annoyingly, nothing is known about the school curriculum, other than it was, apparently, non-denominational. Given the circumstances of the time, Peter Gurney's conclusion that the school probably supplemented state education rather than substituting for it as the original Owenites would have done is almost certainly correct. <sup>33</sup> Still, there was a hint of Owenism in the location of the school. The Temperance Hall stood on Co-operative land in the middle of the new Co-operative housing estate (Blenkinsop Street was named after Thomas Blenkinsop, and stood adjacent to Douglass Street!). The people who lived in the houses were Co-operative members whose mortgages were paid, in part, out of the dividends that they earned from shopping in the Wallsend Society's shops, and they may even have used the nearby Co-operative allotments. Equitable Street, Mutual Street, and Rochdale Street would soon grace the immediate neighbourhood. Surely, somewhere in all of these contrived coincidences was more than just a hint of Owenite community thinking?

## **AFTERMATH**

The closure of the only Co-operative school in late nineteenth-century Britain was not the end of Co-operative education in Wallsend by any means. The town's Co-operators were even urged to re-start a school by a CWS official who 'trusted before long that the committee would



again see their way to open another school.’<sup>34</sup> It was unlikely that this could happen. The new Board schools rapidly occupied the ground for schooling, and the Wallsend Society had to meet the costs of its new central premises together with absorbing a temporary dip in sales ‘due to the great depression of trade in the district.’<sup>35</sup> In any event, the Society’s educators moved towards adult education, initiating a series of lectures at the Temperance Hall in 1875-1876, the first ‘by a lady, and was entitled “women’s rights”; and the second, “the social future of the working classes”’. A night school was tried from November 1876, but was not successful ‘and had to be discontinued at the end of two months’, though the library flourished into the next century and remained open as late as 1954. More luck came with the formation of the Women’s Co-operative Guild in 1883. The Wallsend branch of the Guild, the first in the North East and the seventh in the entire country, was launched with enthusiastic support from the Society’s leadership in their committee room in 1884.<sup>36</sup> Wallsend was still ahead of the game.

## Notes

- 1 *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 13 May 1871, p. 2
- 2 *Ibid*
- 3 Barbara Taylor, *Eve and the New Jerusalem: Socialism and Feminism in the Nineteenth Century* (London, Virago, 1983), see chap IX, p. 263
- 4 Nigel Todd, ‘His Majesty the Chief Constable: Tyneside’s Chartist Policeman’ in *North East Labour History*, Bulletin No. 26, 1992, pp 36-46; *Newcastle Daily Leader*, 5 November 1888; *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 5 November 1888.
- 5 *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 22 February 1902
- 6 Owen R. Ashton, W.E. Adams: Chartist, *Radical and Journalist (1832-1906)*, (Whitley Bay, Bewick Press, 1991), pp 31, 58
- 7 See: Catherine Webb (ed), *Industrial Co-operation: The Story of a Peaceful Revolution*, (Manchester, Co-operative Union, 1906), pp 205-206
- 8 *The Co-operator*, August 1860, p 37
- 9 ‘Letter from William Cooper to Professor Fawcett, November 1866’ in Arnold Bonner, *British Co-operation: The History, Principles, and Organisation of the British Co-operative Movement*, (Manchester, Co-operative Union, 1961), Appendix IV, p 510
- 10 *The Co-operator*, November 1865

*north east history*

- 11 *Ibid.*, November 1862
- 12 *Wallsend Industrial Co-operative Society: Jubilee History and Handbook (1862-1912)*, (Pelaw-on-Tyne, Wallsend Industrial Co-operative Society, 1912), pp 28-30; see also: William Richardson, *History of the Parish of Wallsend*, (Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Northumberland Press Ltd., 1923, Newcastle and North Tyneside Libraries reprint, 1999).
- 13 *Co-operative News*, 1 August 1876
- 14 *Jubilee History and Handbook*, op.cit., p 78
- 15 *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 4 April 1900; *Co-operative News* 7 April 1900; *Jubilee History and Handbook*, op.cit., pp 23-25
- 16 *Co-operative News*, 19 April 1873 (citing the *Newcastle Chronicle*)
- 17 Joan Allan, *Joseph Cowen and Popular Radicalism on Tyneside, 1829-1900*, (Monmouth, Merlin Press, 2007), p 61; *Newcastle Courant*, 14 July 1871, p 5
- 18 See: Allen, op.cit., esp Chapter 3; G.D.H. Cole, *A Century of Co-operation*, (Manchester, Co-operative Union, 1944), pp 163-165; Nigel Todd, *The Militant Democracy: Joseph Cowen and Victorian Radicalism*, (Whitley Bay, Bewick Press, 1991), Chapter 8.
- 19 *Co-operative News*, 19 April 1873
- 20 *Ibid.*, 1 August 1876
- 21 *Ibid.*, 19 April 1873; *Jubilee History and Handbook*, op.cit.; For an account of the extent of Co-operative house building, see: P.A. Darville, *The Contribution of Co-operative Retail Societies to Welfare within the framework of the North East Coast area*, (unpublished M.Litt thesis, University of Durham, 1954).
- 22 *Jubilee History and Handbook*, op.cit., pp 78-79; *Co-operative News*, 28 October 1871
- 23 Darville, op.cit., p 245
- 24 *Jubilee History and Handbook*, op.cit., p 79
- 25 *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 20 April 1872
- 26 *Newcastle Guardian*, 11 May 1872; the Wallsend Society's Jubilee history gives 1 July 1871 as the starting date but this was almost certainly simply a formal opening ceremony.
- 27 *Newcastle Guardian*, 11 May 1872
- 28 *Jubilee History and Handbook*, op.cit., p 79
- 29 *Ibid.*, p 79-80; *Newcastle Weekly Chronicle*, 6 July 1872
- 30 *Co-operative News*, 22 January 1873
- 31 *Jubilee History and Handbook*, op.cit., *Report of the Committee of Council on Education (England and Wales)*, 1873-74, p 591; Wallsend School Board, Minutes, 5, 9, 22 April 1875
- 32 Susan Vidler, 'The Gateshead Borough Police of the 1870s' in Newcastle University History Department, *Crime and Society in the Nineteenth Century North East*, (Newcastle upon Tyne, Newcastle City Library Local Studies Collection, 1984)

*north east history*

- 33 Peter Gurney, *Co-operative Culture and the Politics of Consumption in England, 1870-1930*, (Manchester, MUP, 1996), p 35. Two other relevant recent accounts of the history of Co-operative education are: Tom Woodin, 'Co-operative education in Britain during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries: context, identity and learning' in Anthony Webster et.al., (eds), *The Hidden Alternative: Co-operative values, past, present and future*, (Manchester, MUP, 2012), and Nicole Robertson, *The Co-operative Movement and Communities in Britain, 1914-1960*, (Farnham, Ashgate Publishing, 2010); The *Journal of Co-operative Studies*, Vol. 44, No. 3 (No. 133), December 2011, is devoted to reflections on the current and future directions of Co-operative education.
- 34 *Co-operative News*, 1 August 1876
- 35 *Shields Daily Gazette*, 9 August 1875
- 36 *Jubilee History and Handbook*, op.cit., pp 80-81; Darville, op.cit., p 200

# TRADE, GENDER AND MEMBERSHIP – CO-OPERATIVE POLICY AND PRACTICE IN NORTH EAST ENGLAND AND SOUTHERN SWEDEN IN THE LATE 19<sup>TH</sup> AND EARLY 20<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY. Katarina Friberg

In all member based societies questions concerning membership are central; who can become a member, whether members can be excluded from the society, what rights follows membership, etc. Particular queries concerning the regulation of membership are highlighted at member meetings when statutes are decided upon but the character of membership, exclusive membership or open membership and everything in between, shapes the whole organisation of voluntary societies.

The following article will deal with the policy and practice of membership in late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century co-operative societies. The societies studied are the Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society (founded in 1860) in Newcastle upon Tyne, Britain, and Konsumentföreningen Solidar (founded in 1907) in Malmö, Sweden. The body of the text is more or less identical to a section in my thesis *Workings of Co-operation: a comparative study of consumer co-operative organisation in Britain and Sweden 1860 to 1970* (thesis from 2005). I have edited the text and provided an introduction in order to focus on some of the most interesting aspects of how membership policy works in practice.

### **EARLY CO-OPERATIVES, AN OPEN MEMBERSHIP?**

“Co-operatives for mechanics, railroad workers, bakers and husbands – the question of open membership policy” was the title of my section on membership policy in the thesis. All of the categories listed suggest exclusiveness, explicit or implicit and they reveal the character of co-operative societies in the cities and regions where the two societies studied were founded and shaped. They also reflect the early development of the Newcastle society and Solidar and demonstrate that open membership policy – which both societies adhered to – in practice could mean something rather different from the idea. The term *husbands* in italics in the title hinted at the fact that husbands rather than wives officially joined the co-operative society. In reality it was a household membership and the wife usually managed the household. The Women’s Co-operative Guild (WCG) in Britain spelt out the consequences of this practice; that women seldom stood for office and were even denied a vote at general meetings. In the late 1890s the WCG started an “open membership” campaign. In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century many retail societies – particularly in the north-west - did not allow wives to apply for membership if the husband was already a member. One reason mentioned was a wish to avoid excess share capital. The WCG did not take that argument as valid and claimed women were shut out deliberately.<sup>1</sup>

In this article an example from the Solidar society shows that the issue was a bit more complicated. The defensive co-operators in the north-west may have used the excess share capital dilemma as an excuse but the relationship between membership and co-operative assets cannot be ignored. Ideally society finances were tied up with member household finances.<sup>2</sup> Besides this as the Solidar case will show, active work from officials to get women to stand for office came to nothing because of the ‘tradition’ of the husband being the official member of the co-operative society.

For the majority of voluntary member based organisations it is necessary to attract members, preferably many members. For co-operative societies

and in particular for retail societies it is important initially to recruit the necessary numbers of investing members to get on track. Despite co-operatives being associations of people rather than associations of capital as joint stock companies are, co-operatives have tied the practice of raising capital to membership. Members contribute with an initial membership fee and invest in a limited number of shares; they can also place their savings in their society (not withdrawn dividends or saving schemes). In Malmö and Newcastle and elsewhere it was important to set the cost of shares and fees for membership at a reasonable level. The following example shows us that the link between membership and investment could prove difficult in practice when it came to attracting members.

In the case of Solidar and the Newcastle Society, we do not have access to deliberations prior to the foundation of the societies. But a suitable illustration is not far away: Kooperativa Föreningen Seger, one of the societies which amalgamated with Solidar in 1925. When Seger was about to be formed in 1905, the share price was set at 10 kronor (to buy a black suit in 1905 one had to pay 20 kr). It was reckoned that 2,000 kronor would suffice to acquire a store and get it going, and hence at least 200 members would have to sign up. Yet, the collectors' reports indicate that people were slow to sign up. There was indeed an interest in joining, but these were difficult times. Industrial conflicts had broken out in Malmö, and many people did not have the money to join.<sup>3</sup> In May 1905, when a preliminary meeting for prospective members was held, it was decided that no financial agreements, such as renting a store, be made until the industrial conflicts were over. The formative meeting was finally held in November 1905. By now, conditions had changed somewhat. The premises they wanted to secure for the society were more expensive and would require an initial sum of 3,000 kronor. Moreover, participants at the meeting argued that 10 kronor for a share was an inappropriately high price. Many were interested in joining the society, it was argued, but not everyone could afford to buy a 10-kronor share. It was then finally decided that the value of the shares be 5 kronor each.<sup>4</sup> Whether

by coincidence or by a conscious symbolic act, the board of Seger signed the contract for a store on 21 December 1905 – the same date as the Rochdale Pioneers opened their store in 1844.<sup>5</sup> This example illustrates the connection between membership and raising co-operative capital.

## **POLICY AND PRACTICE**

Now let us look at the wider picture and membership in policy and practice. When the Newcastle upon Tyne society was formed in December 1860 it was registered as The Mechanics' Industrial Co-operative Society. However, only eight years after its founding, at a special meeting for the revision of the rules, it was decided that the words Mechanics' Industrial be dropped. It was thought that the old name was suggestive of exclusiveness to all but mechanics.<sup>6</sup> In reality, the society had never been exclusive to mechanics. A jubilee history from 1886, as well as a more recent historical tract on co-operation on Tyneside, informs us that it was cabinet-makers and fitters that formed the society.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the admission of women as members also indicates that this society had an open membership policy from the very start. In the minutes from the board we thus find out that Isabel Nixon was accepted as a member in February 1863. She thereby became the first female member of the society.<sup>8</sup> At least two other women were accepted as members that same year.<sup>9</sup> Some years later, when the number of persons applying for membership increased more rapidly, the number of women applicants also increased, not proportionally but in absolute numbers. In February 1866, 35 persons were approved as members, five of whom were women, and in February 1868, i.e. five months before the meeting when the name of the society was changed, eleven women were accepted as members (the total number of members accepted that month was 77).<sup>10</sup>

Since the fate of other consumer co-operative societies in Newcastle is unknown, we do not know if The Mechanics' Industrial Co-operative Society was the only society left in Newcastle by 1868.<sup>11</sup> However, the fact that they settled on The Newcastle upon Tyne Cooperative Society

as the new name for the society is an indication that they were now the only consumer co-operative society in the city. The name change could perhaps even be read as a manifestation of their singular status. Be that as it may, the crucial point here is that there is much evidence to support the conclusion that the Newcastle Society had practised an open membership policy all along. This also fits the general pattern in Britain, where most consumer cooperative societies had open membership policies by the 1860s.<sup>12</sup>

What, then, about Solidar in Malmö? Among the early co-operative ventures in Malmö, there are examples both of exclusive societies and of societies with an open membership policy. Malmö Arbetareförening (Malmö Workers' Society) furnishes us with an example of the former. The society, founded in 1867, can be best compared to the Workmen's Institute in Britain. Apart from its regular activities, Malmö Arbetareförening at one point decided to start up a co-operative store. Only those who were members of the Society were allowed to apply for membership, and they had to do so by paying a monthly fee of 25 öre until the sum of 24 riksdaler was paid. After one month 626 customers' passbooks were acquired by members and the turnover was 7,918 riksdaler. However, due to rapid expansion and unsuccessful investments this store went bankrupt after only three years.<sup>13</sup> The aborted effort of Malmö Workers' Society to go into co-operative business is an example, albeit not the most straightforward one, of an exclusive society.

Membership in the consumer co-operative society was not restricted to any particular trade, background or profession, but it was conditional upon membership in Malmö Arbetareförening.<sup>14</sup> A more common restriction on the range of possible membership was that of only allowing people belonging to a work-related category. It is likely that this was the case in some of the bakery societies in Malmö. Three out of four bakery societies only sold bread to members. The names of these societies would also appear to suggest that they served an exclusive group of members: Gjuteriarbetarnas i Malmö Bageriförening (Foundry workers' Baking



Society in Malmö), Fackföreningars Bageriförening (Trade unions' Bakery Society), and Arbetarna vid Statens Järnvägars Verkstäder i Malmö Bageriförening (The Bakery Society for employees at the State Railway Works in Malmö).<sup>15</sup> The name of a society is admittedly too flimsy evidence to rely upon, for the reference to mechanics in the Newcastle Society's original name in fact failed to correspond to an exclusive membership policy. Yet there is no reason for us to dwell upon this issue any further. The case of Malmö Arbetareförening is a clear enough example of exclusive membership.

Solidar, on the other hand, is an example of a co-operative in Malmö with an open membership policy, and so is Seger, a society which amalgamated with Solidar in 1925. Since we have access to the first rules of Solidar, there is no need to take the laborious detour of piecing together scraps of evidence. Available documents simply reveal that, right from the start in 1907, membership was not restricted to any particular category. In fact, membership was not even restricted to individuals and associations were allowed to join. No less than 15 trade union sections bought shares in Solidar in 1908.<sup>16</sup> The possibility for juridical persons to join a co-operative society was introduced with an amendment of the Association Act in 1903.<sup>17</sup>

Open membership, as we have used the term, refers primarily to the absence of any rule limiting membership to one particular category, work-related or otherwise. This still leaves open the possibility that certain categories can be formally or de facto excluded. Women could be a case in point. Yet, we have already seen women were admitted to the Newcastle Society from the very beginning, and our examples provide an idea of the influx of women into the society. The same is true of Solidar. In the membership register from 1908 handed into the Registrar two women out of 117 individual members can be identified.<sup>18</sup> Still it is more difficult to undertake a more comprehensive investigation, since in the minutes from board meetings applicants are listed as numbers and not as names. However, there is no clause against women applying

for membership in the rules from 1908, and there were two women on the first member council of Solidar.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the first women's guild branch in Malmö, founded in 1908, propagated for women to join the consumer co-operative societies in the city.<sup>20</sup> All in all, there is no doubt that women could, and did, become members of Solidar. Yet, it is not a moot point to bring up the issue of gender. We will return to it shortly, for it ties into the concept of membership in the two societies.

Before we do so we should make a few more remarks to clarify the notion of open membership. Open membership is not the same thing as a right to membership for any prospective member. In both societies, people had to apply to the committee/board for membership, and these applications could either be approved or refused.<sup>21</sup> Besides, those who had become members could face exclusion. There is an interesting example of this from the Newcastle Society in 1899, when a member, who was critical of the ways in which the secretary and the auditors handled the accounts of the society, was expelled from the society. He had gathered over a hundred signatures to bring about a special meeting. At the meeting, however, the chairman stated that several members had denied that their signatures were on the request for a special meeting, and some had withdrawn their names. A public auditor was also present at the meeting, and he declared that he had found no fault in the accounts of the Society. The protest was thus rejected, and the member in question was forced to leave the society.<sup>22</sup> According to the rules of the Newcastle Society from 1905, members who had been ex-members whom the board had denied membership, the possibility to submit their application to a general annual meeting instead – as a sort of appeal against the board's decision. However, this possibility disappeared with the acceptance of new rules in 1918.<sup>23</sup> These examples ought to make clear that open membership is not tantamount to free admittance. It means, rather that an application was scrutinized on an individual basis – or, as we shall see, household basis.

## **THE GENDER ISSUE.**

Let us, once again, go back to gender issues. There was no rule against women applying for membership in either society, and, as we have seen, women did apply for membership. Yet, the interplay between gender-neutral society rules and gendered habits can encroach on female participation in a more indirect fashion. The Newcastle Society had no formal rule against two members from the same household applying for membership. However, a concern about preventing members from using the society only as a savings institution implied that really only one member per household was welcomed as the official member of the society. The rules do not say whether the husband or the wife should be the member, but a clause in Paragraph 4 – in the edition of rules from 1905 to 1968 – indicates that it was husbands rather than wives who usually applied for membership: “[a] married woman may be admitted a member”.<sup>24</sup> It may be that it was the Women’s Co-operative Guild campaign in the 1880s for a truly open membership, meaning that both husband and wife should be admitted as members, which led to the introduction of this clause in the rules.<sup>25</sup> At any rate, the necessity of including it testifies to what was considered at the time to be the normal state of affairs. So, while the rules were neutral enough, a wish to avoid duplicate household membership could obviously result in a sceptical attitude towards married women becoming members. We find examples of this in the discussions of the Revision of Rules Committee 1904-1905. Here, the concern with double household membership made certain members sceptical about admitting married women, arguing precisely that member households could use the society only for investment purposes.<sup>26</sup> In July 1913 the question of duplicate memberships came up on the agenda again, in a motion by Mr Lax:

“To instruct the Directors to make official enquiries as to the extent (if any) of duplicate membership in one family occupying the same house and to what extent such duplication (if any) affects Rule 6. (Maximum amount of Members’ Capital) and to report such information to the next

quarterly member meeting and if in their opinion alterations are necessary, proposals for such alterations to be submitted at the same time.”<sup>27</sup>

The board looked into the matter, but a comprehensive inquiry into the extent of duplicate membership was never made, for the directors stated in the January 1914 report that they could not recommend the adoption of Mr Lax’s proposal. At the quarterly meeting in January 1914 Mr Lax moved a motion that the directors should go on with their investigation into the matters but the motion was defeated.<sup>28</sup> Since there was no inquiry, we do not have evidence about the extent of duplicate membership. Mr Lax’s proposal at least indicates that it existed. What is of interest here, however, is how the limitation to one member per household, combined with established gender attitudes, loaded the dice in favour of husbands. The critical debates about duplicate membership were themselves less than encouraging to women and wives who considered joining the society under their own name.

As stated above, the line “...a married woman may be admitted a member” remained in the rules throughout the period studied. In 1952, a rules revision committee proposed that the line be deleted, but the proposal was defeated at a special general meeting in October 1952.<sup>29</sup> It is difficult to say how the outcome of this vote should be interpreted. In 1952 – when four women were directors, and when the Women’s Co-operative Guild had kept encouraging its members to join and take part in the activities of the consumer co-operative societies for over half a century – the vote could equally well reflect the strong position of women, particularly married women, in the Newcastle Society.<sup>30</sup> What they are voting on, however, is an historical occurrence, produced by the interplay of society rules and old gender patterns.

The situation in *Solidar* and *Seger* is different from the Newcastle Society in one crucial respect. *Solidar* and *Seger* never provided the sort of beneficial investment and savings opportunities that prompted the Newcastle Society to introduce rules against duplicate membership. First, neither the board of *Solidar* nor that of *Seger* had any problem with

accepting both wife and husband as members. Second, however, there was no economic incentive for both members of the household to apply for membership: rather than doubling their investment opportunities, a duplicate membership simply meant a duplication of costs. Husband and wife may both choose to join anyway, for other reasons, but the economic incentives would tend towards a conception of membership based on the household. If rules produced a household conception of membership in the Newcastle Society, the conditions of economic participation produced the same effect in *Solidar* and *Seger*. An incident in *Seger* in 1920 demonstrates that the gender effects of this were probably similar to those in Newcastle, i.e. that it was the husband rather than the wife who was the official member in the household, even in households where both husband and wife were keen co-operators. At the annual general meeting that year, some male members complained about the lack of interest among women for co-operation and the co-operative businesses in Malmö. However, all male members did not complain; some presented solutions. Mr C. Ekelund said, for example, that women should not be forced to take an interest in the co-operative businesses. They should instead be encouraged to take an interest, and to stand for office and become directors. At the same meeting Mrs Anna Ekberg-Åkesson stood for office. She got 67 votes and secured a seat on the board of *Seger*. Mr. Berglund, who topped the election list, got 85 votes.<sup>31</sup>

Yet this annual meeting had an aftermath. Two weeks later, an extra board meeting was called, due to a letter where the writer pointed out that Mrs Ekberg-Åkesson was not a member, and therefore could not be elected to the board. Mrs Ekberg-Åkesson did not protest against the statement that she was not a member, and agreed to step down from her office. But she explained that at the annual meeting she had had the impression that it did not matter whether it was the husband or the wife who was represented. She does not specify what entity the husband or wife would be representing, but she probably meant the household or family. One of the other directors thought that the president should have

informed members at the annual meeting that only members could be elected. Mr Mårtensson, who had been present at the annual meeting, said that he had thought about saying something at the time. But, he explained, it had been pointed out that women should be encouraged to stand for office, and therefore he had said nothing. In the end, Mrs Ekberg-Åkesson stepped down and a deputy member – a man – became director in her place.<sup>32</sup> No other woman became director in Seger before the amalgamation with Solidar. Mrs Ekeberg-Åkesson no doubt saw her husband's membership as a household membership, which for most practical purposes it was. And it may be that many other wives had the same idea, and thought it made no difference if it was their name or that of their husband on the share and member certificate. But formally it did matter. If the wife wished to take part in the democratic decision making process, then she had to be a member in her own name.

The illustrations above show that gender does make a difference. A formally open membership policy coexists with mechanisms which have favoured husbands over wives. But these mechanisms are subtle, and they affect married women rather than women in general. It is difficult to determine exactly how many wives were members of the Newcastle Society and of Solidar. In the Newcastle Society, the names of all members applying for membership are noted at the beginning of the minutes of almost every board meeting. But neither women nor men are presented with their titles, which means that we cannot find out whether the women who applied and were accepted were wives or not. Given the considerable numbers of women that became members from the 1890s onwards, however, the number of married women must also have become fairly substantial. The situation in Solidar is even more difficult to assess. Minutes from board meetings only list member numbers. A rough estimate can nevertheless be gathered via a more indirect route, for there are some requests for withdrawal of membership left in the source material, where names and titles are given. Out of 213 requests for withdrawal of membership between the years 1922-1928, 70 were made

by women and 32 of those by married women.<sup>33</sup> This means that at least some wives thought it wise to be members in their own right.

The general lesson of this essay is that both the Newcastle Society and Solidar practiced open rather than exclusive membership, and that they did so from the very beginning. Beneath this conclusion lies the recognition that neutral society rules can interact with extra-societal factors to produce effects on member participation for particular categories.

Our discussion of the position of married women in fact serves two functions. On the one hand, it shows in some detail how gender mechanisms operate; on the other hand, it provides an introduction to the notion of household membership. The dividend and all other economic/practical member benefits, such as death benefits based on purchase, clearly shows that co-operative membership in practice was more of a household membership than an individual one.<sup>34</sup> Co-operators agree with this concept of household membership but it is a perspective relatively unexplored in academic studies.

## Notes

- 1 Barbara J. Blaszak. *The Matriarchs of England's Cooperative Movement. A Study in Gender Politics and Female Leadership, 1883-1921*. Westport., Connecticut, London: Greenwood Press 2000, pp. 50, 67, 76-79.
- 2 Katarina Friberg. *The Workings of Co-operation: A comparative study of consumer co-operative organisation in Britain and Sweden 1860-1970* (2005), Växjö University Press, Växjö. Part 4 demonstrates how society finances were tied up with member household finances and to what extent advocates of co-operation in Sweden argued for this link. Ironically in practice such a link was much stronger in Britain.
- 3 See minutes from meetings on March 28<sup>th</sup>, April 1<sup>st</sup>, April 14<sup>th</sup>, April 28<sup>th</sup>, May 20<sup>th</sup>, and May 30<sup>th</sup> 1905, in Kooperativa Föreningen Seger Protokollsbok No. 1 28/3 1905 – 8/9 1909. It is only at the meeting for people interested in starting a co-operative society held on May 30<sup>th</sup> that we learn about the calculation that at least 200 members and a share capital of 2,000 kronor would suffice to start up a business. The industrial disputes that are referred to in the minutes were probably the disputes at Kokums verkstad and Lennanders armaturfabrik. The workers at Kokums stopped working at the end of April 1905. This conflict ended only six months later, that is in October 1905. See Bjurling Oscar, "Stad i utveckling 1870-1914", in *Malmö stads historia fjärde delen/1870-1914*, (1985), Statsfullmäktige i

*north east history*

- Malmö, Malmö., p.380-382.
- 4 Protokoll fört öfver möte med intresserade för bildande af en kooperativ handelsförening, 30/5 1905. Protokoll fört vid konstituerande sammanträde för en kooperativ konsumtionsförening i Malmö 30/11 1905.
  - 5 The members of Seger decided on a meeting 21 December 1905 to sign a contract for a store at Amiralsgatan. Protokoll fört vid möte med delägarna i kooperativa föreningen Seger u.p.a. den 21/12 1905.
  - 6 Minutes 29<sup>th</sup> Quarterly General Meeting, 29<sup>th</sup> July 1868. The comment that the old name was suggestive of exclusiveness to all but mechanics cannot be found in the minutes but in the jubilee history *A Brief Account of the Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society from 1860 to 1886.*, p. 8.
  - 7 *A Brief Account...*, (1886), p. 1. Potts Archie, From Acorn to Oak. Co-operation on Tyneside 1858-1909, Northern Area Co-operative Member Education Group c/o North Eastern Co-operative Society, p. 2.
  - 8 She was proposed as a member on 16<sup>th</sup> February 1863 and accepted one week later. See Minutes Committee Meeting, Monday 16<sup>th</sup> February 1863. Minutes Committee Meeting, Monday 23<sup>rd</sup> February 1863. Elisabeth Chapman might have been accepted as a member prior to Isabel since she applied to withdraw her membership in October 1863, see Minutes Committee Meeting, 12<sup>th</sup> October 1863.
  - 9 Ann Miller elected member, see Minutes Committee Meeting, 7<sup>th</sup> September 1863. Elisabeth Yardly elected member, see Minutes Committee Meeting 21<sup>st</sup> September 1863.
  - 10 Women accepted as members in the Newcastle Society. See Minutes Committee Meetings, 6<sup>th</sup>, 13<sup>th</sup>, 20<sup>th</sup> and 29<sup>th</sup>, February 1866. See Minutes Committee Meetings, 4<sup>th</sup> 11<sup>th</sup>, 18<sup>th</sup>, February 1868. See also Minutes Committee Meeting, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1868 because the names of those elected members on the 4<sup>th</sup> February are listed as proposed in those minutes.
  - 11 In the statistics of the Co-operative Union from 1872, when it first was published, no cooperative societies other than the Cabinet-makers co-op society (a worker co-operative) and The Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society are registered in Newcastle upon Tyne.
  - 12 Cole G. D. H., *A Century of Co-operation*, (1947), George Allen & Unwin Ltd, London, pp. 64-65.
  - 13 Svensson Inge, "Hantverk och industri jämte levnadsförhållanden och arbetsmarknad i Malmö under perioden 1820-1870.", *Malmö stads historia, tredje delen (1820-1870)*, (1981), Allhems förlag, Malmö, p. 182-184. Gruveman Carl, *Solidar 25 år, Jubileumsskrift Kooperativa Föreningen Solidar*, 1908-1933, (1933), Propagandakommittén Kooperativa Föreningen Solidar., p. 6-7.
  - 14 I have not found any information about the conditions for becoming a member of this store besides the financial conditions. Gruveman indicates in his account of the



*north east history*

- store that it was a problem that not all members of Malmö Arbetarförening became members. When the store went into liquidation 626 books had been issued but at the time Malmö Arbetarförening had 2,371 members. Gruveman, (1933), p. 6-7.
- 15 Friberg, *Workings of Co-operation*, Part 1, Section 1.2.
  - 16 Malmöhusläns landskansliarkiv Anmälningar till föreningsregistret 1908 I EVIII f:17 Solidar 25/2 1908 No 65-68.
  - 17 Johansson, (1999), pp. 16-17.
  - 18 Malmöhusläns landskansliarkiv Anmälningar till föreningsregistret 1908 I EVIII f:17 Solidar 25/2 1908 No 65-68.
  - 19 Protokoll distriktsmöte Malmö 6/12 1925.
  - 20 Friberg, *Workings of Co-operation*, Part 3, Section 5.2.
  - 21 In the book *The People's Store. A Guide the North Eastern Co-ops Family Tree* an account of a member being denied membership is included. A former member who had already been excluded once applied again for membership. His request was turned down. It was pointed out that he would be admitted only when he could guarantee that the unruly conduct of his wife, which was complained about during his last membership, would not be repeated. Lamb Jim and Warren Steve, *The People's Store. A Guide to the North Eastern Co-op's Family Tree*, (1996), North Eastern Co-operative Society, Gateshead., p. 8. From Jim Lamb's Chronological Register we find out that the incident took place in 1882.
  - 22 Minutes 152nd Quarterly General Meeting, 26<sup>th</sup> April 1899.
  - 23 Utdrag ur protokoll fört vid Koop. Bageriföreningen Solidars årstämma i Malmö den 3/3 1918, attached to Stadgar för Kooperativa Föreningen Solidar 1920, in Map Solidar, Seger, Limhamn Diverse Handlingar.
  - 24 Proposed Rules in 120/106 Revision of Rules Committee 27 January 1904 – 7 December 1905. Rules of the Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society 1946. Rules of The Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society Limited, 1963. Rules of The Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society Limited, 1968.
  - 25 648 The Women's Co-operative Guild started its campaign for open membership in 1884. In the 1880s most co-operatives in Britain were open to both women and men though many did not accept that two members from the same family/ household were members. By this time many societies had more share capital that they could put to use but they were still obliged to pay the five per cent as interest and found it difficult to earn as much by investing the capital safely elsewhere. Besides these practical reasons, it was also observed that some men wished to have control over the money received as interest and dividend. Wives that were members in their own right and could collect interest and dividend tended to regard this money as their own property even in the days before The Married Women's Property Act. If the husband was the household member he had control over this income. The WCG campaign also wished to make it possible for married women to become elected to committees and boards, because to be able to vote and stand for office

*north east history*

- they had to be members in their own right. See Cole, (1947), pp. 183-184, 220.
- 26 A lengthy conversation ensued as to several members of one family being admitted to membership with a view to using the society for investment purposes but no amendment to the Rule was put to the meeting. Revisions of Rules Committee meeting 18<sup>th</sup> February 1904, in 120/106 Revision of Rules Committee 27<sup>th</sup> January 1904 – 7<sup>th</sup> December 1905.
  - 27 Minutes 209<sup>th</sup> Quarterly General Meeting, 30<sup>th</sup> July 1913. We find out that it was Mr Lax, a non-elected member, that moved the motion in the minutes from the 211<sup>th</sup> Quarterly General Meeting on 28<sup>th</sup> January 1914, when he moved a second motion concerning the matter.
  - 28 Directors' Report for the Half-year ended June 6<sup>th</sup> 1914 and Minutes 211<sup>th</sup> Quarterly General Meeting, 28<sup>th</sup> January 1914.
  - 29 Revision of rules: Rule 4 "The committee's proposal to delete the last paragraph of this rule – 'a married woman may be admitted a member' was defeated almost unanimously." Minutes Special General Meeting, 15<sup>th</sup> October 1952
  - 30 The four women on the board in 1952 were: Mrs. S. Lowes, Mrs F. Ogg, Councillor Mrs. M. P. Broad and Mrs M. Holmes. See Board of Management and Chief Officials Newcastle upon Tyne Co-operative Society Ltd. in Presenting Newcastle Co-op Services (1952).
  - 31 Protokoll fört vid Kooperativa Föreningen Segers årsmöte den 2/3 1920.
  - 32 Protokoll styrelsen Seger, 30/3 1920.
  - 33 All requests for withdrawal 1922-1928 in Map Solidar, Seger, Limhamn Diverse handlingar
  - 34 Friberg (2005), see part 4. Chapter 1. Building up and distributing co-operative resources.

## A NEW ROCHDALE? THE SUNDERLAND POOR STORE. Kath Connolly

I first became interested in the Sunderland Poor Store through my involvement as a volunteer in the Popular Politics Project. The three North East Area Committees of the Co-operative Group were keen to be involved in the project, believing the Cooperative Movement has an important role in our region's history. Our oral history interview with co-operator and former Lord Mayor of Newcastle, Joan Lamb, revealed the importance of the Co-operative Women's Guild in nurturing keen and able women. The Guild's history showed them to be an influential, radical organisation of mainly working class women. Formed in 1883, they were often way ahead of their time and in the early years of the twentieth century they campaigned on subjects such as the minimum



*Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Miss Partridge, Ethel and Lizzie Burn.  
The Sunderland Co-op employed welfare worker Miss Partridge standing  
and Miss Davies*

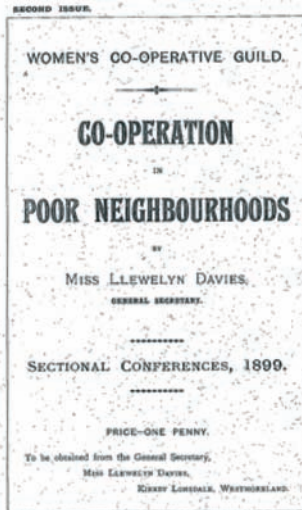
wage, equal pay, reform of divorce law, maternity, child health and birth control. Under the inspirational leadership of Margaret Llewelyn Davies, their General Secretary, the Guild's main focus from 1899-1904 was an attempt to bring Co-operation within reach of the poorest communities. Working with a sympathetic management committee of the Sunderland Equitable and Industrial Society, the Sunderland poor store experiment was the application of the Guild's national poverty campaign in one of the poorest districts in the country, the East End of Sunderland.



*Margaret Llewelyn Davies, Miss Partridge, Anna and Jimmie*

## **THE WOMEN'S CO-OPERATIVE GUILD – “Co-operation in a Poor Neighbourhood”**

Co-operators were drawn mainly from the better off working class, those in steady work and with some security. In the latter years of the



nineteenth century poverty had become a major political issue but despite a growing awareness within the more progressive elements of the Co-operative Movement, little had been done to bring the benefits of co-operation to the poorest districts. The Co-operative Congress of 1899 argued that this issue should be addressed and the best agency to do this was the Women's Co-operative Guild (WCG). A paper entitled 'Co-operation in Poor Neighbourhoods' was published within a few months and the poverty campaign became the main focus of their work for the next five years.

The paper made four main recommendations to take co-operation into poor neighbourhoods;

1. A People's Store to sell wholesome food, in small quantities and at cheap prices. No credit should be given but savings would be accrued through dividends and a loan department established for times of great hardship.
2. A cooked food department
3. An Open Door Policy which removed the barriers to co-operative membership (e.g. entrance fees)
4. Settlement and club rooms staffed by resident workers who would promote a co-operative way of living, visiting homes in the neighbourhood and encouraging membership of the society, the Guild, the children's Penny Bank, classes and activities.<sup>1</sup>

The WCG identified the fact that common co-operative practices were seen to be barriers to membership; high prices and high dividends being the greatest deterrent. In some Societies the dividend was as high as three shillings in the pound and 14,198 members nationally shared in dividends greater than four shillings. While this attracted the better off working class and was popular with management committees, it meant that prices in the stores needed to be high to provide that level of surplus. Poor customers were careful only to shop for very small quantities, and when every penny counts, they looked for the cheapest goods. The Guild argued that it was in the Societies' interest as well as the consumer to keep dividends and prices low <sup>2</sup> to attract more customers. Most Societies set an entrance fee with a requirement to hold share capital and had penalties for withdrawing that capital. Fines were imposed on those who withdrew from their share account. This was meant to discourage members from taking their shares in bad times and rejoining when times were better but these savings were essential to poor families and could represent a lifeline when coping with casual work, ill health or unemployment. <sup>3</sup>

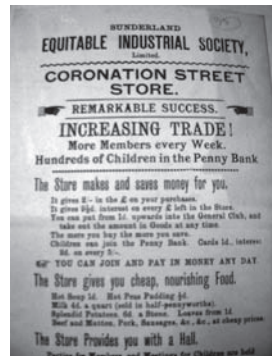
For the first time in their history the WCG met with a good deal of opposition from within the Movement. Many argued that poor people

were already members of co-operatives and in the interest of equity should not need 'special' treatment. The idea of a settlement smacked too much of middle class philanthropy and not in the true spirit of co-operative self help. The Co-op welcomed all and if the poor didn't join then they only had themselves to blame, after all they were a business not a charity. Furthermore many believed that temperance was the only reform that was needed and this too was in the hands of the poor themselves. <sup>4</sup>

However the WCG, did have its supporters and a £50 grant was secured from the Co-operative Union's United Board <sup>5</sup>. Visits were made by their members to cities with large poor areas; Sheffield, Bury, York, Newcastle, Sunderland, Plymouth, Bristol and Bury.<sup>6</sup> They talked with slum dwellers, councillors, school attendance officers, religious and philanthropic workers as well as directors, managers and employees of Co-operative Societies. <sup>7</sup> Pamphlets were published, meetings held across the country and a conference was called and letters sent to the Co-op News. This campaign to take co-operation into poor neighbourhoods was much more than an attempt to open a Co-op store in poor districts it was a challenge to the system which created widespread poverty and inequality. G. D. H. Cole argued that they saw it 'as an agency for the social uplifting of the poor', not charity but a way for the poor to help themselves. <sup>8</sup>

## THE SUNDERLAND CO-OPERATIVE SOCIETY

The Sunderland Co-operative Society had shown a marked desire to reach the poorest and 'get them on top of themselves'. They set their dividend low at 2/- in the £ and this enabled them to set prices low. In 1902 they had 23 grocery stores with three in the poorest parts of town. The Coronation Street Branch, in Sunderland's East End, had been opened in 1897. Sales had increased but the premises at number 79 were cramped and rat infested; in



fact a mongoose was kept to catch rats and reduce leakage. A new store was planned, in line with the Guild's proposals and provision made for a grocery shop, cooked meat shop, hall and rooms for residential co-operative workers.

At the quarterly meeting, held on March 15 1902 the plans were passed with only one dissenter.

"It was a red letter day" for Sunderland and the Co-operative movement when the corner premises of the Branch Store in Coronation Street were opened on October 8 1902. The new store stood "in splendour" against the drab, dreary surroundings. Plate glass and electric light showed off the Co-operative Wholesale Society (CWS) 1d goods and posters publicised forthcoming events. The new store was meant to stand out as a symbol of what could be achieved through Co-operation. A total of 1040 customers were served on that first day and sales in the grocery shop were double that of the old premises <sup>9</sup>.

Costing almost £2,500, it occupied the corner site of 22-24 Coronation Street, between Spring Garden Lane and Golden Alley at the corner of Walton Place in the heart of the East End, the poorest part of the town. The reporter from the Daily News vividly described the area, 'rows of grimy, dilapidated hovels stand back to back and the narrow, ill paved passages between are filthy with human excreta and shut away from air and sun' <sup>10</sup>.

Poverty, disease, drunkenness and crime were key characteristics of the East End of Sunderland at the turn of the century. Overcrowding was a real issue in the North East and Sunderland was the fourth most overcrowded town in England. The death rate in the East End was 35 (per 1,000), twice the rate for the wealthier parts of town. Measles, consumption and enteric diseases were rife.<sup>11</sup> Census records show that many of the men were employed as labourers in the docks, shipyards and local industries while many women worked as hawkers or were employed at the jam factory, tobacco works and brewery <sup>12</sup>. Work was often casual and insecure and a trade downturn resulted in workers being laid off for months at a time, 'Women and children supplemented their family

income selling papers, oranges, winkles or whatever turns up handily, and doing errands for pennies ‘.<sup>13</sup>

In a letter to the Sunderland Society, Miss Davies, unable to attend the opening because of a family bereavement, declared “this is the birth of a new age for the inhabitants of Coronation Street and though we may begin from the sale of a halfpenny black pudding, our idea is that the whole of a poor neighbourhood should be liberated from all that trades in ignorance, poverty, and misfortune and dominated by a co-operative life carried on in the interests of the people themselves”. Mr Winks, the East End member of the Sunderland Management Committee thought “this was the proudest moment of his life, henceforward the poorest of the poor in Sunderland would be able to get the purest and best food in their own co-operative store”

### **THE SUNDERLAND POOR STORE**

The store consisted of a grocer’s shop, butcher’s, flour store and upstairs a hall and the settlement rooms; two small bedrooms, a kitchen and a scullery. The local women invited to visit the settlement were much taken with the bath (under a table in the scullery) and the electric lights; they “did not think they could make such a place here”<sup>14</sup>. A lot of thought was given by Miss Davies and the Guild to furnishing the rooms to make them as simple, cheerful and Co-operative as possible and in stark contrast to the living conditions of their neighbours. They were keen to show a better, brighter way of living which could be achieved through Co-operation.

The brightly decorated kitchen above the butcher’s shop served as an office and a place to receive guests, hold tea parties with the shopmen, directors, labour men and others and make ha’penny cups of tea for the hall concerts. There was a Davenport (desk) for keeping careful records on visits, classes and the town’s bye-laws . The bedroom furniture was made of the simplest white enamelled variety and even the shelves were “gay” with CWS open rose leadless glaze crockery. The big windows free of blinds were hung with washable pink tulip-patterned ‘cretonne’



curtains. There were gifts from the William Morris factory of curtains and bedspreads, and in the hall bright red fustian curtains had been donated by the Hebden Bridge Co-operative Society. Apart from these items all of the furnishing was done through the Sunderland Society who had given £50 but by careful management the Guild spent only £35, the remainder being used to buy a piano for the hall.<sup>14</sup>

The kitchen windows looked out onto a blind alley, Walton Place. These were their nearest neighbours and the children and parents gradually became trusted friends of the settlement workers. A piano organist, attracted by the bright lights of the store, played music such as the Hallelujah Chorus, while Mr Swallow blew his trumpet to attract the barefoot children to exchange rags for whitening, pipe clay or paper flags. Miss Davies was keen to make either him or his wife into co-operators<sup>15</sup>



The store itself was set up along traditional co-operative lines but the important difference was that goods were sold in small quantities. You could buy a penn'orth of CWS tea, coffee, jam, cocoa, 1d. loaf of bread and a score of other things. The Co-operative News reported over 100 penny lines of CWS goods<sup>16</sup>. Only too aware of the poor state of child health, they were keen to raise awareness of the nutritional value of good milk and the store advertised small quantities of pure milk at 4d per quart. Lower dividend enabled prices to be kept low

generally and all purchases, however small, qualified for dividend; essential if they were to reap the benefits of Co-operation when the average spend of customers was only 2d.

The butcher's shop sold cooked meat and various butcher's puddings. 160 pints of hot soup were sold daily in ha'penny and penny a pint portions. A dinner could be bought for a few pennies and the sale of pease pudding was huge; 160 gallons were made each day from three stone of split peas;

and served with pork gravy. It was a tasty and nutritious meal for a ha'penny. Many of the homes in the area had inadequate cooking facilities, with few pots and pans and fuel so expensive, the provision of cooked food proved very successful and soon spread to the other stores in Sunderland <sup>17</sup>.

### **MEETINGS , SOCIAL GATHERINGS AND EDUCATION FOR THE COMMUNITY.**

The small hall, holding about 100, soon became a focus of activity and reports in the *Co-op News* in February 1903 recorded 300 - 400 attending each week. The settlement workers were keen to make maximum use of this facility, and embarked on organising an ambitious programme of activities. In the longer term this would prove to be difficult to sustain but the combination of educational talks, a cup of tea and entertainment in a warm and welcoming environment so near home, was extremely popular and, we are told, up to the last the hall was crowded. <sup>18</sup>

The programme of activities was advertised in the store window and there were weekly clubs to attract a wide range of age groups. An ambulance class proved very popular with the young men and most useful since many of them worked at the docks where there were frequent accidents. The club for young women was even more popular, recruiting 68 members. 'Letter writing and dictation was a favourite of both lads and lassies, many of whom had limited and irregular schooling and "wished they had been better scholars' <sup>19</sup>. The Co-operative movement, the Independent Labour Party (ILP), trade unions and other friends of the settlement provided entertainment and talks.

The men's discussion meeting on a Sunday included topics such as drink, education, the housing question and the unemployed. It provided a welcome alternative to street corners and the public house. One man who used to frequent a nearby pub, the Grace Darling, and would "kill you for a gill" now prefers the Hall <sup>20</sup>. There were 'friendly little' talks on thrift and temperance and at the end of any evening there were opportunities to make deposits in the Penny Bank or sign the pledge. In common with

social reformers of the time the Guild promoted temperance, aware of the consequences of excessive drink, ill health, neglect of children, street fighting and deteriorating poverty. By February of 1903, 57 local people had signed the pledge .

There were lantern lectures and concert parties where the children were always delighted to recite and sing and one evening each month was set aside for table games. Using the Women's Corner in the *Co-operative News* they were able to build up a library which was especially popular amongst the unemployed or those on short time. Between 60 and 70 books were borrowed each week; *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, *Grimm's Fairy Tales* and *Robinson Crusoe* were particular favourites. <sup>21</sup>

### **CORONATION STREET W.C.G. BRANCH**

A Coronation Street branch of the Women's Co-operative Guild was started along with a choral society. Sitting on the platform and taking part in a self governing organisation was new to many working class women and this capacity building continued to be a crucial part of the work of the Guild. There were talks and advice on maternity issues, child welfare, the care of the sick as well as the benefits of Co-operation. The WCG were involved in many campaigns to improve the life of working class women and the Coronation Street Branch would have been a part of the wider organisation and its work. Sitting at a table in the corner of the grocery store they took instalments towards the Sunderland Society's 1s membership fee and, understanding the importance of establishing good habits amongst the young, enthusiastically enrolled them into the Penny Bank . The children had spent their pennies on "bullets", or chips or cigarettes but the desk became a centre of life and interest and Miss Davies tells us they became real friends, full of fun, very affectionate and never rude. They shared confidences and took great pleasure in the store ladies attentions. When a girl of 16 came one day to make a deposit was asked how she was so small, in a calm and old fashioned manner she replied, "I've been kep' down by minding babies".... "Me mothers had

13 and I've minded eight and a small girl tells that she was to be washed "arl over, head and awl".<sup>22</sup>

By September 1904 38 members had paid in over £1 to the Penny Bank;  
702 between 1/- and 5/- ;  
501 less than 1/- ;  
145 one payment only.

In two years a total of 2,007 Penny bankers were enrolled, more than double the number when enrolment took place at the Society's central office in Green Street. It was seen to be a resounding success; periodic entertainment and processions of children through the neighbourhood promoted the bank. The facility was constantly open in the store to make deposits but withdrawal of funds could only be made on a Saturday at the central office; equally important, it allowed a friendship to be nurtured between the store ladies and the children.

There was considerable interest in the Sunderland experiment, not least from Societies who had their own poor areas and so reports of the progress of the People's Store were eagerly awaited. The Women's Guild members were very effective campaigners and the name "Coronation Street had become a household word in the Co-operative movement, so great and widespread has the interest of Co-operators become in the Sunderland experiment."<sup>23</sup> Visitors came from a wide area to see the store; Dr Ethel Williams from Newcastle, Dr Bertha Webb from Sunderland, Messrs Tweddle, Rule and Moorhouse from the CWS; Mrs Randall, Mrs Scarfield, Mr Garcia, Mr Canon and Miss Moore-Ede, Councillor Summerbell and representatives from Pendleton, Chester le Street, Accrington, Middlesbrough, Hull, Leith and many other Co-operative Societies.<sup>24</sup>

There were regular articles in the *Co-operative News* and reports of discussions across the country including a translation of articles about the Sunderland experiment appearing in Swiss and German papers.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the Guild campaigned across the country; producing pamphlets, organising conferences and visiting branches. The Open

Door Policy, which removed the disincentives to membership, became synonymous with the campaign to take Co-operation into poor areas.

### **MARGARET LLEWELYN DAVIES**

Margaret Llewelyn Davies, a Christian Socialist and Owenite, talked of ‘an anchor of hope for the hopeless, a friend’s hand for the friendless and a light for those whose life is full of darkness’ and those who challenged this missionary work as ‘selfish dividend hunters’ only interested in dividends and profits. Using similar religious imagery, the most progressive men and women are in spirit with the brave pioneers in Sunderland and look on the Co-op settlement in Sunderland as a second Rochdale which shows these weak and feeble brethren who opposed the store that faith and courage are still inner forces which will move mountains’.<sup>26</sup>

For the first three months Miss Davies volunteered at the settlement supervising the early stages and working with the employees of the store and the management committee. She was helped by a succession of national Guild members; Miss Spooner, Mrs Abbott and Miss Mayo and eventually Miss Rushworth and Miss Partridge were established as the paid workers. The notion of the settlement had come from Miss Davies’ association with Octavia Hill and Arnold Toynbee but it was also Owenite in its belief that Co-operation provided a social as well as a business model.

They set about ‘promiscuous visiting’ of families in the neighbourhood, concentrating on a relatively small area nearest to the store; Walton Place, Flag Lane, Covent Garden, Spring Garden Lane, so that they could build up a complete picture of the life of the people and their living conditions. 230 families were regularly visited and, recognising the problems involved in winning new co-operators, set about their “propagandist” work; keeping careful records they persuaded their neighbours to become members, join the Penny Bank and shop at the store. There is a fabulous record of these visits held in the Margaret Llewelyn Davies Collection at the London School of Economics (LSE) providing a vivid social history of the East End at the turn of the twentieth century. These are typical of the entries made;

*north east history*

Alcock 5 Walton Place

Nov.1902 One room very poor, bad and little furniture. Mr A. Has been out of work for four months, he is a labourer but doesn't tie his hand to anything. He got £1 if at a job, otherwise 3 /4d. The rent is 1/9d. Mrs A is ill and dirty. They have two children 2 and Jane Ann 4. (She) can't get him down (to the hall) on Sundays for the men's discussion, having no clothes.

Dec 23 1902 room in a terrible mess. Mrs A and Mrs Beckett (from next door) papering it. Mr A by the fire with a child, he is very dirty. They were invited to the Xmas party (only Mr A came).

May 1903 New baby- Michael "the king of Walton Place". Neighbours much disapprove of her scrubbing etc in a fortnights time (after her confinement)"Why does she do it?" Mrs Graham is scornfully indignant, "greed – she won't pay anyone to do it for her". Looked very ill when came up to the Hall with the 'King' . Given to language (19)

Mrs Anderson 23 Flag Lane

Jan 1903 Nice bright woman. Comes to the store for bits and pieces of things, eldest son 21 comes (to the Hall) on Sundays. Good looking man, out of work and doing amateur cobbling. Place neat and clean, a little kitchen and a room beyond.

April 18 1903 Husband had only 5 weeks work since Xmas , just engaged as a donkey man on a ship bound for London. She cried and said no one knew what a struggle it had been for the last 2 weeks. She had had only 2/- and had to pawn nearly everything, a man and two lads and a delicate little girl like my Florrie take some feeding. This is the second home I've scraped together and had to part with. The evenings at the store and the Guild have helped pass the time nicely and she and her neighbour Mrs Coley always come when they can. Would like to come and live at Walton Place near his brother. Doesn't know what she would have done without the soup and pease pudding. Obligated to buy penn'orth sends Florrie because she shames to come herself to ask for so little.

May 1903 Mrs A comes to the sewing class with little Florrie, delicate from the dregs of whooping cough. At Tuesday night party had a little

scene with Mrs. A. A lad had hit her lame boy John and she tried to go for him, threatening to knock his ribs in, nearly came to a fight in the room.

June 1903 Florrie dangerously ill with measles and bronchitis but pulled through. John goes hawking with a barrow on Saturday selling fruit etc. <sup>27</sup>

It is from these records that we find the detail of the hardships of the 'neighbours' in the East End. Maintaining steady work was a major problem, they were indeed the underclass only called on when the system needed them.

Pawning was widespread and part of the daily grind to find enough pennies to survive. People would gather their clothes into a basket and take it or whatever they had of some little value to the pawn shop on a very regular basis. Most could only buy second hand goods and they made great use of credit club to buy essentials many charging interest rates up to 3d in the shilling. If you didn't pay up 'in comes the bums to distress you'. <sup>28</sup>

The Guild knew that this hand to mouth existence was a great drain on very limited resources as well as the local economy and if they could persuade their neighbours to save a little and benefit from the dividend on their purchases, it could make a huge difference to their lives.

The Co-op 'ladies' became friends to their neighbours and just as you would help a friend they were asked to lend a tram fare or help with shoes for a barefoot rope worker. But the store was only used when they could sell their goods at a competitive price and there are frequent references to the dilemma faced by members who would love to shop at the store but can't always do so when prices are higher, every ha'penny had to be counted. <sup>29</sup>

## **ENCOURAGING TRADE REPORTS , YET SETTLEMENT AND STORE CLOSURE.**

The reports of the first three months of the Coronation Street Store were very encouraging. The store did nearly £2,800 in trade over the period,

had 164 members and counted nearly 800 children in the Penny Bank. Between 300- 400 people met in the hall each week for educational and social activities <sup>30</sup> and in making regular visits the Guild felt they were gaining the confidence and friendship of the people, “establishing a relationship unspoilt by the demoralising effects of charity and relief” <sup>31</sup>. In January 1903 Miss Partridge was appointed as a permanent worker by the Board of the Sunderland Society on 25/- each week; the Guild were to pay for the second worker from their own funds with no extra cost to the Society.

The store and the settlement were thriving; it was possible to win the trade of the poorest; grocery trade was double that of the old store and sale of cooked meats and cooked food exceeded all expectations. The butcher’s shop made higher dividends than any of the Society’s seven butcher’s shops. Since the store opened they had bought two adjoining houses to store coal and oil. The Guild calculated £1,080 in dividend would be returned to the neighbourhood each year, providing a cushion or paying for essentials such as rent or shoes. Members greatly welcomed their quarterly dividend, as one woman said, “it is more than I ever saved in my life-aah, if only I had joined the store 20 years ago when I was first married”.

A conference held in Accrington in February 1903 celebrated this success. Sheffield delegates from Brightside and Carbrook Society reported that they had set up a committee to see if a similar store could be opened in their area.

In the winter of 1903 and spring 1904 there was a trade depression and a fall in weekly sales of £9. While this was a setback, early in 1904 the Sunderland Board agreed to employ the second worker, Miss Rushworth at £1 per week.<sup>32</sup> The Management Committee must have felt that this was an expenditure well worth making. However, despite its successes in June 1904 G. D. H. Cole records that, ‘disaster struck’ when Miss Partridge fell foul of the Society’s directors, alleging that they were being unduly interfering. She became ill and was forced to resign. Miss Rushworth



continued offering a much reduced programme of activities. Despite the 'valiant efforts' of board member Mr John Grant and the support of other friends, at the Quarterly Meeting on a recommendation of the executive, the members voted 82 to 25 to discontinue the employment of the residential social workers and in effect close the settlement. (33) The Coronation Street Store was converted to an ordinary branch, with no extra activities much to the grief of the local people who were continuously asking when the hall was to be opened again. The furniture was cleared and sold off and an elderly couple were to reside there as tenants.

G. D. H. Cole concluded, 'The whole thing was over in two years; and deep was the discouragement of the Women's Guild leaders who had laboured hard for its success'.<sup>33</sup>

Why, when all the indicators were pointing to a successful experiment, was the settlement closed? It is unlikely that trading issues were a factor since throughout 1904 the Coronation Street Branch, when taking the butchery into consideration, was doing as well as if not better than the rest of the Society<sup>34</sup>. It would seem that from the very outset there had been considerable opposition to the plan, some seeing it as preferential treatment of one branch over other branches and as a needless expense for the Society. It was reported in the *Co-operative News* that "no other subject had been the cause of so much bickering at the management meetings of the Sunderland Society and the topic was never off the board"<sup>35</sup>. The resignation of the senior social worker Miss Partridge gave the opponents to the scheme the opportunity they had been waiting for.

I would argue that the Sunderland Society had unrealistic expectations of the resources needed to turn around the customs and habits of such a poor neighbourhood. There was also a clear lack of recognition of the value added to the Settlement by the women, who were both committed co-operators and social workers and who both had a strong, sympathetic character, tact, initiative and endless patience; they also had a firm belief in the Co-op and in self-help and they demonstrated accuracy with accounts and report writing. The suggestion that some 'poor widow

woman' could do the work of Miss Partridge and Miss Rushworth sums this up! Likewise the suggestion from the Management Committee that the Education Committee could take over the programme of activities was met with little enthusiasm from the Guild, "when it is everyone's work is apt to become nobody's work"<sup>36</sup>

## **IMPLICATIONS OF THE CLOSURE AND CONTEMPORARY PARALLELS**

The decision to close the settlement had significant implications for the Co-operative Movement. There had been intense interest in the Sunderland experiment throughout the co-operative world and especially from Societies in large towns with poor neighbourhoods. The possibility of engaging other Societies was now much less likely after the Sunderland Board had finally rejected the need for a settlement.

The WCG were ever hopeful that changes in the make up of the Board would bring about a change in policy and they continued to promote their poverty campaign; sending money and advice to the York Society who had opened a branch in George Street but without a settlement and supporting a project in Kingsland Road, Bristol in 1905. There were limited experiments in Hull and Stockton but the Sheffield Brightside and Carbrook Society failed to get the support needed despite the best efforts of committed co-operators and there is no mention of the poor campaign in the minutes of the WCG after 1906.<sup>37</sup> Further research might uncover whether gender was a factor in the decision to close the settlement. The conflict with the wider movement had been a turning point in the development of the WCG. 'Coronation Street had reasserted the Owenite commitment to trading practices with social rather than narrowly commercial benefit' and that "won them the reputation of the left wing of the Co-op movement".<sup>38</sup>

There are interesting contemporary parallels with this story of Edwardian England and the causes and political solutions associated with poverty today; in the demonisation of benefit claimants we can see similar

attitudes to the poor and issues around morality. There is now, as then, a failure to challenge the root causes of poverty, blaming instead the victims of the economic system.

The Co-operative Movement today also shares some interesting historical parallels; debates about the best way to support co-operative stores in poor areas continue today and centre on prices in store, value lines, membership take-up and the best ways of supporting these communities. Like the Women's Co-operative Guild of yesteryear, today's Movement believes that Co-operation is far more than just a business model.

### **Postscript**

We used this story to promote the PPP in the local press and a photograph from the scrapbook in the collection at the LSE. The little girls standing with Miss Davies and Miss Partridge from Walton Place are named as Ethel and Lizzie Burn. Ethel's granddaughter Margaret Cleugh saw the article in the *Sunderland Echo* and contacted the Project. She and her sister Joan were delighted to be reunited with their 'Nana Ditch'.

### **Acknowledgements**

The staff at the Co-op College Archive and in particular Rachel Vorburg Rugh for generously giving me access to her Master's Dissertation. The staff at the LSE archive and Sunderland Local Studies but especially the group of Co-operative volunteers for their help and advice and the volunteers of the PPP for their encouragement to tell this story.

### **References**

- 1 p.76 *The Women's Co-operative Guild 1883-1904* (1904) Margaret Llewelyn Davies
- 2 *The Poverty Campaign*, Ch 3. Masters Dissertation Rachel Vorburg Rugh
- 3 *The Open Door* WCG 1903
- 4 *A Century of Co-operation* GDH Cole p221- 222 1944
- 5 *Caring and Sharing A Centenary History of the CWG* Gaffin and Thoms 1983

*north east history*

- 6 *The Co-operative News* Woman's Corner April 26 1902
- 7 Jan 31 1903 'The Hospital' also in MLD's collection Volume 4 LSE
- 8 *Century of Co-operation* GDH Cole p221- 222 1944
- 9 *The Daily News* Feb 10 1903
- 10 *Co-operative News* October 18, 1902
- 11 *The Hospital* January 31 1903
- 12 1901 Census Walton Place
- 13 *The Peoples Store A guide to the North Eastern Family Tree* Jim Lamb and Steve Warren
- 14 *The Co-operative News* Oct 18 1902
- 15 *The Co-operative News* Woman's Corner November 29 1902
- 16 *The Co-operative News* Feb 21 1903
- 17 Report of the first 3 months of the Sunderland Equitable Ind. Society, Coronation Street Branch
- 18 *The Co-operative News* Dec. 10 1904
- 19 *The Co-operative News* Feb 14 1903
- 20 *The Co-operative News* Woman's Corner November 29 1902
- 21 *The Co-operative News* Feb 14 1903
- 22 p 89 *The Women's Co-operative Guild 1883-1904* (1904) Margaret Llewelyn Davies
- 23 p83 *The Women's Co-operative Guild 1883-1904* (1904) Margaret Llewelyn Davies
- 24 MLD's collection Volume 2 LSE
- 25 *The Co-operative News* Woman's Corner July 16 1904
- 26 *The Women's Co-operative Guild 1883-1904* (1904) Margaret Llewelyn Davies
- 27 MLD Collection volume 2 LSE
- 28 *The Co-operative News* Dec 10 1904
- 29 MLD Collection volume 2 LSE
- 30 The Poverty Campaign, Ch 3. Master's Dissertation Rachel Vorburg Rugh
- 31 MLD Collection volume 2 LSE
- 32 *The Co-operative News*, Woman's Corner Nov 26 1904
- 33 p 223 *A Century of Co-operation* GDH Cole
- 34 *The Co-operative News*, Woman's Corner Nov 26 1904
- 35 *The Co-operative News* (from a correspondent) September 24 1904
- 36 *The Co-operative News* Woman's Corner November 19 1904
- 37 The Poverty Campaign, Ch 3. Master's Dissertation Rachel Vorburg Rugh
- 38 Feminism. Scott p97 as quoted in *The Poverty Campaign*, Ch 3.p71 Master's Dissertation Rachel Vorburg Rugh

# Join **The Co-operative** and together we can help bees make their big comeback.

Bee populations are in severe decline all over the world. Bees pollinate a third of the food we eat, so without them there would be no apples, onions or even tea.

Through our **Plan Bee campaign** we're introducing lots of new ideas, activities and initiatives designed to give bees a fighting chance. Visit our website and find out what you can do to help.



The **co-operative**  
membership

**Join Us 0800 023 4708**  
[www.co-operative.coop/membership](http://www.co-operative.coop/membership)

# EASINGTON COLLIERY: GROWTH OF A COMMUNITY 1911-19

Harry Barnes

The initial development of Easington Colliery between 1899 and the start of 1911 was a slow process<sup>1</sup>. It then bounded forth in the following eight years. Available indicators of the area's speed of growth are (a) census returns, (b) electoral registration details, (c) statistics on the numbers employed at the pit and (d) details from Kelly's Directories for its commercial developments. Yet none of these are available in a straightforward way.

Household census details are only currently available up to 1911, whilst Easington Colliery's total population figures are not provided in the following census of 1921, because the Easington Parish Area then incorporated a much wider territory than the Colliery, including the ancient settlement of Easington Village<sup>2</sup>. Then electoral registration rights were substantially extended in 1918 ending the property qualification and thereby covering more categories of men, whilst enfranchising women aged 30 and over for the first time<sup>3</sup>. Nor were registers compiled based on



*Durham County Record Office.  
People Past and Present Archives.*



*Record Office, People Past and Present Archive*

1915, 1916 and 1917 data, due to the First World War. Consequently pre-1915 registrations provide a poor comparison with post-1918 developments. The statistics on those working at the pit are also hit and miss, only being available near our period for 1914 and then 1921 <sup>4</sup>. Finally, Kelly's Directories initially concentrated on developments in Easington Village and missed out some of the bits and pieces in the early Colliery area <sup>5</sup>. It is only when the above four sources are taken together that they provide a reasonable indicator of developments.

In the 1911 census, the Colliery's population is shown as being 941. Of these, 310 were in employment; 257 working directly at the pit <sup>6</sup>. Accounting for Easington Village's more static population, we can estimate the Colliery's population to be around 7,500 in 1921. A source which fits in with there being more than a seven-fold increase in the Colliery population between 1911 and 1921 is the information on the numbers working in the pit. 2,653 are recorded for 1921 <sup>7</sup>, compared to the 257 we saw in the 1911 census. Travel to the pit from outside the Colliery area was difficult in those times and would not significantly

distort these figures. The main period for rapid growth was 1911 to 1914, followed by a slower acceleration from 1914 to 1918; the later period being affected by the numbers (indicated later) who left to join the forces and also by the consequential fall in the birth rate<sup>8</sup>. According to the 1911 census, only twelve streets in the Colliery were occupied; two of them sparsely. There were also a small number of isolated houses such as the Colliery Manager's home. Yet by 1914, the electoral register shows that the number of streets had expanded to 39, rising to 52 in 1918; then after a later burst of growth to 65 in 1926<sup>9</sup>.

Kelly's Directory gives a flavour of the nature of the developments. For 1914, 66 commercial suppliers are listed as operating in the Colliery, although only one of these appears in the 1910 edition. 54 were outlets on Easington's main thoroughfare at Seaside Lane in a section emerging above and out of the main blocks of colliery houses; the shops and other services being mainly packed together on the northern side of the lane. Already names familiar to later generations were in operation, including Robinson's Newsagent (opposite to Walter Wilson's), Monk's the greengrocer and Donnini's confectioners, whose son would be awarded a posthumous Victoria Cross in the closing days of the Second World War<sup>10</sup>.

As Easington sprang from the bench mark of the 1911 census, it needed more than houses and shops. Its requirement for social facilities is illustrated by a report that 200 people turned up for an ambulance class in March 1911 at the only building which was available to cater for such numbers, the then Haswell Co-op<sup>11</sup>. Within the next three years, Easington acquired a passenger rail service, two cinemas, the Black Diamond Hotel, a workingmen's club, a Church, its first Methodist Chapel, a charabanc service to Sunderland and the opening of a permanent Infant and Junior Girl's School, which freed up the temporary tin school for the boys<sup>12</sup> (12). Other improvements were more immediate. The brick built outside toilets in the back yards of the colliery houses (known as "netties") acquired flush facilities and no longer operated as middens as in 1911<sup>13</sup>.



At the start of the month in which Britain went to war against Germany, a Miners' Welfare was opened which included a "caretakers house, contribution room, billiard room, games room, committee room, bathroom" etc.<sup>14</sup>. Then during the week before the war, a meeting was held in its main hall attended by 262 delegates from 138 Workingmen's Clubs and Institutes across the County. They were there to hear a talk by Andrew Temple about Ruskin College at Oxford, which ran full-time courses for adult students from working class backgrounds; their Union of Clubs and Institutes having provided the finances for him to attend<sup>15</sup>.

By the start of the First World War, Easington Colliery was recognisable as a fully-fledged pit village, except that one standard provision seemed to be missing – the normal pit heap. Instead of such an eyesore coming to dominate the community, coal waste was tipped down the nearby coastal cliffs. A seven-year-old boy Kenneth Musgrave was killed when climbing up this form of pit-heap in 1927<sup>16</sup>. It took until 1931 for an aerial flight to be added<sup>17</sup>. Waste was then initially dropped onto the beach and later directly into the sea<sup>18</sup>. So whilst the social space on the coast line was being blighted, the pit waste was out of sight for normal day-to-day purposes.

Men's lives were, however, still dominated by the rigours of pit life and women's lives by house work – for there were few paid employment opportunities for females. The pit-head baths were not opened until 1937<sup>19</sup>. Instead, a tin bath hung on a nail driven into the wall of the back yard and was dragged into the main living space of the kitchen in anticipation of the return of the shift workers. As a three-shift round-the-clock system was in operation, in some homes the ritual would be carried out two or three times a day. Water would be heated on the coal fire. Where more than one miner came back home at the same time, the bath water was likely to be reused. Round the clock meal provisions and weekly washes were other tasks organised by women. After using pos-tubs, the washing had to be dried in the back streets, where the coal houses and the netties faced each other from neighbouring streets, whilst "children play in the gutters"<sup>20</sup>.

## **STRIKES**

The Durham Miners' Association (DMA) affiliated permanently to the Miners' Federation of Great Britain in 1908. By the start of 1911, the Easington Colliery Lodge was established and it was quickly involved in a national mining strike. Its members participated in a national ballot in January 1912 to help determine whether the MFGB should prepare to run a strike "to establish the principle of an individual minimum wage for every man and boy working underground"<sup>21</sup>. The problem miners faced was that when underground workers operated in poor or abnormal conditions, they were then unable to produce sufficient output to meet what would otherwise have been their normal payment levels. For pay was based on the quantity of coal produced. This was unlikely to be a major problem in a new pit such as Easington's, but its miners normally had experience of more problematic pit life elsewhere in the County.

Nationally a two-thirds vote was required to determine strike action. This was easily obtained by almost four to one. In County Durham 57,490 voted for strike action, with 28,504 against. The strike started on 1 March, with Easington playing its part only fifteen months after its fledgling branch was established. A million miners across Britain were involved, with Easington still only having a few hundred members. To seek to handle the disruption which the strike caused to the economy, the Government introduced a Coal Mines (Minimum Wage) Bill. The MFGB attempted to have some input into the Bill as it progressed through Parliament, but they were dissatisfied with the final version and opposed the measure when it reached its third reading. There was concern that the procedure for determining minimum wage levels was to be placed in the hands of a system of District Boards. A further ballot took place to see if the MFGB membership would accept the Bill. Although the national ballot rejected the measure by 244,011 to 201,013, it was judged that a two-thirds vote was required to continue the strike, so after six weeks the men returned to work. In County Durham, the vote to continue the strike was again around two to one, this time by 48,828 to 24,511. At

Easington, the vote of its small branch was proportionately much closer, with 123 voting in favour of continuing the strike and 112 against. The two neighbouring, larger and more established coastal pits of Dawdon and Horden took a much more militant line. Dawdon voted by 693 to 111 to continue the strike, whilst Horden did the same by 1,129 to 204<sup>22</sup>. Dawdon went on to become a noted centre for Communist activity, especially in 1929<sup>23</sup>; whilst Horden had taken strong action in 1910 against measures to introduce a three-shift system<sup>24</sup>.

Easington was, however, then quickly involved in a number of local disputes. A meeting of the DMA in August 1912 received a complaint from the owners that “men laid the pit idle on Thursday July 25, 1912 contrary to the provisions of the fatal accident agreement”<sup>25</sup>. Further unofficial strikes took place at Easington in 1913 on May 5<sup>th</sup>, July 3<sup>rd</sup> and August 11<sup>th</sup><sup>26</sup>. The last of these continued for several days and occurred when the management insisted that up to sixty men should ride at any one time in a cage. For safety reasons the lodge insisted that the numbers should be limited to thirty<sup>27</sup>. But in a monthly circular, the leadership of the DMA admonished Easington and various other lodges for involving themselves in “unconstitutional....unbusiness-like and unprofitable action”<sup>28</sup>. Yet a few weeks later there was a cage accident at Easington which led to 1,000 men and boys in its “South Pit” being laid off work for over six weeks. The DMA were then obliged to make “out of work” payments to those affected, whilst others contributed funds to help, including the local boy scouts. The Dawdon Lodge levied from its members 6d for men and 3d for boys<sup>29</sup>.

The Easington lodge was also active from its start in pressing demands both locally and upon the DMA. It called for the Easington District Council to contact the North Eastern Railway to get it to establish local passenger services<sup>30</sup> and complained to the County Medical Officer about insanitary conditions in nearby Easington Village<sup>31</sup>. Between August 1913 and May 1915 it placed 28 items on the Agenda of the DMA on matters of local concern, such as the need for “breakage allowances”

for men arriving to take up employment at the pit in the middle of a stoppage<sup>32</sup>. The standard work of the lodge was, however, concerned with issues such as the pursuit of compensation for those killed and injured at the pit, whilst branch officials were regularly (and unsuccessfully) nominated for DMA positions and for delegates posts to the MFGB and TUC Conferences, including a failed attempt to get George Bloomfield selected for the DMA panel of parliamentary candidates in 1914<sup>33</sup>.

## **WAR**

On 13 February 1915, a body was established to present a report to Parliament on “Conditions Prevailing In The Coal Industry Due To The War”. The Committee’s reports shows the scale of the initial rush of recruits from the pits. In the first six months of the war 19.9 per cent of the miners in County Durham had joined the forces<sup>34</sup>. The figures of those miners employed at Easington was 1,896<sup>35</sup>. So a crude application of the overall recruitment rate in the County would mean that 377 of its miners were involved. There are, however, two complicating factors to consider.

First, there is no indication whether the 1914 figure for those employed at Easington was completed before or after the war started: so it is a problematic base. Secondly, Durham Miners had three main motives for joining the forces – patriotism, a sense of adventure and economic need. Easington’s miners would share the first two motivations, but not so much the third. The above report shows that nationally at the start of the war, there was a significant decline in coal production of 13.5 per cent, exactly equivalent to the fall in the size of the workforce. Influencing the figures was a complete loss of coal exports to Germany itself, Russia, Belgium, Austria-Hungary, Turkey and Romania<sup>36</sup>. The loss of the export trade had a serious impact on the Durham coalfield. Figures supplied by the Durham coal owners showed that 41.25 per cent of miners aged 18 to 38 had been recruited in the first eight months of the war<sup>37</sup>. Economic pressures had clearly added to the exodus from the pits, but Easington

was a recently established long life pit. With its cages back in full use, it had few production problems; although its working environment also had its drawbacks as Alderman William House, President of the DMA indicated in his evidence to the investigating committee . He pointed out that east coast pits (which included Easington) were deep and hot, so “a man had to be very strong and robust indeed” to work there<sup>38</sup>. At the start of the war, joining the forces might have seemed a better option to some.

The pull of patriotic sentiment in Easington is illustrated by two contrasting approaches. First, there was anger. Late in 1914, following bombardments by German Warships at Hartlepool eight miles to the south, a crowd smashed the windows of a pork butcher’s shop at Easington Colliery even though its German owner was in detention<sup>39</sup>. Secondly, mainly during the First World War, the Primitive Methodists, who had not yet built a chapel, at different times used both the Miner’s Welfare and Haswell Store Hall to put on some fifty concerts and oratories. During the war they used these to raise National Savings Funds<sup>40</sup>.

After the early loss due to the drop in exports, coal soon came back into demand due to “the greatly increased requirement of the Admiralty, the stimulus given by the war to the manufacture of armaments, and the high prices which were soon being offered for export coal”<sup>41</sup>. The Government were in a quandary as they needed both miners for the war effort and recruits for the battlefields. So as they moved towards conscription, they looked for means by which they could be selective as to whom they recruited for military service and they even returned some key face workers back to the pits. When compulsory military service was introduced in 1916 it provided for local tribunals to sort out who would do what. Initially recruitment was for unmarried men and widowers without dependent children, who were between 18 and 40. But a series of Acts limited exemptions and finally extended the call-up to 50<sup>42</sup>.

If we can’t be sure how many people from Easington joined the forces in the initial rush to the colours, we know almost exactly the details of those who were in the forces near the end of the war. The 1918 electoral

register had a qualifying date of 15 July, some four months before the armistice and a couple of months after the call-up had embraced 50 year olds. 666 military voters are recorded whose homes were in Easington Colliery<sup>43</sup>. 540 of these had home addresses in colliery houses. A number of the remaining 126 are also likely to have come from the mines, but had rented homes, lodgings or “rooms” which were normally rented by younger married couples. Nor are names missing from the register due to the fact that they were under the normal voting age of 21, for the 1918 Representation of the People Act made special provisions for persons on war service to be given the vote if they had reached the age of 19<sup>44</sup>. There is a possibility that some 18 year olds signed up, but they should not have been sent overseas at that age; although back in 1915 Private James William Keith of 3 Sixth Street East was killed and is buried in a Belgium Military Cemetery<sup>45</sup>. Of the 666 military voters, 87 were in the Durham Light Infantry, the same number being in the Navy – 14 of whom served together on HMS Pembroke II. 50 homes each had two members serving in the forces, whilst seven had three such members – normally a father and two sons.

The Easington War Memorial shows the names of 198 killed in the First World War<sup>46</sup>. 27 of these had homes in nearby Easington Village. Amongst those killed are a small number whose names also appear on the 1918 Electoral Register. It would seem that around a fifth of those who fought in the war from the Colliery area were killed.

## **INFLUENZA**

A Spanish Flu epidemic, thought to have arisen in the United States and then to have been carried by some of their troops, hit mainland Europe and its battlefields in 1918. At one time 10% of British soldiers in France were unable to report for duty due to its impact. The epidemic hit County Durham in three waves, in July and October 1918, and then in February 1919 when the war was over. In a study of the impact of the epidemic in County Durham, Steven Edward Corfield highlights these developments

stating that the epidemic “helped contribute towards the greatest number of deaths ever held on record in the history of County Durham”<sup>47</sup>.

The school log for the Easington Colliery Council School records the impact of the epidemic when it led to closures of the school on the orders of the medical officer. The log’s details fit in well with Steve Corfield’s assessment of the waves of the epidemic. First, on 2<sup>nd</sup> July 1918 the school attendance dropped to 51.3% “ arising from an epidemic of influenza” and the school was closed down for almost a fortnight. After a brief return, the school was again closed down for a longer period, which fitted into the emerging summer holidays. The second wave hit at the close of the war. On the news of the armistice, the school closed for half a day on November 11<sup>th</sup> . But from November 12<sup>th</sup> only 53% of the pupils were in attendance and the school was closed the next day due to influenza. This closure extended over the Christmas holiday period. The final wave of influenza led to the closure of the school on 20 February 1919. It was not until March 17<sup>th</sup> that the school re-assembled and obtained a 84.8% attendance<sup>48</sup>. Whilst the school log does not record children’s deaths from influenza, elsewhere it is stated that from the epidemic there was a “very high death rate, some families lost three or four members”<sup>49</sup>.

In the midst of the second wave of the epidemic on 14 December, Easington Colliery went to the polls in the 1918 General Election.

## **SANKEY**

In November 1916, the Government used the Defence of the Realm Act to take control of the South Wales coalfield as a result of strike action there; but it was not until February 1917 that such provisions were extended to the rest of the industry<sup>50</sup>. It was, however, a form of control which was limited to output and distribution, so that the coal owners found it to be a profitable era due to the high demand for coal. The miners, however, felt that they had made sacrifices for the war effort. They moved to correct the balance of interests immediately the war ended. In February 1919, by a six to one vote they supported strike action in pursuit of demands which

included wage increases, shorter hours and nationalisation. In County Durham, the vote in favour of action was 76,024 to 16,248<sup>51</sup>.

The Government bought time by setting up the Sankey Commission to look into the miners' claims. This led to a situation where a Seven Hour Act was introduced to replace eight hour underground shifts and wages were increased by two shillings per shift for what became known as the "Sankey Wage"<sup>52</sup>. The demand for nationalisation was, however, eventually rejected, although the Commission voted by seven votes to six in its favour and the Government had earlier committed itself in "spirit and letter" to accept an interim report, where nationalisation was part of what was termed the "majority report"<sup>53</sup>. As the miners felt that they had advanced a fairly full hand of demands (including they believed the call for nationalisation), a further ballot to call off the strike threat was carried in April 1919 by a nine to one vote; being 95,618 to 6,845 in the Durham District<sup>54</sup>. The miners had agreed to a settlement and then felt they had been tricked over the issue of the ownership of their industry. That their militant mode had not disappeared was illustrated by a resolution passed by the Easington lodge just three weeks prior to the national ballot, which protested at the Government's continuing use of the military against trade unions and called on the DMA "to use all its powers to render such action ineffective"<sup>55</sup>.

Sidney Webb, the London-based socialist intellectual, had served on the Sankey Commission and had even used the opportunity to appear before it to give evidence in favour of nationalisation; whilst only a year earlier, he had drafted what then became Clause Four of the Labour Party Constitution, calling for the "common ownership of the means production, distribution and exchange". In writing about Sidney Webb, Jack Lawson who worked in the Durham coalfield early in 1919, went on to say that its miners had been in "need of such a man to put their case" and that "every miner devoured the press reports of the Sankey Commission"<sup>56</sup>.



## **POLITICS**

In 1909, the MFGB affiliated to the Labour Party and fourteen of their MPs moved from being Lib-Labs to take the Labour whip<sup>57</sup>; although in numbers of cases the initial move was only something of a formality and “it was only after 1918 that the DMA began to support the advance of the Labour Party in a consistent and organised fashion”<sup>58</sup>. This is illustrated by the fact that the miners’ affiliation to the Labour Party had no major impact on Easington Colliery until 1918, for until then it was part of the South East Durham Parliamentary Division which was represented in Parliament by a Liberal: Evan Hayward. He was never challenged by a candidate from the DMA until he stood for the Seaham seat in 1918, following a change in parliamentary boundaries. The Seaham seat then incorporated Easington. That the Durham miners tended to be slow in detaching themselves from their past Liberal links is illustrated by the fact that Hayward addressed the Durham Miners’ Big Meeting in 1913, although he did this alongside the prominent Labour MP, Arthur Henderson<sup>59</sup>.

It was also not until 1918 that the Labour Party started to set up provisions for individual party membership in a systematic way. Until this occurred, Labour activists were normally limited to operating via affiliated bodies such as their trade unions and the Independent Labour Party (ILP). George Bloomfield moved from Horden Colliery where he had been Compensation Agent to take over the post of Lodge Secretary at Easington at the start of 1911. In the previous year he had been Secretary of the Horden Branch of the ILP. He would remain active in the ILP in Durham County for the remainder of the period under review. The Easington Branch was sufficiently active to send a delegate to the Annual Conferences of the ILP for each year from 1917 to 1924. The delegate had always been Robert Walker, who had previously represented the Dawdon Branch at ILP Conferences in 1914, 1915 and 1916, before he moved to Easington. The minimum membership of the Easington ILP as derived from its affiliation fees to its national body, was between 28 and

30 from 1918 to 1922. Such details were not published for most other years of its operations<sup>60</sup>.

Bloomfield was fully involved in the Durham Forward Movement along with other leading ILP members. It aimed to reform the DMA and was in operation from 1911<sup>61</sup>, when Bloomfield also moved to Easington. In September 1911, the Movement held a mass meeting at Seaham Harbour, where the “attendance numbered about 1,500” with representatives from 14 Branches including Easington<sup>62</sup>. At a meeting of the Movement at Seaham Harbour in July 1912, a resolution was carried which called for improvements to the recently adopted Minimum Wage Act and for democratic advances in the operations of the DMA. Bloomfield moved the resolution and it was seconded by Jack Lawson of the Alma Branch. He came to have close links with Bloomfield. Lawson went on to become a Minister in the Labour Government of 1945. At Seaham he spoke in favour of “bringing Durham into line with militant forces of the Miners’ Federation of Great Britain, with the clear knowledge that they would only get from the coal owners what they were compelled to give at the point of a sword”<sup>63</sup>. A meeting of the Movement held at Horden in April 1914 was attended by representatives of 44 lodges in the County. Whilst speakers recognised that a minor reform had then been achieved in the Minimum Wage Act to get tribunals to deal with cases within seven days, a resolution was nevertheless moved by Bloomfield which called for pressure to continue for further reforms. The resolution which was adopted also contained a commitment not to support candidates at the next General Election who did not support the same objective<sup>64</sup>. The DMA went on to retaliate against continuing pressures from the Movement in one of its circulars in 1916, by attacking its “unconstitutional militancy”<sup>65</sup>.

When the new constituency of Seaham was established, Bloomfield wrote on behalf of the Easington Lodge to the Easington Rural District Council in October 1917, objecting to the name the Division had been given, as it had earlier been intended to call it “Easington”<sup>66</sup>. Unlike

numbers of ILP activists who became conscientious objectors during the First World War, Jack Lawson signed up for the forces and served in France<sup>67</sup>. The Easington Lodge successfully nominated Lawson to stand as Labour candidate for Seaham in 1918<sup>68</sup>. But despite the official backing of the DMA in what was the strongest mining seat in County Durham, Hayward defeated Lawson by 12,745 to 8,988. A sign of the problem faced by Lawson was seen when the Wingate miners' lodge came out in favour of Hayward<sup>69</sup>, who had the advantage in the immediate post-war period of being an Army Major. Lawson's own explanation for his defeat was that a "Labour candidate...was a strange creature in that division; and even more suspect when he attacked that 'make the Germans pay' insanity" of the call for reparations<sup>70</sup>. Bloomfield acted as Lawson's agent, whilst Peter Lee from Wheatley Hill acted as a sub-agent<sup>71</sup>. Lee went on to become the first Labour Chairman of the Durham County Council in 1919, whilst in the same year Lawson was elected to Parliament at a by-election in Chester-le-Street.

It has been pointed out that for the Seaham division in 1918 "the Labour Party had no organisation and support and propaganda for Lawson depended mainly on the few branches of the Independent Labour Party in the mining villages"<sup>72</sup>. The ILP accounts for 1918 show that the division had only three registered branches at New Seaham, Dawdon and Easington. According to the affiliation fees which these branches paid, the New Seaham and Dawdon ILP only had six or seven members each, compared with the thirty or so members of the Easington ILP<sup>73</sup>. The bulk of the organisational work would seem to have rested upon the shoulders of Bloomfield and his local comrades.

After the electoral defeat, six men met in the upper committee room of the Murton Miners' Welfare to set the wheels in motion to constitute a functioning Seaham Divisional Labour Party which would operate under Labour's new rules<sup>74</sup>. Five were miners and they included Bloomfield (who was appointed to act as Secretary pro-tem) and also Lee and George Walker. The latter was a native of New Seaham and a member of the

ILP who went on to become President of the Easington miners' lodge<sup>75</sup>. As was the case with Jack Lawson; Bloomfield, Walker and Lee were all Methodist lay preachers. Bloomfield and Walker both became active in the United Methodist Church (later known in Easington as St. John's) where Lawson and Lee also preached on occasions<sup>76</sup>. On Lawson and Lee, it has been pointed out that "socialism was an extension of their religious convictions, an ethical and communal ideal morally superior to the self-interest that informed Liberalism and Conservatism"<sup>77</sup>. It is, therefore, typical that soup kitchens were run at the United Methodist Church building during the 1921 and 1926 lock-outs<sup>78</sup>.

One of the first tasks of the newly formed Seaham Divisional Labour Party was to find a candidate to replace the departing Jack Lawson. The Seaham Division was essentially made up of the territories of the Easington Rural District and the Seaham Urban District. The former had the largest proportion of its male population who were miners of any District in County Durham, whilst the latter had a mining population that was proportionately more than twice that of the average Durham District<sup>79</sup>. Beatrice Webb had once claimed that the Parliamentary Labour Party was "the Party of Checkweighmen"<sup>80</sup>. So it was natural to expect a DMA official or a checkweighman such as Bloomfield who was also lodge secretary, to emerge as candidate. But instead from August 1919, lodges and ILP branches in the division started to make what Beatrice Webb called "pathetic requests" to her husband Sidney to accept their nomination<sup>81</sup>. He was remembered for his commitment to the miner's cause earlier that year when serving on the Sankey Commission. He would take some persuading to seek the nomination, but in time he was duly adopted as candidate and went to take the seat at the three following general elections. Both Beatrice and Sidney played a full role in helping to turn Easington and its surrounding area into territory with active Labour Party Branches and Women's Sections<sup>82</sup>. Bloomfield was at the centre of the area's Labour Party activity, acting as Webb's agent in 1923<sup>83</sup>.

From 1911 to 1919, Easington Colliery had shown dramatic changes due to its rapid growth, its industrial struggles, the impact of the First World War (ending with the influenza epidemic) and the start of its first major moves towards Labour, which were stimulated by events that were crystallised in the work of the Sankey Commission – at least as far as the leadership of its miners’ lodge was concerned. The twists and turns of its following life as a pit village would fit into a pattern that had been established in these few tough years.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

I owe a special debt to Dr Lewis Mates who is on the editorial board of this Journal. He provided me with key references to material on the Durham Forward Movement and on officials of the Easington Colliery miners’ lodge. There are a great number of people associated with the Easington area, with whom I have discussed issues and I am especially indebted to local historians Mary N Bell and Eileen Hopper, who have always readily responded to my enquiries. I am grateful for the expert help of the staff of the Durham Record Office and to Ann Barnes who did the difficult bit and sorted out my endnotes. I am solely responsible for any shortcomings.

## **References**

- 1 *North East Labour History*, 2011 Volume 42, pp. 88-108.
- 2 Census 1921, Durham County Record Office F18 (National Archives).
- 3 Rallings, Colin and Thrasher, Michael, *British Electoral Facts* (London: Total Politics 2009), p 104.
- 4 Durham Mining Museum <http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/e002.htm>
- 5 *Kelly’s Directory*, Durham 1910, p. 148, Durham County Record Office J4.
- 6 Census 1911, part of the Easington Civil Parish, (National Archives).
- 7 Durham Mining Museum.
- 8 *The British Economy: Key Statistics 1900-1970* (London & Cambridge Economic Service), p. 8 for UK birth rates.
- 9 Electoral Registers for Easington Colliery, Durham County Record Office CC/C1

*north east history*

- 1/184, M67/139, CC/CC1 1/193, M67/144, M67/203.
- 10 *Kelly's Directory, Durham 1914*, p. 153, Durham County Record Office J5 and [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis\\_Donnini](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dennis_Donnini), Donnini's Confectioners later became a popular ice cream parlour.
  - 11 Durham Chronicle, 3 March 1911, Durham County Record Office M57/52.
  - 12 Reed, William Ramsay, *A Fathers Legacy* (Easington District Council 1992), pp. 69-70.
  - 13 National Coal Board, Durham County Record Office ncb 005-027 2 bf-14084.
  - 14 Durham Chronicle, 10 July 1914, Durham County Record Office M57/56.
  - 15 Durham Chronicle, 24 July 1914, p. 10, Durham County Record Office M57/56.
  - 16 Durham Mining Museum.
  - 17 Reed, p.72.
  - 18 Hopper, Eileen, *Easington Through The Years* (Newcastle: Summerhill Books 2011), pp. 64-5 shows photographs of the original ariel flight and its impact.
  - 19 Reed, p 72.
  - 20 Easington Colliery Rural District Council, Durham County Record Office RD/Ea 78.
  - 21 Arnot, R. Page, *The Miners: Years Of Struggle* (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1953), pp. 90. See also Chapter IV on "The Minimum Wage Strike of 1912", pp. 90-122.
  - 22 Durham Chronicle, 5 April 1912, p. 7, Durham County Record Office M57/53.
  - 23 Howard, Stuart, 'Dawdon In The Third Period', *Bulletin of the North East Labour History Society*, 1987 No 21, pp. 3-16.
  - 24 Beynon, H., and Austrin, T., *Masters and Servants* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 1994), pp. 231-236.
  - 25 Durham Miners' Association, 14 August 1812, p. 174, Durham County Record Office D/DMA 12b.
  - 26 Durham Miners' Association, Monthly Circular No. 217, January 1914, p 6, Durham Mining Museum, <http://www.dmm2.org.uk/dmaarchv/circ217.htm>
  - 27 Durham Chronicle, 15 August 1913, p. 3, Durham County Record Office, M57/55.
  - 28 Durham Miners' Association, op cit,
  - 29 Durham Chronicle, 24 October 1913, p. 4 and 31 October 1913, p 7, Durham County Record Office, M57/55.
  - 30 Easington Rural District Council, Durham County Record Office, RD/Ea6, p. 375.
  - 31 Report of the Medical Officer of Health, quarter ending 30 September 1913, p. 25, Durham County Record Office.
  - 32 Durham Miners' Association, Durham County Record Office, D/DMA 31.
  - 33 Durham Miners' Association, 27 February 1914, Durham Mining Museum, <http://www.dmm2.org.uk/dmaarchv/1914e03n.htm>
  - 34 Report of the Coal Mining Organisation Committee, *Conditions Prevailing In The*

*north east history*

- Coal Mining Industry Due To The War*, (Cd 7939, 1915), p. 7.
- 35 Durham Mining Museum <http://www.dmm.org.uk/colliery/e002.htm>
- 36 Report of the Coal Mining Organisation Committee, p. 9.
- 37 *ibid*, part 2, evidence, p. 98.
- 38 *ibid*, p. 203.
- 39 Durham Chronicle, 25 December 1914, p. 4. Durham Record Office, M57/56.
- 40 *Methodism in Easington Colliery 1913-1963*, Jubilee Brochure, p. 15 (Seaham: Greenwood & Sons, 1963).
- 41 Williams, J.E., *The Derbyshire Miners*, (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1962), pp. 517-8.
- 42 Military Service (No. 2) Act, 1918 (Chapter 5).
- 43 Electoral Registers for Easington Colliery 1918, Durham County Record Office, CC/CC 1/193, M67/144, CC/CC 1/204, M67/146.
- 44 Representation of the People Act, 1918, (Chapter 64).
- 45 The Yorkshire Regiment, Local War Memorials, Easington Colliery <http://www.ww1-yorkshires.org.uk/html-files/easington-colliery.htm>
- 46 *ibid*.
- 47 Corfield, Steven Edward, *The Impact of the 'Spanish' Influenza in County Durham, 1918-19*, (U.K., Corfield History Publication, 2010, Chapter 1.
- 48 Easington Colliery School Log Book, Durham County Record Office, E/E 13, pp. 140-9.
- 49 Reed, p. 70.
- 50 Arnot, p. 170.
- 51 Arnot, p. 187.
- 52 Arnot, p. 210.
- 53 Coates, Ken, (editor), 'The Sankey Commission', *Democracy in the Mines*, (Nottingham: Spokesman Books, 1974). pp.63-68.
- 54 Arnot, p. 202.
- 55 Naylor, Barry E, 'Ramsay MacDonald and Seaham Labour Politics', *Bulletin of the Group for the Study of North East Labour History Society*, 1981, No 15, p. 10.
- 56 Lawson, Jack, 'The Discovery of Sidney Webb' in *The Webbs and Their Work*, edited by Margaret Cole, (London: Frederick Muller, 1949), pp. 195-6.
- 57 Williams, p. 488.
- 58 Callcott, Maureen, 'The Making of a Labour Stronghold', *Working Class Politics in North East England*, edited by Callcott, M, and Challinor, R, (Newcastle upon Tyne Polytech Products Ltd., 1983), p. 66.
- 59 Centenary Gala Brochure, Durham Miners' Association, (Seaham : J. Greenwood & Sons, 1983), p. 26.
- 60 Independent Labour Party Annual Reports, 1910-21, London School of Economics Library, MF 13 and 1893-1932 Reports, Microfilm Research Collection, British Library, Boston Spa.

*north east history*

- 61 Mates, Lewis H., '*The Syndicalist Challenge In The Durham Coalfield Before 1914*', p. 2. [http://durham.academia.edu/LewisMates/Papers/378413/The\\_Syndicalist\\_challenge\\_in\\_the\\_Durham\\_coalfield\\_before\\_1914](http://durham.academia.edu/LewisMates/Papers/378413/The_Syndicalist_challenge_in_the_Durham_coalfield_before_1914)
- 62 Durham Chronicle, 15 September 1911, Durham County Record Office M57/53.
- 63 Durham Chronicle 19 July 1912, p. 7, M57/53.
- 64 Durham Chronicle 1 May 1914, p. 10, M 57/55.
- 65 Durham Mining Association, Monthly Circular No. 13, May 1916, p.3, Durham Mining Museum, <http://www.dmm2.org.uk/dmaarchy/circ013.htm>
- 66 Easington Rural District Council, Durham County Record Office RD/Ea9
- 67 Lawson, Jack, *A Man's Life*, (London: Holder & Stoughton, 1932), p. 152-3.
- 68 Naylor, p. 12.
- 69 Durham Chronicle, 29 November 1918, Durham County Record Office M57/59.
- 70 Lawson, p. 154.
- 71 Lawson's Parliamentary Expenses 1918, Durham County Record Office D/DMA 79.
- 72 Callcott, Maureen 'Sidney Webb, Ramsay MacDonald, Emmanuel Shinwell and the Durham Constituency of Seaham' *Bulletin of the North East Group for the Study of Labour History*, 1977, No. 11, p. 14.
- 73 Independent Labour Party.
- 74 Callcott, p 14.
- 75 Durham Chronicle, 2 October 1926, p. 5, M57/66.
- 76 Methodism in Easington Colliery 1913-63, pp. 13 and 15.
- 77 Worley, Matthew, *Labour Inside The Gate*, (London, I.B. Tauris. 2005), p. 14.
- 78 Reed, p. 6 and <http://ppparchive.durham.gov.uk/photos/picviewer.asp?previous=397>
- 79 Barron, Hestor, *The 1926 Miners' Lockout*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), pp. 24-5.
- 80 Beynon and Austrin, p. 250.
- 81 Cole, Margaret I, (editor), *Beatrice Webb's Diaries 1912-24*, (London: Longman, Green and Co., 1952), p. 175.
- 82 Callcott, pp. 14-16.
- 83 Blackwell, Joseph, *Seaham Divisional Labour Party: Items of Interest*, (unpublished, c 1950), Durham County Record Office D/X 1208/23(1).



# THE VANE TEMPEST VIGIL: A CASE STUDY INTO THE COMPLEXITY OF GENDER AND CLASS IN COLLECTIVE ACTION. Deborah Smith



*Vane Tempest*

**T**he mining industry has a long history of industrial disputes and both the lockout of 1926 and the strike of 1984 continue to feature heavily in popular memory. <sup>1</sup> The year long strike from 1984 to 1985 set the Conservative government against the National Union of Mineworkers (NUM) and created the context for the 1992 announcement of the pit closure programme. On 13 October 1992 Michael Heseltine, the Secretary

of State for Trade and Industry, announced that 31 of the remaining 50 deep coal mines in Britain would be closed.<sup>2</sup> The announcement provoked a public outcry and a number of demonstrations against the decision. The NUM began to organise a campaign against the closures, known as the Coal Campaign. The announcement also prompted the re-mobilisation of Women Against Pit Closures (WAPC), a national organisation which had formed during the 1984 strike.

The Durham WAPC branch was re-formed in November 1992 and began the work of recruiting members. By January 1993 it was agreed that a 'pit camp' would be set up in line with other WAPC groups around the country. A caravan was donated by Easington District Council and was stationed at the Vane Tempest Colliery in Seaham. The Vane Tempest Vigil began on 21 January 1993 and remained at the colliery until 9 July 1993.<sup>3</sup> The caravan became a centre for village support, media attention and campaign organisation. As well as maintaining a presence in the caravan, the Vane Tempest Vigil members attended demonstrations, spoke at rallies, organised fundraising events and made connections with several other campaign groups. Despite the best efforts of the NUM and WAPC, the Vane Tempest Colliery was closed on 4 June 1993.

Throughout their campaign the members of the Vane Tempest Vigil were subject to gender and class stereotyping which drew on the popular memory of women's roles in mining disputes. Hester Barron recently argued that women in mining communities have been simultaneously portrayed as strike-breakers, heroines and innocent victims. According to Barron, the portrayal of women as heroines was based on the idea that women were the 'binding force' of communities.<sup>4</sup> Throughout the 1993 Coal Campaign it was the figure of the heroic miner's wife which came to the fore. This image was reproduced and placed the Vigil members and WAPC in general in narrow class and gender boundaries. At the centre of this stereotype was the assumption that the campaigners were apolitical, working class housewives who were married to miners and were therefore participating in the campaign in order to protect their family income and

their communities. While it is true that several of the Vane Tempest Vigil members were married to miners, this representation obscures the reality of the group and their campaign.

Using the Vane Tempest WAPC group as a case study, this paper will examine the media representations of the group, the relationship with the NUM and the ways in which these issues affected the campaign. It will argue that the media portrayal reproduced the image of the heroic miner's wife and that although the NUM challenged this stereotype publically, it was reinforced through the attitude and behaviour of its officials. It will go on to examine the realities of the Vane Tempest Vigil and demonstrate that the stereotype obscured the diversity of the members and the breadth of the campaign, before arguing that the Vigil campaigners were forced to perpetuate the stereotype in order to gain legitimacy and forge a collective identity.

This paper will draw on interviews with several of the Vane Tempest WAPC members. The subjects were selected in order to give an insight into the range of backgrounds and identities of the WAPC members. The selection of subjects was also restricted according to availability. As Jaclyn Gier-Viskovatoff and Abigail Porter found in their study of the 1926 lockout, the use of oral history can often be hindered by the tendency of subjects to recount their experience according to the public consensus.<sup>5</sup> This study will therefore use the personal archives of Vane Tempest Vigil members to verify the oral accounts. These archives include minutes from meetings, promotional material and an unpublished booklet which was created in the months following the Vigil. The booklet contains written accounts of the experiences of each of the Vigil members. Finally this study will also examine Newspaper articles in order gain an insight into the media portrayal of the campaign.

### **FIGHTING FOR "THEIR MEN"?<sup>6</sup>**

The figure of the heroic miner's wife has found a place in the collective memory of mining disputes and this image came to the fore in the 1993

campaign against pit closures. The media reproduced this image and conceptualised WAPC members within that framework, which then influenced the community perception of the Vane Tempest Vigil. The NUM reinforced this narrow stereotype through their relationship with the group.

Several articles reinforced the assumption that Vigil members were married to miners. The extent of the media desire to place the group in this role was made clear during an interview with Jean Spence, a member of the group. Jean described her experience of dealing with journalists on the first day of the vigil:

Somebody from the press came up to me and said could she come along to my house with a camera and talk to me while I was getting my husband ready for work and the kids ready for school. Or something horrendous like that. My life is not like that! And so that was coming from the outside all the time.<sup>7</sup>

Jean's experience highlights the assumption that the Vigil members were not only married to miners but also occupied very specific gender roles. Terms such as "pit women" and "womenfolk" were regularly used to describe the group.<sup>8</sup> These phrases implied that the women had a direct link to the pit which was defined by their gender. In using these phrases, rather than more positive terms such as activist or campaigner, the articles characterized the group in terms of their gender in relation to men. By reproducing the idea that the women were married to miners, the media not only obscured the reality of the group dynamics but also failed to recognise the political ideologies of the movement. This served to place the Vane Tempest Vigil in a secondary position to the NUM campaign, rather than an autonomous campaign with independent aims.

The local media also reproduced the idea that WAPC groups were motivated by practical need and were not engaged with the economic and political debate around the issue of pit closure. Several newspaper articles were dedicated to discussions of the economic and political aspects of the government's pit closure programme, including many quotes from

trade union officials.<sup>9</sup> The Vigil group were very much engaged with such debates, however they were not referred to in any of the articles described. The media coverage of their campaign was restricted to issues concerning the community, their specific activities at the Vane Tempest and high profile visitors to the caravan.

The limited media coverage also served to promote the assumption that the WAPC campaign was of a secondary nature and portrayed the groups as ‘helping out’ the NUM, rather than as campaigners in their own right. Activities such as holding banners at the pit gates and welcoming supporters and NUM officials were highlighted at the expense of more proactive tactics. An article published on 25 February 1993 described the Vigil members encouraging local people to show support as they passed the colliery, making tea and talking in the caravan.<sup>10</sup> The article fails to mention that the members also took part in rallies and demonstrations and often spoke at those events. Just weeks before the article was published the national WAPC organised a mass demonstration in London.<sup>11</sup> Delegates from the Vane Tempest branch travelled to London days early to contribute to the organisation and were joined by several of the members on the day of the march. The article did not refer to this achievement.

These limited representations of Vane Tempest Vigil and their campaign informed the local community’s understanding of the group. In April 1993 the group held a poetry competition for the local community around the themes of ‘The Women of Seaham’, ‘The Women’s Vigil’ and ‘The Miner’s Wife/Children’.<sup>12</sup> Several of the submitted poems blurred the boundaries of the categories and assumed that the vigil members were married to miners. These poems echoed the media portrayal of the group in the role of the heroic miner’s wife. One poem begins, “The Women are fighting for their husband’s jobs in the mines” and goes on “Most of them have families to look after”.<sup>13</sup> Another describes the group as “scared about their husbands’ fate” and applauds the women for supporting “their men”.<sup>14</sup> These lines replicate the idea that the members of the vigil

were married to miners, were motivated by the practical need of family income and played a supportive role, rather than actively pursuing their own campaign.

The NUM however, promoted a very different representation of the Vigil members and WAPC in general. WAPC activities regularly appeared in the monthly NUM publication *The Miner* and incidents of direct action were given positive coverage. WAPC members were referred to as campaigners or activists and were described as being on the “front line” of the campaign.<sup>15</sup> By using such phrases, the NUM portrayed the women in a more political and direct role. It is clear that the NUM recognised the importance of and showed appreciation for WAPC support.

However, there were also more practical motivations for the NUM’s positive representation of WAPC. The years following the 1984 strike had eroded many of the traditional avenues of support in mining disputes. The closure of pits meant that on a practical level there were far fewer miners and therefore less support. In Seaham two of the three pits had been closed, leaving only the Vane Tempest and many of the workers in the Vane Tempest at the time of the Coal Campaign were ‘travellers’ – miners who had been transferred in from another area.<sup>16</sup> These factors meant that the traditional ‘mining community’ which had been the source of so much support in previous disputes was significantly weakened. Furthermore, during the Coal Campaign, British Coal threatened that any redundancy payments would be removed or reduced if employees took part in direct action against the closures.<sup>17</sup> These factors combined to create a context in which two aspects of WAPC campaign were vital to NUM – their physical location in the community and their methods of direct action. It is these aspects of the campaign which were promoted within the pages of *The Miner*.

Despite challenging the narrow portrayal of WAPC in *The Miner*, the NUM reinforced the stereotype in their behaviour and actions. Several of the vigil members described the NUM attitude towards their campaign in a patronising and paternalistic manner. In her own account of the

campaign Vigil member Sue Robson wrote:

I'm not sure that women's role in these issues and concerns was fully appreciated by the other groups who were fighting the closures, there was a sense that the jobs and the collieries were the men's property. Our voices were not always heard.<sup>18</sup>

Another member, Margaret Mound, described the way in which the women would be:

Clapped and patted on the back by the NUM but at no time did the NUM respond to our suggestions for meetings or discussions about the way the campaign should be going.

It is clear from these accounts that the vigil members were aware of being placed in a secondary position by the NUM, which they felt devalued their movement.<sup>19</sup>

The allocation of speaking opportunities at the 1993 Durham Miners' Gala illustrates this point. Minutes from a vigil meeting held in June 1993 reveal that the group had requested an opportunity to speak at the gala but that 'the NUM [are] not responding to our request for a speaker'.<sup>20</sup> This issue highlights the contradiction in the NUM approach to the group – they were portrayed as 'frontline' activists yet their attempts at collaborative working and requests for recognition other than on the pages of *The Miner* were ignored. By preventing the group from addressing the gala audience, the NUM restricted them from making points about the future of the campaign and thus placed them firmly into a secondary position.

It is clear then, through the media representations and the NUM actions, that the popular memory of the role of women in the 1984 was recreated and applied to the 1993 movement. WAPC in general and the Vane Tempest Vigil in particular were placed into narrow gender and class roles which actually obscured the reality of their campaign.

## **THE VANE TEMPEST VIGIL: THE REALITY**

Developments in gender history have seen scholars move away from

categorising women as a homogeneous group and towards recognition that categories such as gender cannot be universally applied, but rather they are specific to a particular time and place in history. This section will follow these trends and examine the backgrounds of the vigil members, their understanding of the group's aims and the focus of their campaign. In doing so it will demonstrate that the stereotype of the miner's wife which had been promoted by the media and reproduced by the NUM did not reflect the diverse reality of the Vane Tempest Vigil.

At the centre of the stereotype of the heroic miner's wife is the assumption that the campaigners were apolitical, working class housewives, were married to miners and lived in mining communities. The majority of the women who made up the core of the group did not come from mining families and those who were married to miners did not fall neatly into the stereotypical role. Gail Price for example was married to a Vane Tempest miner but also had a successful management career and often became frustrated by the media portrayal of the group.<sup>21</sup> Almost all of the Vigil members had been politically active prior to the 1993 campaign; many of the women such as Myrtle McPherson and Mary Smith were active members of the Labour Party while others such as Jean Spence and Gaynor Clark had backgrounds in feminist activism.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, several of the members identified themselves as middle class and the majority did not come from mining communities.

The stereotype of the heroic miner's wife also assumed that the women's ultimate aim was to safeguard miners' jobs as they were vital to the family income. In reality the members of the Vane Tempest Vigil did not believe that it was possible to save the colliery and actually expressed doubts about mining as an occupation. The vigil members saw their campaign as a way of making a political statement, rather than a specific fight to save the pit. As vigil member Jean Spence told me, "If we could have saved the pit that would have been great".<sup>23</sup> She went on to say:

I never for one second thought we could save the pit. It wasn't about that. It was about demonstrating that the people that identified with the



area really aren't just there to be walked all over. We just needed to say something.<sup>24</sup>

This sentiment was repeated by many other vigil members. Mary Smith believed that the closure of the pit “was a foregone conclusion” but that the group “weren't going to let them [the government] have an easy ride of it” and Margaret Barnes said of the colliery, “I think everyone knew it was going to finish”.<sup>25</sup> These statements show that the members of the Vane Tempest Vigil accepted what they thought was the inevitability of the pit closure and yet continued their campaign because they wanted to make a political statement by resisting the government. As one member put it, “You don't just enter a fight because you're going to win”.<sup>26</sup> These apparent contradictions highlight the fact that, in conflict with the image promoted by the media, the majority of Vigil members joined the campaign in order to make a stand against the government, rather than to save the pits.

The development of the women's campaign also contradicted the media image, which assumed that the motivation of the campaigners lay in the practical need of a miner's wife and the defense of their community rather than in political ideology. An examination of the broad focus of the Vigil campaign contradicts this assumption.

The group was associated with wider issues, such as environmental concerns. Indeed, by June 1993, following the closure of the Vane Tempest Colliery, the issue of the potential environmental hazards had been proposed as a possible future focus for the group.<sup>27</sup> The Vigil members were aware of the environmental dangers, felt strongly about these issues and took action to challenge the cessation of pumping. The very fact that the group continued after the closure of the Vane Tempest Colliery is evidence of the wider focus of the group.

Another issue explored by the Vane Tempest Vigil was the development of feminist concerns. During research interviews many of the women identified themselves as feminist and for those who did not or were not interviewed, the articulation of feminist concerns have been expressed in

less explicit ways. The feminist influence on the vigil was evident from the beginning. The Vigil was a women-only group and took its inspiration from the female peace camps at Greenham Common.<sup>28</sup> Several of the individual members had backgrounds in feminist activism.

The background of the members and the feminist influences on the movement were manifest during the campaign in a number of ways. The Vane Tempest Vigil forged links with several other women's groups. Correspondence was exchanged with the National Assembly of Women, Tyneside Women's Aid and Carlisle Women's group among many others.<sup>29</sup> The Vigil also received visits from a women's group in Belfast and donated money to a Rights of Women Campaign, despite the group's own difficult financial situation.<sup>30</sup> It is also clear that the Vigil members felt strongly about opposing any misogyny they encountered during their campaign. During a meeting in June 1993 the members discussed the lack of female speakers at a meeting about industrial action in a nearby factory and agreed to write to the trade union to raise their concerns.<sup>31</sup> The Vigil members also worked to improve the lives of women on a practical basis. The group supported the female workers of a factory in nearby Middlesbrough, who had been dismissed for refusing to accept pay cuts. Representatives of the Vigil participated in a picket line with the WAPC banner and committed themselves to supporting the workers.<sup>32</sup>

The Vigil members also expressed feminist principals through their celebration of International Women's Day (IWD). Myrtle McPherson, a member of the group, gave a speech at an IWD gathering in Gateshead. Beginning with the line, "It is very appropriate that I am here today, women's day, to speak about why women are uniting to fight the proposed pit closures"; the speech highlighted the connection of the Vigil with the feminist gathering.<sup>33</sup> The Vane Tempest Vigil also organised an International Women's Day Celebration for their members and supporters. The event took place over the day and evening of 8 March 1993 and included several female performers as a celebration of women's talent.<sup>34</sup>

The articulation of feminist identity and the activities described above show that the focus of the Vigil campaign reached beyond the matter of miners' jobs and their community. Again, the reality of the Vane Tempest Vigil differs greatly from the image of the heroic miner's wife. It is clear then that the diversity of the Vigil members, the identification of the group aims and the development of the campaign contradict the stereotype promoted by the media and reinforced by the NUM.

### **COLLECTIVE IDENTITY AND AUTHENTICITY**

The previous sections have demonstrated that the media representation of the Vane Tempest Vigil reproduced the stereotypical image of the heroic miner's wife. This informed the community understanding of the campaign and was reinforced in the actions of the NUM. They have also shown that this stereotype did not reflect the reality of the Vigil. This section will argue that because of the restrictions placed on them by the NUM and the media, the Vane Tempest Vigil adopted the figure of the heroic miner's wife as the public image for their campaign in order to gain legitimacy as a group and to forge a collective identity.

Beckwith's study into the Lancashire WAPC group found that the indirect location of female activists to the wider campaign meant that they had to achieve legitimacy in order to function effectively.<sup>35</sup> This was also the case for the Vane Tempest Vigil. The group did not have a direct relationship to the dispute as they were not miners and were further restricted by the media's portrayal and NUM actions towards their campaign.

There were strong feeling among the group that they must live up to the stereotypical image in order to avoid criticism and gain authenticity as a movement. The individual Vigil members were very aware of their own position within the campaign. All of the written accounts refer to the authors' family background and those not from a mining family felt the need to explain their motivations for participating in the campaign. Gaynor Clark was particularly conscious of her lack of mining connections,

“I was always, always really conscious that somebody might say “well, what’s it got to do with you?””.<sup>36</sup> This exemplifies the perceived lack of authenticity of activists from non-mining families. The Vigil members therefore reinforced the image of the miner’s wife through their activities, in campaign publicity and when selecting group representatives.

In doing so the Vane Tempest Vigil members were also able to forge a collective identity. New Social Movement Theories emphasise the importance of identity in collective action. Alberto Melucci argues that collective identity is a prerequisite of collective action and that, rather than being a starting point, this must be constructed by movements.<sup>37</sup> In the case of the Vane Tempest Vigil, the group were able to overcome differences in ideology, social class and background by reproducing the stereotype of the heroic miner’s wife and forming a collective identity around this image.

Singing is recognised as an important tool in forming collective identity and was a significant aspect of the WAPC campaign, both in 1984 and in 1993.<sup>38</sup> One particular song, ‘Women of the Working Class’, became connected to WAPC and was often sung by the Vane Tempest Vigil campaigners.<sup>39</sup> The song demonstrates the way in which the group drew upon the image of the heroic miner’s wife in order to form a collective identity.

‘Women of the Working Class’ reproduced the stereotype by referring to a shared history and outlining a clear identity for the singers. By referring to the women “fighting for our lives, side by side with our men”, the song promotes the assumption that the activists were married to miners and were motivated by practical need rather than ideological reasons. This is also apparent in the way in which the song places working class identity in direct conflict with feminism, as in the line, “Where women’s liberation failed to move, the strike has mobilised”. This line of the song states that feminism or “women’s liberation” was not a phenomenon which was relevant to the lives of working class women and makes participation in mining disputes and feminist activism incompatible, again obscuring an important ideological aspect of the Vigil campaign.

By participating in singing this song, despite the fact that it did not represent the majority of the group, the Vigil members were able to form a collective identity centred on the image promoted in the lyrics.

The Vigil members sang 'Women of the Working Class' at several public events such as demonstrations. In doing so the group publicly promoted the figure of the heroic miner's wife and encouraged their audience to connect that image with the group. This was also evident in other aspects of the campaign. The limited media portrayal of the group dictated the acceptable boundaries of female activism, which were centred on that stereotype. As the previous sections have shown, this informed the community understanding and expectations of the campaign. The group were aware of this and individual members were conscious of what they felt was their unauthentic position in the campaign. Margaret Barnes, for example, described her lack of mining connections and identified herself as a "bogus" member and Gaynor Clark described her decision to ensure that she did not represent the group publicly:

I never represented the group in anything other than being there. I mean I also made a real kind of erm decision that like I wouldn't carry the banner and things like that because I felt as if somebody else picked up on it then they could say well these aren't even miners' wives, do you know what I mean? And what do they think they're doing.<sup>40</sup>

The Vane Tempest Vigil therefore reproduced the image of the heroic miner's wife in order to ensure that their campaign remained within the boundaries of acceptable activism and was consequently able to increase community support.

At the beginning of the Vigil the group produced a handout to promote their campaign. Entitled 'We Are Here!', the leaflet outlines the background of the WAPC campaign, the aim of the vigil and calls for donations and support.<sup>41</sup> The group is described in the leaflet as "The Women of Seaham with support from Easington". In reality the majority of the members of the Vigil did not live in either village and of the two individuals who spent most of the time in the caravan one lived

in Durham, the other lived in Easington. Clearly the group were aware of this when producing the leaflet but felt that they needed to emphasise the centrality of Seaham in order to foster community support. The leaflet also includes a poem entitled 'We Can Do Anything!', which is about the role of women in the 1984 strike. The poem describes women as "working and proud" and refers to "my man" in the context of the campaign. By including this poem in the leaflet the vigil members encouraged the community to link their campaign with the earlier strike and promoted the idea that they were working class women who were married to miners.

This is also evident in the public speaking undertaken by the group. Several of the women confirmed during interviews that members of the group who were married to miners would always be selected for public speaking events or to give interviews to the media. Newspaper articles from the period verify this. Quotes, references and even photographs were restricted to the members from mining families. This was also the case when speaking on behalf of the group as a poem by Gail Price demonstrates.<sup>42</sup> Gail was married to a Vane Tempest Miner and was a member of the Vigil. The poem, entitled 'We Need a Speaker', describes the process of choosing a speaker for the group. The first line of the poem describes the authors "dread" at the prospect of public speaking. The poem shows that it was the norm for miner's wives to be asked to represent the campaign and agrees that it gave the group "more credibility". This demonstrates that the author did not necessarily feel comfortable with the amount of public speaking assigned to her yet she accepted this as the group felt it was important to the campaign. By always selecting a Vigil member with a mining background to represent the movement, the group were reinforcing the limited media portrayal of their campaign. However, because the media representation informed the community understanding, the Vigil members felt that this was necessary in order to encourage support for their cause.

This evidence therefore shows that despite the fact the Vigil members were a diverse collection of individuals, with strong political ideologies

and varying motivations, the group found it necessary to participate in the reproduction of the myth of the heroic miner's wife in order to gain authenticity and support. This also allowed the Vane Tempest Vigil members to overcome differences and form a collective identity.

## **CONCLUSION**

The evidence presented in this paper has shown that the Vane Tempest Vigil members were subject to gender stereotyping which obscured the reality of their campaign but which also acted as a tool for them to achieve certain aims. The media promoted a limited image of the Vigil, particularly local newspapers which portrayed them as wives of miners who wanted to save their husbands' jobs. This obscured their diversity and ideology and this limited portrayal informed the community understanding of the Vane Tempest Vigil. It was also reinforced by the NUM. The NUM publicly challenged the portrayal of WAPC, however evidence from the Vane Tempest Vigil campaign has shown that it reinforced the stereotype through its actions. An examination of the Vigil has shown that the stereotype of the heroic miner's wife did not reflect the reality of the campaign. The Vigil members came from a variety of backgrounds and were motivated by political ideology. The campaign itself was wider than the matter of pit closure and included issues concerning the environment and feminism. Despite this, the documents relating to the development of the campaign demonstrate that the group participated in reproducing this myth throughout the Vigil. The Vane Tempest Vigil knew that the success of their campaign depended on their ability to foster community support, media attention and NUM cooperation and the members were aware that in order to do so they needed to gain legitimacy as campaigners. They achieved this by reproducing the stereotype, which also allowed them to forge a collective identity.

By highlighting the diversity and ideology of the Vane Tempest Vigil, this paper demonstrates the importance of research into the role of women in the 1993 Coal Campaign. The conclusions drawn add to the

growing body of historical work which challenges the assumption that the women's participation in mining disputes has been an extension of their domestic roles and highlight possibilities for further research into comparative work with the 1984 strike. By examining the similarities and differences between the two disputes it may be possible to gain new insights into the historical role of women in mining disputes, including their motivations, focus and aims.

## References

- 1 Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners Lockout: Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), Introduction.
- 2 Jean Spence, 'Women, Wives and the Campaign against Pit Closures in County Durham; Understanding the Vane Tempest Vigil', *Feminist Review*, 60, Feminist Ethics and the Politics of Love (1998) 33.
- 3 Vane Tempest Vigil, 'Chronology of Events', undated, Vane Tempest Vigil booklet, unpublished.
- 4 Barron, *The 1926 Miners Lockout*, 140.
- 5 Jaclyn J. Gier-Viskovatoff and Abigail Porter, 'Women of the British Coalfields on Strike: Documenting Lives Using Oral History and Photography', *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies*, 19, 2 (1998)
- 6 Betty Elliot, 'Not in Vain', *Poem submitted to Vane Tempest Vigil Poetry Competition*, 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
- 7 Jean Spence, Interview with the author, Seaham, 20 February 2011.
- 8 David Allan, 'Vigil Women are Standing Firm', *Houghton Star*, 25 February 1993
- 9 For examples see: Independent Correspondent, 'Ellington votes for strike to save work', *Morning Star*, 13 February 1993; 'Mines sell-off is a 'step back'', *Northern Echo*, 1 March 1993; 'Pits: Victory or disaster?', *Northern Echo*, 26 March 1993.
- 10 David Allen, 'Vigil Women are Standing Firm', *Houghton Star*, 25 February 1993.
- 11 Vane Tempest Vigil, 'Chronology of Events', undated, Vane Tempest Vigil booklet, unpublished.
- 12 Vane Tempest Vigil, 'Poetry Competition', *Poster*, 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
- 13 Beverley Wilson, 'Women in Protest', *Poem submitted to Vane Tempest Vigil Poetry Competition*, 1993, Jean Spence personal archive, (Appendix 1).
- 14 Betty Elliot, 'Not in Vain', *Poem submitted to Vane Tempest Vigil Poetry Competition*, 1993, Jean Spence personal archive, (Appendix 2).
- 15 'Women on the front line', *The Miner*, June 1993; Paul Herman, 'Women demonstrators leave Parkside pit after a three-day protest sit-in.', Photograph, *The*



*north east history*

- Miner*, August 1993; 'On the Front Line', *The Miner*, December 1993.
- 16 Spence 'Women, Wives and the Campaign against Pit Closures in County Durham', 40.
  - 17 *Ibid*, 40.
  - 18 Sue Robson, Written account of Vigil experience, undated, Vane Tempest Vigil booklet, unpublished.
  - 19 *Ibid*
  - 20 Minutes, Vane Tempest Vigil Meeting, Seaham, 24 June 1993, Jean Spence personal archive. Jeanne Boydston, 'Gender as a Question of Historical Analysis', *Gender and History*, 20, 3 (2008) 564.
  - 21 Jean Spence, Interview with the author, Seaham, 20 February 2011.
  - 22 Gaynor Clark, Interview with the author, Sunderland, 7 March 2011; Jean Spence, Interview with the author, Seaham, 20 February 2011; Mary Smith, Interview with the author, Sunderland, 8 March 2011; Myrtle McPherson, Interview with the author, Easington, 10 March 2011.
  - 23 Jean Spence, Interview with the author, Seaham, 20 February 2011.
  - 24 Jean Spence, Interview with the author, Seaham, 20 February 2011.
  - 25 Margaret Barnes, Interview with the author, Sunderland, 9 March 2011; Mary Smith, Interview with the author, Sunderland, 8 March 2011.
  - 26 Gaynor Clark, Interview with the author, Sunderland, 7 March 2011.
  - 27 Minutes, Vane Tempest Vigil Meeting, Seaham, 15 July 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
  - 28 Spence 'Women, Wives and the Campaign against Pit Closures in County Durham', 54.
  - 29 Letter to Vane Tempest Vigil, Signed Ms D. Greenlaw for Carlisle Women's Action Group, 25 January 1993, Jean Spence personal archive; Letter to Vane Tempest Vigil, from North Tyneside Women's Aid, 1993, Jean Spence personal archive; Letter to Vane Tempest Vigil, from National Assembly of Women, Tyneside Branch, 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
  - 30 Minutes, Vane Tempest Vigil Meeting, Seaham, 10 June 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
  - 31 Minutes, Vane Tempest Vigil Meeting, Seaham, 24 June 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
  - 32 Minutes, Vane Tempest Vigil Meeting, Seaham, 15 July 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
  - 33 Myrtle McPherson, Speech given at International Women's Day, Gateshead, 8 March 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
  - 34 Jean Spence, Interview with the author, Seaham, 20 February 2011.
  - 35 Beckwith, 'Lancashire Women against Pit Closures Movement', 1038.
  - 36 Gaynor Clark, Interview with the author, Sunderland, 7 March 2011.
  - 37 Steven Buechler, 'New Social Movement Theories', *The Sociological Quarterly*, 36, 3 (1995), 446.

*north east history*

- 38 Spence, 'Women, Wives and the Campaign against Pit Closures in County Durham', 34.
- 39 Mal finch, 'Women of the Working Class', undated, Jean Spence personal archive, (Appendix 3).
- 40 Margaret Barnes, Interview with the author, Sunderland, 9 March 2011; Gaynor Clark, Interview with the author, Sunderland, 7 March 2011.
- 41 Vane Tempest Vigil, 'We Are Here!', *Vane Tempest Pit Camp Newsletter*, Issue 1, February 1993, Jean Spence personal archive.
- 42 Gail Price, 'We Need a Speaker', *poem*, 1993, Jean Spence personal archive, (Appendix 4).

*Christopher Anstley*

*1724 - 1805*

*A Remedy for Unrest*

*Ah! Well they know that if the Door  
Were cloathed and fed, they'd work no more;  
That nothing makes mankind so good,  
So tractable as Want of Food;  
And like those frugal Politicians,  
Think Starving is the best foundation  
Of popular subordination.*

*1780*

*From Speculation or,  
A Defense of Mankind*

# THE DURHAM MINERS' GALA: FROM HISTORY TO HERITAGE

David Hopper



*Gala 1925*

The Durham Miners Gala, or Big Meeting as it is known locally, took place in the City of Durham this year for the 128<sup>th</sup> time. This celebration of working class solidarity began in 1871 in Wharton Park, Durham City. The union, the newly formed Durham Miners Association (DMA) needed this as a rallying point to help the union to establish itself as the organised representative of Durham's coal miners. Now some 141 years later, with no coal mines within the former Durham Coalfield, it appears to be going from strength to strength and shows no sign of

fading like our industrial past. In this article I will attempt to analyse what purpose it has served, the politics of the event, its significance to the people of the coalfield and the reasons, or lack of them, for keeping the event going in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

### **THE EARLY DURHAM MINERS GALAS**

From its inception the demonstration was a show of solidarity, unity and strength to show the powers that be at the time – the coal owners – that the miners were organised. The men had broken a form of slavery, ‘The Bond’, which tied workers to the colliery owner from April of one year to March of the next. In a court case in Sunderland in 1869, the ‘Pitman’s Attorney’, Mr. W. P. Roberts, the radical lawyer, obtained a significant decision for the miners. This decision allowed the miners to move from one colliery to another to find work if they so desired. Prior to this judgement any miner could be jailed if he broke the conditions of the infamous Bond. This incident is still epitomised today at the Gala because the Monkwearmouth Lodge banner still bears the portrait of the court room scene when their men were on trial in Sunderland in 1869. The court judgement was the real catalyst that brought the DMA into formation as a trade union after earlier attempts to formulate organisations had been relentlessly crushed by the coal owners assisted by the forces of the state (shades of 1984/85). Formative leaders like Thomas Hepburn, Tommy Ramsey and many more were blacklisted and victimised.

Prior to the first Gala the authorities were very apprehensive of the impending arrival of thousands of miners descending on the Cathedral City in August 1871. They need not have worried however as the miners and their families were perfectly well behaved and thoroughly enjoyed their first of many more annual demonstrations. The political make-up of the early leaders, mainly Methodists, was a strong belief in arbitration as a means of settling disputes. Often this did not go down well with a lot of miners who had been influenced by Chartists, who believed more in direct action. The Methodists were, in most cases, among the small

minority of miners who could read and write. Therefore a big majority of the miners' lodge representatives were of that persuasion. Speakers at the early Galas inevitably included Alexander McDonald who attended from 1871 until his death in 1881. McDonald was the President of the National Miners Association and was heavily involved in the Mines Regulation Acts of 1860 and 1872. Richard Fynes, whose book on the history of the Northumberland and Durham Miners is considered a classic, was also invited to address the early Galas on several occasions. Of course the Durham Miners Agents, the Area Officials, and those of Northumberland also gave frequent contributions from the platform as the Gala began to grow in size and importance.

The new union was now involved in organising the largest single district Miners' union in the country at that time. It was steadily increasing its membership and building its industrial and political influence as well as increasing its financial resources. The Area officials William Crawford and W. H. Patterson, who were later joined by John Forman and John Wilson, held the union together for many years although their moderate stance wasn't always welcomed by the membership. The miners' offices in North Road, Durham were officially opened in 1876, a sign of how quickly the union had progressed. However the following year saw the introduction of the first sliding scale arrangement, a system of arbitration that gave the coal owners the upper hand in determining wages in times of depression in the coal trade. This arrangement, much favoured by the moderate Durham Area Officials, lasted until 1889. This was a cause of much unrest between the miners and their leaders, some of whom like John Wilson and William Crawford had been elected Liberal M.P.s.

The favoured speakers on the Gala platform during this time were the Liberal M.P. and Northumberland Miners' Leader, Thomas Burt; Charles Bradlaugh, the land reformer and anti-royalist and also Joseph Cowan the radical reformer. There was also a great deal of sympathy for the Irish Independence Movement and many lodges elected speakers to the Gala because of that cause. John O'Connor Power, the Fenian

M.P., was a speaker at four Galas during this period. Perhaps the strangest choice of speakers during this period was that of Prince Kropotkin, the Russian anarchist, who addressed the gathering in 1882 and spoke about the conditions of the Russian peasantry and the Tsar's police methods.

The Gala continued to grow as did the union and in 1885 William Crawford, the President and John Wilson, the General Secretary were elected to Parliament as Liberal M.P.s for mid-Durham and Houghton-le-Spring respectively. An Inspector of Mines, Mr. Bell, a speaker at the 1885 Gala, perhaps signalled the recognition of the need for Parliamentary legislation and emphasised the importance the union placed upon it at that time. In 1887 there were more additions to the Mines Inspection Acts, which were last improved five years earlier. It further legislated that boys employed in the coal industry were restricted to a ten-hour shift.

In 1890 the death occurred of William Crawford, who served the DMA for over twenty years from his appointment as an Agent in 1869 to becoming President in 1870. He chaired the first Gala and was General Secretary until his death. Like a lot of the Liberals and Methodists, he favoured arbitration and conciliation rather than strike action. His portrait appeared on a number of Durham Miners' banners including those of Edmondsley, Blackhouse and Haswell, which today is on display in Durham Cathedral. Mr. W. H. Patterson replaced Crawford as General Secretary. This year also witnessed the first International Miners' Conference which was held in Belgium. This was just after the formation of the Miners Federation of Great Britain

(MFGB) at Newport in 1889, although the Durham Miners did not join it until 1892. In the 1890s the Galas were dominated by the demands for a fair day's work for a fair day's pay and poured scorn on the ideas of their leadership's partnership of labour and capital. Charles Bradlaugh, the militant atheist, continued to be elected by the lodges and spoke seven times from the Gala platforms. He was a real agitator, who was denied his seat in Parliament after refusing to swear the oath of allegiance. He called for the impeachment of Lord Beaconsfield, Lord

Lytton, Sit Bartle Frere and the Government for famine in North West India, the war at the Cape of Hope and for the massacre of British troops in Afghanistan (how ironic). He was a popular speaker and spoke for better education and more reasonable distribution of wealth.

This was also the era of Marxist thinking and philosophies and the recently formed Social Democratic Federation (SDF) was becoming a popular vehicle for Marxist thinkers. Many of them were to have a role in future Galas - Tom Mann, the engineers' leader, John Burns, also of the engineers, Annie Besant, the leader of the match-girls strike and a young Scotsman named James Ramsey McDonald. The SDF was campaigning for a law to establish the eight-hour day and Tom Mann had published a pamphlet in 1886 entitled 'What a Compulsory Eight Hour Day Means to the Workers'. This was an issue that would dominate the minds of the Durham Miners for many years to come and was a constant issue at the Galas around this period. This new trades unionism and its demands were opposed by the Liberal leadership of the DMA who were working extremely hard in the coalfield to try and turn the membership against the eight-hour day agitation. They were using arguments that the legal-eight hour day would mean coal would be produced for sixteen hours a day and that the Durham coal hewers would have to increase their hours underground from six or seven to the legal eight. These arguments held the men for quite a period, whether they were correct or not, but eventually the eight-hour day was won despite the opposition of the Durham Miners leadership. The other major issue at the Galas of this period was the 'Irish Question'. The sympathy throughout the coalfield for the cause of Irish independence was very strong. This really cannot just be explained by the number of Irish families in County Durham because, although numerous, they were a small minority in the coalfield. The villages in the coalfield were now growing and each pit and community had their own banner. The banner was a rallying point and carried proudly at the Gala. This was to remain until the destruction of the industry in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century.





*Gala crowds*



The last decade of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century saw great upheaval in the Durham Coalfield which was obviously reflected in the politics of the Gala. The Liberal traditions of the leaders were being challenged by the lodges as the new wave of Unionism was seen as a great threat by the old leaders. In 1892 the coal owners demanded reductions in wages of 10%, which was totally rejected by the men. Although the leaders were quite keen on arbitration to try and settle the issue, the men were not at all keen on leaving their fate to them. William Crawford had passed away and John Wilson had taken over his mantle and his approach to negotiation. There was a great deal of suspicion of the leadership, including the Executive Committee. Despite many attempts to get the men to vote in favour of the reduction in wages, attitudes only appeared to harden so far as the lodges were concerned. Attempts by the leadership to disallow the option of a strike against the coal owners terms were foiled and the vote for strike action was overwhelming. The leadership were trying everything they knew, but to no avail. The coal owners eventually got tired of the leaders' inability to have the offer accepted, indeed they increased the reduction demanded to 13% and locked the men out on 16<sup>th</sup> March.

A very bitter dispute then began where the men appeared to not only be fighting the Durham Coal Owners Association, but also were being led by men with no stomach for the battle. Despite this, and much collaboration by the leaders in the local press, the strike ground on for three months. It was only through the efforts of the Bishop of Durham that eventually a negotiated settlement was reached and the extreme hardship on the county was eased. The final negotiated settlement, which was around the owners initial 10% reduction, could hardly be deemed a victory for the men. The division between the lodges and their leadership was widened.

The General Election of 1892 also saw the emergence of candidates standing as Liberal/Labour representatives and ten were successful. This was the beginning of the challenge to the Durham Miners leaders' direct allegiance to the Liberal Party. That year also saw Durham affiliate to the

MFGB, who had provided support in the recent lock-out. However the liaison did not last long, because the Durham Miners, (although the vote was slightly in favour of strike action,) refused to join the MFGB strike against the coal owners 25% reduction in wages and were expelled, much to the delight of their leaders. However, the late 1890s Galas saw Tom Mann, now from the Independent Labour Party, elected to speak on a number of occasions by the Durham lodges. A prominent speaker during this period of Galas was J. Havelock Wilson from the Seaman's Union, a Liberal M.P., who as we will see later encouraged a breakaway Miners' Union in Nottingham. Still expelled from the MFGB, the first ever local Conciliation Board was formed by the DMA Agents and Executive Committee. Very shortly afterwards the DMA voted again to join the MFGB. A disagreement on the eight-hour day campaign, which Durham would not support, led to their contributions being refunded. Once again they were outside the national Federation, when the first Compensation Act came into force in 1898. As the century came to a close, the DMA was now an integral part of the Durham County mining community. The first service in Durham Cathedral on Gala Day occurred in 1897, and in 1899 at Haswell Moor the first Aged Miners' Homes were built. The Gala was now the annual coming together, not only of the miners, but also of villages, family and friends.

## **EARLY 20TH CENTURY, LABOUR PARTY, THE 'GREAT' WAR AND GOVERNMENT DECEIT**

At the beginning of the 20th Century the Durham Miners members were trying to have the DMA affiliate to the newly formed Labour Representation Committee

(LRC). In the 1906 General Election 29 LRC M.P.s were returned, including Mr. J. W. Taylor, the Secretary of the Durham Colliery Mechanics Association at Chester-le-Street. The background to Taylor's election appeared in an article in the North East Labour History. After this election, the LRC was renamed the Labour Party. Keir Hardie was

its Leader and Ramsay McDonald its Secretary. The new party was trade union based and now established in Parliament. The selection of speakers during the pre-War period was greatly influenced by the Labour Party. Regular speakers at the Gala were the Labour M.P.s Keir Hardie, Arthur Henderson, John Burns, Philip Snowden and Ramsay McDonald. The link that was established with the Labour Party remains to this day despite many fall outs along the way and the DMA has never endorsed any candidates to stand against the Labour Party. The main Gala speakers were now always from the Labour Party in addition to the miners and other trade union leaders. The DMA rejoined the MFGB in 1908 and accepted the Eight Hours Act. In 1909 the West Stanley Colliery disaster claimed 168 lives and was commemorated by a black drape on their banner, the Coal Miners Regulation Acts were passed, and in 1912 the National Strike took place for a minimum wage which lasted just over two months; all these were given significance at the Gala.

From 1914 until 1919 there were no Galas because of the First World War. In 1915 the Agent John Wilson died. An Agent from 1882 and a Liberal M.P., he fought tooth and nail to prevent the DMA recognising the Labour Party. He died before the new Miners Hall and Offices were built in Redhills on 23rd October 1915. Alderman William House, another Durham Miners Agent, also died in 1917. During the war, the mines were under the control of the Government, because it was patently obvious that the coal owners did not have the ability to be left in control of coal production at such a vital time for the nation. In 1919 the Government set up a Commission under the Chairmanship of Justice Sankey into the coal mining industry to try and head off demands on wages and conditions being made by the MFGB. These demands were for the nationalisation of the mines under workers control, a six-hour working day and a 30% advance in wages. This really was an argument for workers' control. The Commission recommended two shillings per shift increase in wages, a reduction to seven hours per shift and an undertaking which seemed to suggest that the coalition Government was prepared to

accept the Commission's recommendation that the mines be nationalised. However, the miners were deceived by the Government and it was to take another twenty eight years before the dream of nationalisation of the mines was to become a reality.

The early 1920s were a period of major conflict and turmoil. The 1921 lock-out by the coal owners followed the betrayal by the Government. The MFGB were desperately fighting to protect wages and conditions under the Workmen's Compensation Acts, but the owners gave notice to terminate National Wage Agreements; this was to lead to the 1926 General Strike.

### **THE 1920s –THE GENERAL STRIKE**

There were no Galas held in 1921 because of the owners lock-out, nor in 1922 because of the total depression in the coalfield. Galas were held in the next three years, but no Gala was held in 1926 during the National Lock out, the Great Strike known in trade union history as the General Strike. Alongside the miners, answering the call of the Trades Union Congress (TUC) for solidarity, other workers joined them. With no Big Meeting, the miners lodges themselves organised an alternative Gala at the tiny village of Burnhope. Over fifty of the Durham lodges attended. A. J. Cook and Will Lawther from Chopwell addressed the crowd and were enthusiastically welcomed. It must have been a terrific sight to see the lodges, their bands and banners converge onto Burnhope. However, by November the strike was over. The miners, who were left to carry on fighting alone for six months before their eventual capitulation, had been betrayed by the TUC. Durham, even in the final ballot, voted against the return to work but Peter Lee, the Durham President, ruled at the Council Meeting that the majority to stay out of eight thousand votes, did not constitute the two thirds majority needed by rule to continue the strike – a very debatable decision indeed. The hardship in the coalfields was desperate and with the end of the General Strike, the return to work of the Nottingham Miners under their scab leader Spencer, ( which was

almost the last straw,) the MFGB voted to return to work without an agreement. The MFGB, led by A. J. Cook, had fought a valiant battle and he was to be revered forever in the Durham Coalfield. The General Strike has been well documented, but suffice to say it was a great show of strength and unity of the trades union members.

During the 1920s a very strong allegiance was formed with the Labour Party, with the Gala platform being shared by many M.P.s; George Lansbury, Ramsay McDonald, Mannie Shinwell, Helen Wilkinson and Oswald Mosley amongst them with local miners M.P. Jack Lawson, Bob Smillie, the President of the MFGB and of course, Arthur Cook, the National Secretary. The platform speakers, following the 1926 strike and depression, saw the election by the lodges of many left-wing speakers unconnected with , but on the same platform as the Labour Party. This was the period of the National Minority Movement, a broad left alliance formed by the Communist Party , which had greatly assisted in the election of A.J. Cook. Amongst them were Shapurji Sakatvala Communist M.P. for Battersea, David Kirkwood M.P., and James Maxton M.P., both at the time remaining as ILP, the “Red Clydesiders”. -this typified the militant mood of the Durham Miners lodges. There were some advances made during this period, but they were mainly on the political front. Durham County Council became the first Labour controlled local authority in the U.K. The first Labour Government led by Ramsay McDonald had come to power in 1924, a minority government which lasted less than 12 months; and the next Labour Government in 1931, again in a minority, was to fall foul of the Durham Miners when it formed the National Government.

## **DEPRESSION, WAR, LABOUR GOVERNMENT & NATIONALISATION**

The 1930s saw great depression in the Coalfields and unemployment was having a devastating effect on the mining communities. Peter Lee, the Durham President who was elected in 1919, passed away in 1935

and was replaced as an Agent by ballot vote, the successful candidate being Sam Watson, the Boldon Lodge Secretary. Although Watson had courted and had support of the left, including the Communists, he was to become the most politically right wing leader. Nevertheless, Lee and Watson were probably the most influential Durham Miners leaders of the 20th Century. Will Lawther, of Chopwell fame had been elected in 1933 but once he left Durham to become a National Official, Watson ran the show. The Durham Miners Welfare Convalescent Home at Ulverston, Cumbria was opened in 1930. There was also the achievement of holidays with pay, a step in the right direction, as the war with Germany loomed. Interestingly just before the war, the Gala had a speaker from the Soviet Union Miners and a republican woman speaker from Spain.

From 1940-1945 no Galas were held because of the Second World War. Normal service was resumed in 1946 when, following the election of the Labour Government, the crowds were addressed by the new Prime Minister, Clem Attlee and the Minister for Health Aneurin Bevan and leaders of the union now retitled, the National Union of Mineworkers (N.U.M). Here was given the statement that the coal industry would be nationalised. In 1947 the mines were nationalised and, we were told, "owned by the people" – the National Coal Board ( NCB ) was born. Many advancements were now made – the opening of residential training centres, the introduction of a five-day week agreement, improvements in medical treatment centres and the rapid provision of pit head baths across the coalfield. The speakers during the 1950s, a period of relative stability, were the major players in the Labour Government and the Secretary of the National Union of Mineworkers, Arthur Horner, who spoke at twelve consecutive Galas. Horner, a communist, was an opponent of Sam Watson, the Durham leader. However, Horner and Aneurin Bevan, two former South Wales' miners, were both well regarded by the Durham Miners lodges.

The 1960s were the years that saw massive colliery closures in Durham. Dozens of so-called uneconomic pits were closed without any opposition

from the union's leadership. The Durham miners were made industrial gypsies, being moved to the Midlands and Yorkshire coalfields. Even the re-election of a Labour Government did not see a let up in the closures as the west of the Durham coalfield was almost obliterated. Sam Watson was convinced there was no alternative. Oil and nuclear power were, he thought, the future. Wages declined and miners were told they were lucky to have a job. The election of a Labour Government in 1964 did not ease the rate of pit closures. Indeed, they increased. The building of a nuclear power station at Hartlepool was a body blow to the Durham Miners who been so loyal to Labour. The Prime Minister, Harold Wilson, was heckled when he spoke at the 1968 Gala. This had been a traumatic time for the Durham Miners. The speakers were a new breed, both left and right of the Labour Party were invited to the Galas. Tony Benn, George Brown, Michael Foot, James Callaghan and all the Labour Party hierarchy attended. Will Paynter, National Secretary of the NUM was also a speaker addressing ten Galas until his retirement in 1968. A new National Secretary, Lawrence Daly – a Scottish firebrand – was elected. This was the dawn of a new era. Miners' wages had dropped dramatically following years of compliant leadership. Strikes broke out unofficially in Yorkshire and spilled over into Durham.

### **1970s , TORY GOVERNMENT, STRIKE, LABOUR AGAIN.**

The shock election of a Tory Government in 1970 was the catalyst for realistic wage demands from the NUM. The Yom Kippur conflict in the Middle-East had dramatically increased the price of oil. The NUM balloted for strike action after the Heath Government had refused the wage demands and on 8<sup>th</sup> January 1972 the first National Miners' Strike since 1926 began. After a seven week stoppage with great support from the other trade unions, Heath was forced to concede the full claim and more. The right wing Durham leadership had to admit that striking does work – a new brand of militancy now abounded.

Shortly afterwards in 1974 the miners were back in the thick of the

action. Wage negotiations had broken down and in January 1974 a ballot produced an 80% mandate for strike action. Heath, the Tory Prime Minister, took a gamble and called a General Election on 'Who Governs Britain?'. Unfortunately for him the answer was not him - Labour formed a government with Liberal support. The miners' claim was settled with wage increases and many improvements in fringe benefits. The miners were back at the top of the industrial wages league. A plan for coal was announced and everything seemed rosy. New recruitment was announced and investment made in the industry. The next few years saw collaboration with the Labour Government to introduce the Incentive Schemes into the industry. Despite two overwhelming ballots against this, Joe Gormley, the right wing President, along with the help of the Durham leaders allowed the Nottingham and South Derbyshire coalfields to introduce Incentive Schemes. When this was challenged in the courts, Justice Watkins ruled that the NUM National Executive Committee could ignore the ballot result and allow Area Incentive Schemes. So much for the democracy of ballots! This really was a crucial decision as far as the NUM was concerned. The writing was on the wall from 1978. After the "Winter of Discontent" of the unions due to the Labour Government wage squeeze, the Tories won the General Election.

### **THATCHER, THE 1984-85 STRIKE, PIT CLOSURES AND DEMISE OF THE MINING INDUSTRY.**

The incoming Tory Government were anti-trade union. Coal stocks were built up and from 1979, the Thatcher-led Tory Government was spoiling for a fight. Pit closures continued and the so called Ridley Plan, where the police were to be mobilised, payments to strikers' families were to be cut off and large quantities of foreign coal were to be imported was implemented. Throughout the 1970s Benn, Michael Foot and Lawrence Daly were major speakers at the Gala and, as the left influence in the coalfield increased, Arthur Scargill from Yorkshire, Dennis Skinner M.P. and other left-wingers were prominent. Indeed Scargill caused a storm of



controversy at the 1980 Gala when he announced there was a pit closure list. He was derided by the Durham leadership for scaremongering. Derek Ezra, the NCB Chairman, denied any such plans. However, at the 1981 Gala, the talk was of a retreat by the Government who were not quite ready for the conflict. When faced with wildcat strikes, they put forward a subsidy to the coal industry. Gormley and co. called off the pending strike ballot. In December of that year a new President of the NUM was elected, the left wing Arthur Scargill.

Things carried on with the closures being made, but in 1984 the NCB went too far and a strike broke out at Cortonwood Colliery in Yorkshire which spread to Scotland, South Wales and Durham. Soon the British coalfield was like a battleground. Scargill, the NUM President -v- Thatcher's Government. The twelve month strike was the longest and most bitter in coal mining history. The Government were determined not to be defeated and their ranks were swelled by the scab Nottingham Miners, once more like 1926. The police and courts were used to harass and bully miners and there really was only one chance of the NUM gaining a settlement when the pit deputies, with an almost 90% mandate to join the strike, called off their action in favour of a review body on closures, a scam if ever there was one. The miners had been badly let down by Labour leader, Neil Kinnock and the Labour Party and also the TUC. The return to work without an agreement with hundreds of men sacked and victimised, was one of the worst scenarios possible. There was no Gala in 1984, only a march and rally in Durham City. After the strike the Durham leaders, Tom Callan and Harold Mitchell, retired and the resulting ballot saw them replaced by David Hopper and David Guy from Wearmouth and Dawdon Collieries respectively. Different Tory government leadership, same old tactics as the closures continued - Sacriston, Horden, Eppleton, Seaham, Dawdon, Murton, Easington, Westoe and Wearmouth. By 1993 there was not one working coal mine remaining in Co. Durham. The Galas were dominated after the strike by left-wing speakers – Arthur Scargill, Peter Heathfield of the NUM, Tony

Benn, Dennis Skinner, Rodney Bickerstaffe and Ron Todd among many others.

### **THE GALA TODAY..TRULY THE BIG MEETING!**

It was thought that the 1993 Gala would be the last and a huge crowd attended; but thanks to the generosity of a New Zealand businessman, Michael Watt, who helped fund the Gala for three years, it carried on.

During the 1990s, the Durham Miners Association widened the franchise of the Gala and encouraged more participation from the rest of the Trade Union movement. In the former mining communities of Durham many local people started forming heritage groups and banner groups. New and replica banners have been and are being made across the county, some from communities that have not had a colliery for 50 years or more. The will and spirit of the people was the major factor which has kept the Gala going. Today there are 40 banner groups that have their own structure and hold exhibitions and displays of banners in and around the North-East on a regular basis and further afield. The Gala itself goes from strength to strength. In 2011 some 70 banners were paraded through the city with 40 bands – one of the most spectacular sights you can see. It is the only Miners Gala left in Britain and even though successive Labour Leaders – Neil Kinnock, Tony Blair and Gordon Brown – have refused to speak from the platform, the Gala remains bigger than any of them. It has inspired millions of working people



At the time of writing (May 2012) Ed Miliband, Labour Party leader, has agreed to attend the 2012 Durham Miners Gala.

Come to next year's 129<sup>th</sup> Gala in Durham and witness a phenomenal event. It is, after all, a part of our and your heritage.

# HARTLEY PIT DISASTER

## JANUARY 16<sup>TH</sup> 1862

### Keith Armstrong

‘What was it there on Hartley heap, caused the mother and child to weep?’ (George Cooke)

Cold January’s gripped our throbbing hearts and torn them.  
Still the sea rolls on.

This earth’s bowells stink of our loved one’s deaths,  
the air tastes foul.  
Still the sea rolls on.

They don black gloves,  
drag out the bodies one by one.  
The death-stained faces seem to smile.  
Still the sea rolls on.

We are the widows of Hartley,  
our men and boys are dead,  
our lives cracked open,  
damp corpses in our beds.  
Still the sea rolls on.

We clutch cold messages from Dukes and Queens,  
we wipe the coal dust from our widowed eyes.  
The coffin makers’ heavy hammers beat,  
keep time with lapping parlour clocks,

and still  
the sea rolls on,  
still the sea rolls on.

Still the sea,

we are the widows of Hartley,  
our men and boys are dead.

Take away your stumbling words and

GIVE US BREAD.

*David Wright 1841*

*Yes, We Are Free*

*Yes, we are free to plough the sea  
And dig the earth for treasure.  
And when we do, the ruling few  
Can take our gains at leisure.*

*We are free to weep while tyrants sleep.  
And starve while they are feasting;  
And when we do, the ruling few  
Feed us with scorn and jesting.*

*We're free to fight with all our might  
In every Whiggish battle,  
And when we do, the ruling few  
Treat us like slaves or cattle.*

*We pay the tax laid on our backs  
And seldom try to stop it;  
And when we do, the ruling few  
Can take by force and pocket.*

*And free we're born to sow the corn,  
And free when ripe, to cut it:  
And when we do, the ruling few,  
Are free to take and eat it.*

*And this you see that we are free  
To labour for starvation,  
Because they take all that we make  
To pay their d-d taxation.*

## STILL THE SEA ROLLS ON

### **THE HARTLEY PIT CALAMITY OF 1862:**

A commemoration in words and images to mark its 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary

This new book from Northern Voices Community Projects, compiled and edited by Dr Keith Armstrong and Peter Dixon and commissioned by North Tyneside Council, has been published to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Calamity. With historical documents and images, alongside poems, songs, stories, photographs and drawings by local people, it forms part of a series of events and activities, during this year, intended to ensure that the story of Hartley is not forgotten. Furthermore, it is also the 180<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the birth of pitman poet Joseph Skipsey, born in Percy Main in 1832, who wrote a long poem on Hartley featured in the book.

The Hartley Pit Calamity of 1862 was the first large scale mining disaster of Victorian times. The extent of the calamity, together with the spreading of news by rail and telegraph, brought this tragic event in rural Northumberland into the homes of families throughout the land on a daily basis.

The reaction from the public, together with the interest shown even by Queen Victoria, kept the story in the press for more than a month. Just as evidenced in 2010 in the Chilean mine rescue, the public were gripped by the horror of men trapped underground and the heroic efforts made to rescue them.

COPIES CAN BE OBTAINED FROM:

NORTHERN VOICES COMMUNITY PROJECTS,  
93 WOODBURN SQUARE, WHITLEY BAY, TYNE & WEAR  
NE26 3JD TEL 0191 2529531  
EMAIL [k.armstrong643@btinternet.com](mailto:k.armstrong643@btinternet.com)

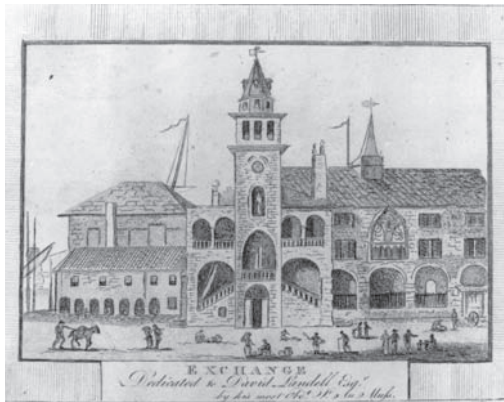
**PRICE £7.99** (ADD £2 POSTAGE)

ISBN 978-1-871536-20-1

## THE TRIAL OF ALEXANDER WHYTE, 1793.

Peter Livsey

Alexander Whyte, a baker, could not have known, when he stepped out onto the Sandhill in Newcastle-upon-Tyne on February 18<sup>th</sup> 1793, that he would not see home again that day or for a long time to come. He could not have foreseen that he would stand trial for seditious libel in the ancient Guildhall that stood between the Sandhill and the river. <sup>1</sup>



*The Guildhall, Newcastle*

His first intimation of trouble to come was when he was approached by Thomas Puncheon, one of the Sergeants of the Mace, the eight officials paid by the Corporation to maintain order. He asked him to come up onto the external stair of the Guildhall, to speak to John Ridley, who was a butcher and an acquaintance of Whyte's. However, Whyte was immediately taken before a magistrate in the Mayor's Chamber, body-searched out in the Hall and taken to the town gaol in the Newgate. One of the upstairs cells was cleared of two deserters to confine him alone. His wife and daughter were turned weeping away.

Whyte's arrest was one result of the panic caused in Britain by the

French Revolution as it entered its violent, Jacobin phase. In the spring of 1792 Thomas Paine was charged with seditious libel for the second part of his *Rights of Man*. On 21<sup>st</sup> May a Royal Proclamation ordered magistrates to seek out and prosecute those involved in writing and printing “wicked and seditious” writings. This proclamation prompted loyal addresses from across the country.

The demand of Paine and his followers for greater political and social equality had encouraged the formation of numerous societies across Britain, among them the London Corresponding Society which was founded by artisans and working men on 25 January 1792. This presented a great problem for the more cautious reformers within the narrow establishment. In April 1792 The Society of the Friends of the People, Associated for the Purpose of Obtaining a Parliamentary Reform was formed by a group of advanced young members of the opposition Whigs. Although three peers joined initially, the MP for Northumberland, Charles Grey, was the leading figure and he stressed that the organisation would not engage in activities that would promote public disturbances. Branches were formed by similar groups throughout England.

However, in the fraught circumstances of violence in France and Paine’s popularity, their stance prompted a reaction among their own class. In May 1792 a group representing the Newcastle establishment, including most of the Aldermen, requested that the Mayor call an official meeting at the Guildhall “for the purpose of consulting on the proceedings of a society called ‘The Friends of the People.’” The Mayor, the respected Sir Matthew White Ridley, who was also a Whig MP, refused. Nonetheless, the group announced in the press resolutions against any change in Parliamentary representation, to be available for signing in the Exchange, the open arcade of the Guildhall, and to be forwarded to the Home Secretary.

Although Grey was able to defend himself successfully at a similar meeting officially called for Northumberland at Morpeth in July, the tide was running against even moderate reform. When his trial was

postponed Paine wrote the provocative Address to the Addressees of the late Proclamation and then fled to France in September. <sup>2</sup>

In Newcastle, the new Mayor, chosen on the second Monday after Michaelmas, was the merchant James Rudman, one of the Aldermen who had signed the requisition in May. He readily responded to a further requisition of the Guildhall and on December 17<sup>th</sup> at a large meeting “of the gentlemen, clergy, freeholders, burgesses, and inhabitants” of Newcastle, an Association was formed, pledging among other resolutions, “That we will exert every possible means to support the Executive Government, in the detection of, and bringing to legal punishment, all persons concerned in promoting seditious publications, tending to inflame the minds of his Majesty’s subjects, and to withdraw them from their allegiance.”

A Committee was formed, including the Mayor, Aldermen, Councillors and other leading establishment figures, including Sir Matthew White Ridley. It met on December 29<sup>th</sup> at 11 am at Bella’s Coffee House, in the former Surtees house opposite the Guildhall. It was brought to their attention that “through misguided zeal” a paper was circulating singling out the Dissenters as potentially disloyal. In Newcastle they represented a large and productive community, spread across all classes, but excluded from political power. The Committee swiftly issued a declaration that loyalty was not confined to “any religious description of men” and expressed its disapproval of the paper. <sup>3</sup>

The same month Thomas Paine was found guilty in absentia and outlawed. Into the New Year across the country loyalist crowds burned Paine in effigy. The small towns of Durham and Northumberland were no exception – there were separate bonfires in Winlaton, Winlaton Mill and Swalwell, and the one in Chester-le-Street was organised by a local Loyal Association. At Felton in Northumberland a notice attached to the effigy read, “Tom Paine, a sower of sedition, and libeller of our happy and envied constitution – Britons beware of his democratic principles, and avoid his merited fate.” A radical of the next, post-war, generation noted that these “exhibitions were exultingly related in the Newcastle



Advertiser [a pro-government paper]; but the wisdom of the magistracy of Newcastle saved that town from such a foolish, disgraceful, and riotous expression of popular opinion.”<sup>4</sup>

Newcastle's elite were determined to retain their monopoly of loyal expressions and actions. Yet they may have been looking to make an example. In 1793, of the 10 recorded prosecutions for seditious words or writings, 6 took place in London. Exceptions were a Fellow expelled from Cambridge University; a dissenting minister prosecuted for two sermons in Exeter; and a bookseller in Newark. Interestingly, the last of these, Daniel Holt, was warned by a friend that the members of the Newark Association for the Support of the Constitution were on the lookout to inform on those selling what they deemed seditious publications. The other prosecution outside London was Alexander Whyte's in Newcastle. How had a poor baker come to this?<sup>5</sup>

It was accepted by both sides at the trial that Alexander Whyte and John Ridley, who became the chief witness against him, were drinking, early on the morning of 17<sup>th</sup> February, in Mr. Loggie's Golden Anchor pub on Grindon Chare, just off the Quayside. This was probably after a night of work at the oven and the chopping block. Whyte showed Ridley a paper which the latter then asked to borrow. The following morning, now in Mr. Hunter's Angel, at the foot of Butcher Bank, where it entered the Side, Ridley read out part of the paper to a group of fellow-drinkers. It was heard and seized upon by Sergeant Puncheon and it and Ridley were taken across Sandhill to the Guildhall. By the end of the day Alexander Whyte was in the town gaol.

Newcastle's Newgate was among the better town gaols in England – “A clean prison: proper bedding for debtors and felons. I never found any sick prisoners.”<sup>6</sup> But Alexander Whyte was desperate with worry for himself and his family. They were not allowed to see him, even when they brought his food to the gaol. He appealed to the Sheriff, Matthew Pringle, when he passed through on a visit, but was told, “It was a pity I had not been a better

subject.” However, orders were then given to let his wife go up, but for them to meet only in the presence of the turnkey. On the 25th February, a week after the arrest, she was allowed to stay to consult about his bail, and a few days later his children were allowed in. At this point bail was being required for his appearance at the next Assizes. He twice offered the sureties of householders renting at £10 and £23 per annum. But bail was set at £800 or £1000, which was impossibly high.

On Wednesday, Whyte appeared before the Quarter Sessions in the courtroom, with its black and white tiled floor, at the west end of the Guildhall. The case was put to the Grand Jury and all three Newcastle newspapers reported the outcome in the same words, “A true bill was found at these sessions against Alexander Whyte, a baker, for a libel upon the Constitution.” The clerk’s rough notes indeed refer to a libel. But, the official Order Book refers only to a misdemeanour, a category, rather than a named offence. Both state that Whyte pleaded not guilty and asked for time to prepare his defence. He was returned to gaol until the July Quarter Sessions, unless he could find bail. Whyte may have hoped that a reasonable figure would now be set, but he was still asked for £300 for himself and £150 from each surety – “which could not be expected from a stranger in my circumstances.” The authorities seem to have been in some doubt as to how to proceed. The clerk’s notes on this case contain more corrections than in others. They could not drop the case, but had begun to play it down, describing it as a misdemeanour and referring it to their own Quarter Sessions rather than the Royal Assizes.<sup>7</sup>

Back in Newgate, Whyte was moved in with the debtors, and other visitors as well as his family were allowed. But, “I had no copy of my indictment...I had no prior information of the commencement of my trial – I was immediately issued from the prison to the bar – I had no means of procuring the advice or assistance of any Gentleman of the Law, and was therefore obliged to make out my own defence in gaol.”

On Wednesday 17<sup>th</sup> July 1793 he stood once again in the courtroom of the Guildhall to take his trial before the Recorder of Newcastle, the

aged Christopher Fawcett. The Clerk of the Peace, who was also the Town Clerk, the wealthy Nathaniel Clayton, established that Whyte had had no legal advice. He claimed that the Court had been informed that he wished to change his plea. This Whyte denied and the jury were sworn.

A lawyer for the Crown “described the heinousness of the offence and the need for exemplary punishment,” but Clayton conducted the questioning of the two witnesses. John Ridley stated that Whyte had read out part of a paper to him in the Golden Anchor. He had not understood much because Whyte was drunk. He had not thought it seditious but “curious,” and had asked to borrow it to read to some friends. While he was doing so in the Angel Sergeant Puncheon had snatched it from his hands and taken it to a magistrate.

Whyte’s cross-examination established that Ridley was not really certain Whyte had written the paper himself; did not think it seditious, but “perfectly innocent and intended only for amusement;” and that in lending it there was no intention to “publish” it – “I never thought it was intended for the public.”

Sergeant Puncheon claimed that John Ridley had asked him to read it to the dozen or so men in the bar of the Angel, but thinking it “nonsense” he refused. When Ridley himself began to read it he thought it was “queer” and seized it. Ridley said “Damn your soul,” and tried to get it back. Puncheon took it to an Alderman who sent him to the Mayor. The Mayor ordered him to bring in Ridley. On the Court stairs Ridley said, “Yonder is Mr. Whyte, who wrote the paper.”

Whyte’s questioning of Puncheon revealed that he had had no warrant to seize that paper in particular, but the sergeants had had a verbal order from an Alderman, “to seize all such papers we could find, and bring them before a magistrate.” When Whyte asked whether he thought this was sufficient, Clayton intervened to say it was not a fair question. However, he agreed to put it to the Sergeant and Puncheon said he did. Whyte came back, “Did you think that the Magistrates could protect you in the execution of such a warrant?” Puncheon replied, “I thought they could.”

Whyte then addressed the jury. He pointed out that the terms of the indictment sought to, “blacken my character; which thank God, after six years residence stands as yet unimpeached in the neighbourhood in which my family still resides.” He had never before been accused of any offence. He pointed out that Ridley was an interested witness, desperate to shift the blame for publication onto Whyte. Yet even he had admitted on oath that there was, “no previous appointment – no premeditated scheme – no apparent design to disseminate doctrines hostile to the Constitution.”

There was no proof, other than the word of this interested witness that the paper seized from Ridley was the same one read by Whyte the previous morning in the *Golden Anchor*. So there was not even the required level of proof that he had written or published the paper at all. He quoted legal authorities, including the published *State Trials* to support his argument. At worst there was an attempt at publication, by Ridley, when the paper was illegally seized by Sergeant Puncheon without a warrant.

He raised the spectre of General Warrants (found illegal during the *Wilkes* case twenty years before) if a charge could be brought on the vague accusation that a libel had been published, without proof that it was done in a “seditious manner.” In fact, the paper was “perfectly innocent, and nothing more than a piece of harmless amusement, never intended to go beyond the threshold of the author; the fictitious character affixed to the paper shows that it never was intended it should be taken in a serious point of view.”

In this country, he asserted, again quoting past legal authorities, “it is to such writings as have been prosecuted for libels, we are at present indebted for our civil and religious liberties.” The persecution of such writings by the arbitrary rulers of the *Ancien Regime* in France was “the sole cause of the present disturbances that still continue to deluge that unhappy country with blood.” He assumed that no such arbitrary measures would be attempted by any magistrate who was “at bottom a friend to the Constitution of this country and the Illustrious Family on the Throne.”

Moving to his conclusion, Whyte asserted yet again that on the evidence “there is nothing of evil design, malice, or seditious purpose appears in the whole of this affair; neither, with due submission, is it proved that I was in any manner concerned, in either writing or publishing the paper now before the court.”

In a direct appeal to the jury he pointed out that a guilty verdict would become a precedent. If that happened, any gentleman could have a letter from a friend snatched from his hand by a “busy by-stander,” have it declared seditious and be called upon to turn evidence against his friend or be taken into custody himself. “Gentlemen of the jury, I leave it with you to do in this case as your conscience may direct, and as you would wish to be done by in a similar situation.”

After Whyte had produced three character witnesses, the jury conferred. After an hour and a half they brought in a verdict of “Not Guilty of publishing.” The Clerk, Nathaniel Clayton, objected to the Recorder that this meant not guilty at all, since the Grand Jury had found a bill for publishing only. Asked again, the Jury unanimously found Alexander Whyte not guilty.

The Order Book of the Quarter Sessions briefly recorded Whyte being found not guilty of “a misdemeanour” and discharged. The two pro-government newspapers ignored the verdict altogether. But, Solomon Hodgson’s Newcastle Chronicle, the following Saturday (July 20<sup>th</sup>), included a substantial paragraph in its local column. It described the circumstances of the alleged seditious libel; how Whyte had been in Newgate for five months; and that he conducted his own defence, being unable to afford legal assistance. It noted that “the trial was conducted with the greatest candour,” and the general verdict of Not Guilty.

Whyte’s intelligence and determination are further shown by the pamphlet he swiftly produced, giving his account of the trial, to be “sold by the Booksellers of Newcastle, Shields, Sunderland, Durham, Morpeth etc.” The cover also made clear it was for the benefit of his family “who have suffered much from his long confinement.” At the end of the account

he movingly describes the ordeal of his wife and five young children, one lame, one with consumption and two who contracted smallpox while their father was in prison. His wife had had to sell their possessions and rely on the credit of the neighbours, “on the honour and honesty of her husband, whom all along they considered injured by this extraordinary prosecution.” He returned home jobless and burdened with debt. Copies of his book are still to be found and it is to be hoped its sales went some way to repairing his fortunes. He would have been pleased to know that a version was entered in later compilations of the State Trials which he had quoted in his defence. The offence of Seditious Libel was abolished in 2009.

Whyte pointed out that the authorities may have got what they wanted, despite the jury’s verdict – “they may truly boast that by a vexatious and groundless prosecution they have totally ruined an innocent man and his helpless family. Such indeed have often been the effects of libelous prosecutions; and how greatly must it be in the interest of every person, who wishes well to the liberties of his country, to guard against their dangerous consequences!!”

Fear of prosecution rather than mass arrests did lead to the suppression of free speech. Newcastle had long had a number of debating clubs, often with overlapping membership. “At this time [1786] there was a “House of Lords” in Newcastle. It consisted of a number of respectable tradesmen who met for the purpose of discussing politics.” Its membership cards bore the coat of arms of the Spread Eagle where it met, at the bottom of the Groat Market, which then ran down to Denton Chare. The engraver Thomas Bewick, who had quite advanced political views, had become a member in 1778. By 1790 the inn was actually more familiarly known as The Newcastle House of Lords Arms. But by the end of 1792 its members were careful to profess loyalty to the existing order, and by 1795 the inn had reverted to its original name.<sup>8</sup>

Bewick also enjoyed the sessions of Swarley’s Club, held upstairs at the Black Boy farther up Groat Market, and named for the landlord.

But, “This happy society was at length broken up, at the time when the war on behalf of despotism was raging, and the spy system was set afloat. Some spies, and others of the same stamp, contrived to get themselves introduced, and to broach political questions, for the purpose of exciting debates, and feeling the pulse of the members, who before this had very seldom touched on subjects of this kind.”

Was there still fire behind all this smoke? In April 1794 Joseph Smith, a Newcastle joiner, wrote to Thomas Hardy, secretary of the London Corresponding Society, “by desire of a number of friends to a radical reform in the constitution here.” Despite living in a place where “an aristocratic Magistracy endeavours to stop the genial and benign spirit of natural liberty from spreading...A good number have formed themselves into societies, and meet weekly, admitting none but known friends.”<sup>9</sup>

Joseph Smith sought an ongoing correspondence with the London Society and ended, “Farewell, hoping the Hydra of Tyranny and Imposition shall soon fall under the guillotine of truth and reform.” Hardy replied, endorsing Smith’s sentiments, enclosing recent resolutions of the Society and inviting a delegate to London. He addressed his reply, as requested by Smith, to the care of Mr. Hunter, publican of the Angel, Butcher Bank. Of all the taverns in Newcastle, this was the one where, 14 months earlier, Sergeant Puncheon had snatched from the hand of John Ridley the paper allegedly written by Alexander Whyte. Coincidence?

1 Unless otherwise stated quotes and references are from *An Account of the Trial of Alexander Whyte, Baker, for a False, Malicious and Seditious Libel* (Newcastle, 1793).

2 Carl. B. Cone, *The English Jacobins* (Transaction Publishers, Brunswick (USA) and London (UK), 2010); ‘Thomas Paine’ in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (OUP 2004) Volume 42, pp 398-413; H.T. Dickinson, *Radical Politics in the North East of England in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Durham County Local History Society, 1979) pp 14 - 19.

3 *Newcastle Courant*, January 5<sup>th</sup> 1793.

4 *Newcastle Advertiser*, January 5<sup>th</sup> 1793; Eneas Mackenzie, *A Descriptive and Historical Account of the Town and County of Newcastle-upon-Tyne* (Mackenzie and Dent, Newcastle, 1827) Volume I p 69.

*north east history*

- 5 *A Complete Collection of State Trials*, compiled by T.B. Howell and T.J. Howell (London, 1817) Volume XXII pp 471 - 1250.
- 6 John Howard, *The Works of John Howard* (London, 1791) Volume II p 198.
- 7 Tyne and Wear Archives Service, Quarter Sessions Draft Minutes, QS/NC/4/1; Quarter Sessions Order Book, QS/NC/1/8.
- 8 John Sykes, *Local Records*; or Historical Register of Remarkable Events (Sykes, Newcastle, 1833) Volume I p 338; H.T Dickinson, *Radical Politics in the North East of England in the Late Eighteenth Century* (Durham County Local History Society, 1979) p 19; Thomas Bewick, *A Memoir* (Newcastle and London, 1862) p 141.
- 9 Northumberland Collections Service, Ridley (Blagdon) Manuscripts ZRI/25/17; *Selections from the Papers of the London Corresponding Society 1792-99*, edited by Mary Thale (Cambridge University Press, 1983) pp 133 and 148-9.

*Joe Corrie, Scottish Miner & Poet (1894-1968)*

*Eat More*

*"Eat more fruit!" the slogan says,  
"More fish, more beef, more bread"  
But I'm on unemployment pay,  
My third year now, and wed.*

*And so I wonder when I'll see  
The slogan, when I pass  
The only one that would suit me.  
"Eat More Bloody Grass!"*

*1930s*



# TYNEVIEW - A JOURNEY AROUND THE PORT OF TYNE. BEFORE Michael Chaplin

This is the introduction to Michael's book (September 2012) which includes recollections of his father the novelist and founder member of the Society, the late Sid Chaplin.



This is an account of a journey, undertaken close to home in the month of July 2011, tracing the jurisdiction of the Port of Tyne, an area of water stretching from a point three miles off the two piers at its mouth to the river's tidal reach 22 miles upstream.

Since I and my companions – artist Birtley Aris, photographer Charles Bell and poet Christy Ducker - didn't fancy the swim, we started our walk at the lighthouse at the tip of the South Shields pier, made our way along the south bank of the river to Wylam, crossed over its bridge and then returned seawards to the point of the Tynemouth pier.

As expeditions go, it's not exactly epic. In 10 days on the hoof, we can't have walked more than 50 miles, but all of those days were filled with rich experiences, visiting factories, workshops, museums, churches, community centres and schools, but equally important, meeting people

who had interesting things to say about their lives and work, community and culture, most especially their river. These Tynesiders, many of whom we almost literally bumped into on the riverside path, were unfailingly open and eloquent, but many asked us a question of their own: why exactly are you doing this?

Which is a fair enough enquiry, and I'm going to try to answer it – in a slight circular way - by asking one back: can you remember your first glimpse of the River Tyne?

In my experience, people usually do, though I have to confess I don't, but I'll come to that shortly. Among those who wrote down their first impressions were distinguished visitors like Charles Dickens, Arnold Bennett and the decidedly grumpy J.B. Priestley, but it was the fond recollection of another writer that has stayed with me, for understandable reasons. As a teenage boy my dad, the novelist Sid Chaplin, first visited the city in the early 1930's, travelling from his home in Ferryhill 30 miles away, and like many visitors and returning pilgrims, saw it from the vantage point of a train idling on the King Edward Railway Bridge. That first sight of the river and the great gorge it had cut over many millennia to separate Newcastle and Gateshead rather took his breath away, as he recalled many years later:

I looked down into the mighty trough. On one side was a little wonder of a swing bridge and high above the great High Level. It was the turn of the tide and the brown Tyne from the hills was pushing through black waters the sea had siphoned up from the slakes and the sewers. The Swing Bridge called to a ship and the gulls went up with a clap of wings. There was a puff of white smoke from Robbie Stephenson's High Level. Downriver the brave ships rode at anchor while one-eyed giants on wheels raked out their holds; fleets of driftwood jostled ready to set sail; and the great noble city went up the river in steps and stairs. There she sat, like a conference waiting for its picture to be taken, and the big open smile was all the better for a blackened stump or two – the Keep, the Black Gate, the Cathedral with its lantern of stone. Because I hadn't learned to swear,



I remember saying to myself: ‘By gum, I’d give two years off the back end of my life to come and live in the heart of all this...’

This is about as vivid a description of a place can get, though in fairness it should be said that it presents a rather Newcastle-centric view of the river scene. There are many places on the Tyne that offer grand perspectives of water and landscape, and I can think of at least one that tops it: the sight of the mouth of the Tyne from the deck of a ship approaching safe harbour – the embrace of the crab legs of its two piers, the smudgy horizon of distant hills, the cranes of the middle river, the white markers of the High and Low Lights at North Shields, the waving of the ever-present sightseers on the Spanish Battery. Throughout the bulk of the 2000 years since Tyneside was first settled, this is how most people arrived in this place: Roman centurions and the traders who brought them goods from the impossibly distant Mediterranean; Vikings with a more sinister intent; barques bringing pit props from the Baltic shore; colliers plying back and forth to London and Continental ports; warships in sail and steel; giant supertankers and tiny fishing cobbles; and the City of Port Elizabeth, a cargo vessel that had taken

its new fifth engineer – my brother Chris – to South Africa and back in the mid-1960's, when I was among that morning's crowd on the Battery. They all passed this way, like the distinctly unromantic, box-like ferry that returned me from a weekend in Amsterdam that time, when I was so moved by this matchless early-morning panorama of home.

By the time Chris came home from the Indian Ocean that morning in the mid-1960's I'd been living in Newcastle for the best part of a decade. In 1957 my father kept the promise he'd made to himself all those years before to take up residence in the city by the Tyne, and the family moved from Essex to an Edwardian house perched above a municipal dump in the then-unfragrant Jesmond Vale. I was five years old, which offers some excuse for why I don't actually remember crossing the river for the first time, though I do recall lying in my tiny front bedroom at night, in the darkness, listening to the distant hooting of ships working upriver, and the occasional ghostly boom of the Shields foghorn. The sense of curiosity this aroused led not long afterwards to an adventure on the Ouseburn. The tributary of the Tyne was a noisome, smelly ditch back then – there was still industry upstream in Gosforth to pollute it – but it did have dozy sticklebacks in the pool above the waterfall by the white bridge. Often a fishing expedition led to a wander upstream into Jesmond Dene, but one day I had the idea of turning right instead of left and following the Ouseburn downstream. My pals and I – I suppose we were about 7 - had never done this before.

The remaining course of the river had only a mile to run, but our expedition turned out to be as mysterious and hazardous as searching for the source of the Nile. Mysterious, because quarter of a mile from the white bridge the Ouseburn disappeared into a grate on the side of a hill, forcing us to search for the place where it emerged again; hazardous, because the journey involved crossing into Shieldfield, whose battle-hardened lads greeted Jesmond boys with grim amusement and twirling bicycle chains. The Ouseburn meanwhile moved mythically on beneath the streets, then undergoing slum clearance, emerging into the light under

the Byker bridges, in what's now yet another of Newcastle's numerous cultural quarters. At that time the Ouseburn Valley was a pungent sink-hole of abandoned mills, leadworks and hideaways for gentlemen of the road, incidentally also the stamping ground of Arthur Haggerston, my dad's chancer anti-hero in the novel he was writing at just this time, *The Day of the Sardine*. Through this silent, spooky landscape, we moved like nervous U.S. cavalymen in a Sioux burial-ground, or trigger-happy GI's in the war about to begin in Vietnam, but finally we were through it, observing the tide moving up our stream, gently rocking the ancient motor boats by a pub perched under a bridge. Finally we passed between the long sheds belonging to the Tyne Improvement Commission and reached our destination: a few hundred yards downstream of those mythic bridges, the Ouseburn said hallo to its Big Daddy, the Tyne, to us as vast and mythic as the Mississippi, with cranes dipping, hooters blaring, ships turning in midstream for the sea. We didn't stay long. It stank to high heaven and was kind of scary. In any case we had to get home for tea, and the Lone Ranger on the telly.

But something was set. Around this time I started taking Sunday morning walks with my dad as he gathered material for his Newcastle novels, and collected names for their characters in the city's cemeteries. Often these wanderings ended by the Quayside and its weekly market. Here big men in braces stood on the backs of trucks, barking out the benefits of nylon sheets to slab-faced headscarved women, heavily drawing on un-tipped cigarettes. But I was drawn to the river, where I'd stare at the disconcerting speed of its oily current, down or indeed up, depending on the tide. Once I saw a dead dog and shivered at the stiff legs proud of the water, wondering where its body would finally rest. Dad saw it too: the sight was recorded at the climax of *The Day of the Sardine*.

Thus the Tyne became part of my world, a border between my home town and that alien place on the other side; more than that, a central feature of the mental map I carried inside my head of all the places that mattered to the growing boy, along with Heaton Grammar School, the People's

Theatre, the Jesmond Picture House, St James's Park and the Handyside Arcade. Later, after university, I returned to work on *The Journal* as a reporter, and the Tyne became part of another world, of stories that might make the paper, among them launches of ships from yards down river. On one assignment I saw an Esso super-tanker going down the slipway at Swan Hunters, accompanied by various lost vignettes: gaffer in bowler hat and visiting dignitary, dead animal draped on shoulders and confections of chiffon perched above; cheap champagne hitting plate steel; dancing chains restraining the ship and madly-capering rats running for cover; most impressive, the heart-stopping spectacle of the ship gathering speed as it was received into the water of Tyne.

Another destination for the young journalist had its own, rather grimmer rituals: the Coroner's Court, then found in a squat stone building at the northern end of the Swing Bridge. Not many people went down that way then; it was the mid-70's and the Quayside seemed to be quietly dying too. Inside the smoky room where inquests were held, it was cold and dark whatever the season, and it wasn't only the fingerless gloves often worn by the coroner's clerk that put one in mind of Dickens' *My Mutual Friend*, since what brought us all here was that book's leitmotif: the corpses of human beings, some of whom had met their end, in suicidal despair or drunken stupor, in the black river flowing thickly 30 feet below our feet. I didn't know it then, but this place of bleak little endings was offering something of an omen for the Tyne as a whole.

In 1977, I was offered a job as a current affairs researcher at London Weekend Television, and 20 years after my dad made the journey in reverse, I crossed the bridge going south to live by another river, the Thames. It was to be almost 30 years before we came back to make a new home. In the interim we returned many times: for holidays by the sea, countless football matches, the occasional family wedding, rather more funerals (my dad's among them), and another ritual as I morphed from television producer into writer, the openings of plays at Live Theatre, a converted mediaeval warehouse a few yards from the Tyne. During this

time there was wholesale change on the river, mostly for the worse, as its shipyards closed one by one and the coal trade that had been so vital to its growth and enrichment withered and died. Of course I knew about these apparently inexorable events, but followed them from a distance. I didn't see or indeed feel them, until a day in the summer of 2001 when I celebrated my 50th birthday with friends and family on a pleasure cruise from Newcastle Quayside down to the sea. Like many before and since, I was quietly shocked by what I saw, even more by what I heard, or rather didn't hear. The upper river, Walker and Wallsend especially, was eerily quiet, and long stretches of the southern shore were returning to nature.

Five years later, my wife Susan and I finally returned to Newcastle to live and work. As the months went by, I sensed a more subtle change, in the attitudes of Tynesiders towards their river. I suspected we were collectively turning our backs on it, prompted no doubt by the fact that far fewer numbers of people worked on or beside the Tyne in its traditional industries. It also seemed to me this process wasn't solely physical. We'd begun to take it – as some would say, her – for granted. Stuck in a traffic jam on the Tyne Bridge, we never pause to look down at the Tyne and reflect on the fact that she's at the bottom of it all. Without her we'd be lost; indeed, given the river's place in the history of this place, we wouldn't be here at all.

I felt this was more than a pity, and wondered how a playwright and screenwriter like me might affect these perceptions, even in a small way. So I came up with a plan: put simply, to find ways to celebrate the river and its effect on our culture. With this in mind I tentatively approached the Port of Tyne with an idea – a job application, basically – to become their writer-in-residence. The Port's chief executive Andrew Moffat instantly agreed, and I must here thank him for that and his part in what's followed. I set to work, with a little trepidation. Often writers-in-residence work in self-contained institutions like hospitals, schools or prisons, but here I was taking on not just the body responsible for safe movement on the river and the handling of much of its trade, but also by implication the Tyne itself, as well as the communities lining its shores. How could I do justice

to all of that? One obvious way of starting was to encourage people to write about the river and its meaning in the lives of themselves and their families and publish it (eventually on a specially dedicated adjunct of the Port's own website: go to [www.portoftyne.co.uk](http://www.portoftyne.co.uk) and follow the link to 'Writer In Residence'). People responded in significant numbers – some living far away from their native Tyneside – with pieces of writing that were sometimes funny, often moving and always vivid. A selection appears in these pages, peppering and enriching the narrative. I then went to work myself, interviewing a dozen people whose lives revolve around the river in interesting and surprising ways. With evocative photo portraits by David Tiernan, these were published by the Port in the slim volume, *Tyne People*.

I then had an idea for something rather fatter: a book examining in much more detail what was happening, or indeed not happening, along the river. Since I became the Port's writer-in-residence, I've almost lost count of the people who've asserted to me, 'Oh, the river's dead now, isn't it?' I know what my instinctive reply is to that – indeed I've made it many times – but I wanted in the don't phone them up, go and see them, ideally on their home turf; second, if you end to test it, and finally establish whether, as Mark Twain remarked after reading his own obituary, reports of its demise are premature. The nature of my response – this book - represents a return to journalistic roots. Half a lifetime ago, my first news editor on *The Journal* gave me two lessons I've never forgotten: first, if you want to find out what someone thinks about something, want to get a feel for a place, get out of your car and walk it. Put another way, the best way of gauging the temperature is to feel the sun or indeed the wind on your face. I was also beginning to understand that though a walk is very definitely rooted in the present, it also involves an examination of the past, and almost as inevitably, an imagination of the future. It might therefore be a journey of both memory and hope, and a way for this Tynesider to get to know his river all over again.

This then was how *Tyne View* was born, but my earliest vision for the book was that it shouldn't be merely a procession of text, but an equal



and artful juxtaposition of words with images. My invitation to Birtley, Charles and Christy to join me, and in the process hugely enrich my own work, had a further selfish motive behind it: I thought it would be rather lonely walking on my own, and I thank my collaborators for their engaging company as well as the quality of their contributions to our collective enterprise. Every morning we set out full of hope and curiosity, an expeditionary party like those of old (think Cook and Darwin), though in our case we weren't collecting fossils and botanical specimens, but facts, images, reflections, wise and funny thoughts, fragments of life beside the water. The other difference of course is we weren't travelling on water, but beside it; rather than being conveyed across oceans on the Explorer and the Beagle, but to our start and finish lines in a black cab belonging to the ever-obliging East Coast Taxis, driven by the hugely knowledgeable and equally sardonic Brian, though so obscure were some of the places we reached, even he had sometimes to consult his sat-nav.

The morning I began my stint as the Port's writer-in-residence I came across a colour map of the working Tyne, dating from just before the First World War, detailing the many enterprises occupying the river frontage, the railway lines that served them and the communities that had sprung up to support them. Utterly beguiled, I sat and stared at it for an hour. I've since examined many other maps of the river, among them the first chart of its mouth assembled for the benefit of Elizabeth sailors, and another, drawn up 450 years later and viewed this time on computer, showing the position of the hundreds of sunken ships that litter the sea-bed in precisely the same area. In a way, this book represents a kind of mapping exercise too, not merely of a physical terrain, but also of the thoughts and feelings of the people we met along the way. Part-map, part-snapshot, part-testimony of the river at this moment in its long history, I like to think it might illuminate travellers at points in the future as well as the present. It certainly was a fascinating journey for my fellow cartographers and I, and I hope you enjoy its re-creation.

## THE STORY OF VAL DUNCAN'S POLITICAL LIFE.

Vicki Gilbert



Val Duncan was born Valerie Reynolds in 1953 in Leicester. Val's father, Bill, came from a mining family in County Durham and her mother, Enid, from a farming community in Montrose, Scotland. The family lived in the Midlands mainly due to Val's father's employment as a Building Inspector for local authorities and Val grew up in Leamington and Warwick because her father wanted to work near the family. Val said she had a very happy and free childhood, remembering going off for days with a gang of friends and only returning home for meals.

Val also grew up with the dual influences of her mother's feminism and her father's socialism. However, her mother worked shifts as a nurse resulting in Val spending much time in her father's company. He was an active trade unionist and was a regional representative for the National Association of Local Government Officers (NALGO), taking his daughter to union meetings from the age of three. Val spoke about his influence often, recalling helping him put leaflets out for the local Labour Party. Her Mum was never overtly political or a member of any political party or women's group but she had a fierce sense of equal rights and independence which she instilled into her daughter. Val said this was central to her deciding to become an engineer and to go to university to train for that; and even though her Dad was sceptical about her ambition, that only made her more determined. Later, Val observed that her father

had been right about the male dominated culture which as a woman, you couldn't escape.

Val told me she had found school boring at first but later, thanks to teachers who inspired her, she became more integrated and an 'eager student'. An early sign of the future activist was the campaign she led against Year 11 girls having to wear the school uniform. The campaign was successful but typical of Val, she then saw the other side of the argument i.e. the fashion competition amongst the other pupils. However, she couldn't express her change of view out of loyalty to her friends. Her politics from that point became underlined with a belief in equality for all and her support for the underdog. At the same time she determined to become an engineer and studied: AL Maths, Physics, Chemistry and General Studies.

Val was offered a place at the University of Sheffield to take a B. Sc degree in Engineering. Val also became involved in student politics and campaigned against the introduction of higher fees. There were only three women out of 83 students on that course and the women were awarded the best degrees. One of the women went into teaching but Val and her friend found senior jobs in engineering.

Having completed her MA, 'Women into Science and Engineering' Val looked for work as an Engineer. 1974 was a key year for Val, she married for the first time, moved to St. Albans and started working at De Havilland' where she worked on the production line sorting out prototypes for the 416, a civil aeroplane. Later, despite a promise to herself that she would not work on military defence work, she said when everything became amalgamated it was unavoidable if working at BAE systems.

Recalling why she first joined a union, Val discovered that three other male graduates from different universities, who had started work at same time as her, were paid more even though Val had more qualifications and a better degree. She became so angry after the management advised her that due to the 'Equal Pay Act' 1976 she could now have equal pay with



the same colleagues she had worked alongside for two years. Val's response was to join TASS (Technical and Supervisory Staff) where she found she was the only woman in that branch and was sent to all sorts of women's conferences. This was the start of her lifelong union involvement, which included sitting on national Union Committees.

In 1984, Val joined Marconi Avionics, a part of the GEC Consortium, as a Production Line Manager, responsible for 104 workers based on two sites. GEC were unionised with the shop-floor being mainly Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers (AUEW). As a manager Val had to negotiate with trade union representatives, who were mainly members of the Association of Scientific, Technical and Managerial Staffs (ASTMS later called MSF). Val, still an active member of TASS herself, said it used to make her laugh that she had to buoy up and advise the union reps who were supposedly negotiating on behalf of their members with her in a managerial role, as this was the wrong way around.

In these years, Val was still racing around the countryside after work and always in her own time, organising Regional Women's Conferences

on behalf of the union and working with the Labour Party trying to get more women into Parliament. Surprisingly no-one ever suggested Val might consider standing as a Labour candidate, and she never thought of doing it either.

Val became Secretary of the North Thames Area MSF/AMICUS and then Regional President in 1999. She preferred to organise rather than to front as this was a core part of her personality. Val was greatly respected as an excellent organiser and administrator, as well as a tactical thinker. She went around branches encouraging the Union's campaigns at the end of late 1980s, early 1990s, as there were lots of redundancies with car factories closing. There was also an internal purge within the union during the merger with ASTMS and there was a lot of jockeying for positions and general nastiness. Val recalled this was not a nice time. Eventually Val's region, which was left wing, was excluded by restructuring for its continuous voting against the executive. Val came to the conclusion later, that much of the Trade Union leadership had been incorporated and observed that there was more bullying inside the unions than there had been in the work place, from her experience

Val and her first husband split up after they discovered their views on life were opposed. She reflected on how she discovered his purported support did not extend to sharing house-work or making the tea for her after late nights at union meetings. She later married Bill, who she met at Marconi as a colleague and together they fostered Paul, offering a home-life through his early teenage years. Bill, who was made redundant in 1993, became Paul's main carer. When Val retired they moved to the north-east, to live near her Mum and Dad at Tynemouth.

As a lifelong Socialist, Val worked in Women's organisations, anti-war groups and the Labour Party, but mostly in the Trade Union Movement, where she was often the only woman at meetings. She became Regional Secretary for the TASS/MSF in the Milton Keynes area and represented that Region on the union's National Women's Committee as well as at the union's National Conference. Val became Secretary of Tynemouth Branch

Labour Party in the late 1990s but after being a lifelong member, she resigned over the Labour Government's Iraq War. Val went on to found an anti-war group at Whitley Bay with friends, which was possibly the only group to have a Tory, Liberal Democrat and Labour Party member sharing the Chair.

At this time Val also became Secretary of the North East Labour History Group, supported the campaign against privatisation of the local Metro, was a supporter of the Tyne and Wear Left Unity group, helped to form the Socialist choir: 'Making Waves', for which she wrote songs, and helped carry through a local school-based project to campaign for greater youth facilities for local teenagers; all this whilst devoting time to her wider family.

Val joined the National Assembly of Women and in 2006 became its National Secretary, remaining in the post until her cancer prevented her from continuing. She enjoyed representing NAW at the Women's International Democratic Federation in Venezuela in 2007. Val described her work as an engineer, trade union and political activist as fun, complicated, challenging and interesting. However she did reflect about whether she might have been a landscape gardener, and mentioned the lack of early careers advice and feeling she had been caught up in a 'sausage machine' treadmill she could not get off.

Val loved line dancing, meeting up socially with her Post Office colleagues, playing the piano, reading, swimming, dancing with her Dad at a local social club but most of all she loved Paul. At Val's funeral, Paul said he regretted never calling her 'Mum', but she regarded him as her son and saw her grandchild two days before she died last November 2011 aged 58.

Val was a wonderful, loyal, kind, gentle, compassionate woman. One never heard a critical word said about her, only positive comments. She will be missed for her balanced and creative political advice as well as her loving personal support. She stoically fought her cancer and will be remembered and loved by the vast number of colleagues, friends and family for the time she shared with us all. Val was a true Sister.

## INTERVIEW: LEE HALL

### For social justice and a better future

Lee Hall was interviewed by John Charlton on the new production of the classic play. “Close the Coalhouse Door. May 2012.



It is always timely to revive a play about working class people organising and striking to resist draconian infringements on their lives. It seemed very appropriate to remind people of a proud past of struggle and engagement.” This is Lee Hall’s message about this summer’s revival of the 1960s iconic musical play, *Close the Coal House Door*.

It played to full houses at Newcastle in April and early May, Directed by Sam West it then went on national tour. *Coal House* was written by Alan Plater and Sid Chaplin with songs by Alex Glasgow, including the unforgettable ‘When this pub closes’ and ‘The Socialist ABC.’ This new production leaves the original largely intact but adds material by Lee Hall to give it a clear contemporary context. John Charlton talked to Lee Hall about its continued relevance.

The play was revived through the enthusiasm of Sam West. Sam and Lee talked with Sid Chaplin’s son Michael and Max Roberts of the Live Theatre who had directed it in Newcastle twenty years ago. Alan Plater, a good friend to many of the North East theatre community, had died recently and it seemed a good way to honour his memory. Lee says, “It’s also important to register that many ‘artistic’ decisions are not made on ‘artistic’ grounds. It’s a collective endeavour. So many things happen because of relationships, small acts of solidarity and kindness. The theatre is a place where our

journeys are shared. I was very trepidatious about doing anything with the play as it has such a strong folk memory. I thought I could only make it worse so I had to be coaxed into it, mainly by Max.”



*Lee Hall*

### **FOLK MEMORY**

The point about folk memory was certainly borne out in Newcastle. From the start the audience was emotionally involved. Everyone thought they knew the songs their words rippling through the house. Lee was a bit surprised by this audience involvement, “but then they didn’t come to watch a great piece of art. They came to be involved. And that’s what theatre so often fails to offer working class audiences - and it’s something Coal House does in spades.”

Lee says that as he worked with Sam they both soon realised that the play is not a historical pageant, a lesson about the mining industry. “It is more about unionising and strikes, and the incremental progress, as laid out by Alan Plater in the play, that the struggles of one generation often don’t bear fruit until many decades later. It was a strong statement to go back to the very original version in 1968 which, whilst it cavilled at the Wilson Years of ‘rationalisation’, was hopeful and positive about the bigger political project. I also did not want to add a litany of failure to the history of progress. It seemed important to celebrate the century and a half of resistance which preceded the 1984 defeat.”

One problem though was the play’s sexual politics here located in the 1950s rather than 1968. Lee was able “to write up the character of the PhD student who comes into the community. Her politics and perspective allows the play to deal with some more difficult problems and stops our revival simply being an anodyne homage.”



### **A VERY IMPORTANT MODEL**

Although Lee never met Alex Glasgow or Sid Chaplin their influence on him has been enormous. “(Alex) tackles politics with wit and humour, in dialect with such an unusual voice—George Brassens meets Brecht, a Tyneside Wolf Biermann. He has been a very important model. I think his songs are brilliant, moving, unique, learned yet direct, sophisticated yet unpretentious. Sid’s tales must be central to any writer who tackles working class Northern life.”

Lee knew Alan Plater personally. “Growing up in the ‘seventies and ‘eighties it was hard not to absorb his work if you turned on the telly. It was an immensely important tool of education and politicisation. What strikes me now is how much their socialism was just a given, an ordinary yet central part of what they did. *Close the Coal House Door* is an angry play written by very gentle men.”

### **TRADITIONS OF MUSIC HALL**

Lee Hall is best known for three acclaimed productions; the movie and musical *Billy Elliott*, and play, *The Pitmen Painters*. He sees them as very different pieces of work from *Coal House*, though related. “*Coal House* is more knockabout—using the traditions of music hall; an inherently working class art form, to tell the story. *Pitmen* is a straight play but they are essentially asking the same question, using the history of miners and their cultural and political achievements to ask a bigger question about socialism and the state. Both have a sceptical attitude to the Labour Party. *Billy Elliot* owes more to *Coal House*. It’s big, populist, has a musical form, funny sentimental, polemical in turns. What the *Coal House* and its success the first time allowed was space for voices like mine. You could make populist art, for working class people that didn’t need to peddle anodyne politics. Its politics is incredibly important in an age where we are drip fed soporific reactionary nonsense masquerading either as art or entertainment.”

Lee grew up in a working class home in the east end of Newcastle, shipyard and engineering territory. He went to the local comprehensive and was, he says, “fortunate to be taught by a generation of teachers who had been politicised in the early seventies with a strong purpose to inspire kids

like me. I got into theatre at school and took part in the burgeoning Youth Theatre Movement where politicising the kids was a stated aim. Many of the actors I now work with came from these groups so I am still working with people with whom I share a background and politics. I feel very lucky.”

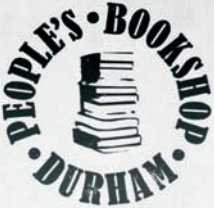
### **PARTISAN ABOUT REGIONALISM**

Billy Elliott and Pitmen Painters have enjoyed great international success including Broadway, New York, a notoriously difficult setting for British regional drama. Lee does not think Coal House would work there. It has such a direct relationship with its audience, originally produced to talk specifically to people with a coal mining history. It would have to be re-written about the struggles of American labour, like the film *Matewan*. Coal House insists it's legitimate to talk about 'our' history in 'our' language. It's partisan about its 'regionalism'. Some might think this stops it being a great play, but that's precisely what makes it a 'great' piece of theatre. I think it's incumbent on all theatre writers to ask 'who is this for?'. The audience is part of the play. It's certainly part of this play because it's telling an untold and uncelebrated story-the working class in the north east.”

### **DIFFICULT DECADES**

It has been a couple of difficult decades for political theatre. Lee says, “ I think if we compare the years in which people like Alan (Plater) were part of our common culture by writing for the telly, I have to say we are living through de-politicised times. The gatekeepers are at best apolitical and we all know what that means. There are people like myself who are still writing within a humanist/socialist tradition but we are thin on the ground. It's clear social mobility and educational opportunity for working class people like me, Alan, Alex or Sid has suffered huge setbacks in the last few decades. The deregulation of the Thatcher years has meant the commercial imperative in culture has swamped the cultural one. However I am not pessimistic. The success of *Pitmen*, *Billy Elliot* and *Close the Coal House Door* shows that there is a great hunger for work about class and from a Socialist perspective.

We live in hugely volatile times and I am very hopeful and certain that this will inspire 'political' or shall we say 'agitational/ oppositional' drama. The rise of women's voices, voices from ethnic minorities are much more part of the furniture than they used to be, but it would be folly not to see that the Left is in disarray. Political art comes out of a political culture - and that is something we are all presumably trying to build. I try to contribute to that by insisting on doing unfashionable work - which hopefully becomes fashionable. Art doesn't change the world directly because we don't have a direct relationship to the world. It is mediated. So I see there is a very real and ever present struggle for hegemony. It will always be a struggle and as artists we keep having to plug away. An important part of art is to remember. It's as important to remember in art as it is to agitate. It's definitely an important part of what Coal House is about, as well as Pitmen or Billy Elliot. But art can also shape sensibilities, capture the 'structure of feeling' as Raymond Williams puts it. These are essential functions of art and have massive influence on politics. But for me learning about art and politics were completely interlinked. I can't understand one without the other. Fundamentally art is an act of labour. It is something material that is made not something mystical. Embodied in art are all sorts of values that are oppositional to Capitalism and although it's easy to be an unwitting apologist for the Capitalist model, it is just as easy to make something which questions, and is oppositional to it."

 <p><i>Independent Local Radical</i></p>	<p><b>BOOKS FOR RADICALS OF ALL AGES</b> <i>Secondhand - Out of Print - Rare</i></p> <p><b>SPECIALISING IN RADICAL POLITICS &amp; TRADE UNION HISTORY</b></p> <p><i>For out of print booksearch &amp; telephone orders:</i> <i>Phone: 0191 384 4399</i> <i>or email: <a href="mailto:info@peoplesbookshop.co.uk">info@peoplesbookshop.co.uk</a></i></p> <p><b>THE ATTIC SADDLERS YARD, 70 SADDLER STREET, DURHAM DH1 3NP</b></p> <p><b><a href="http://WWW.PEOPLESBOOKSHOP.CO.UK">WWW.PEOPLESBOOKSHOP.CO.UK</a></b></p>
---	---

## REVIEWS

### Willie Thompson Reviews Editor

For the reviews in this issue we are making a minor innovation in celebration of the revival in Newcastle of that classic piece of agitprop theatre, 'Close the Coalhouse Door', first performed in 1968. We are including here two reviews, one by Judith McSwaine and the other by Sandy Irvine in addition to the reviews of recently published books of interest to our readers – which include among many aspects of labour history such themes as women's social history, the Shields lifeboats and the Tyne keelmen.

Ariel Hessayson and David Finnegan eds., *Varieties of Seventeenth- and Early Eighteenth-Century Radicalism in Context* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2011) 271pp., ISBN 978-0-7546-6905-0, £65, hbk.

The title says it all or much of it. This collection of essays emerged from a conference 'Rediscovering radicalism in the British Isles and Ireland c.1550-c.1700' held at Goldsmith's College, University of London in 2006. The editors in their introduction struggle to create some sort of thematic coherence from the twelve contributions but what all they demonstrate is that the anachronistic term 'radicalism' unknown in this period has been used by historians to cover a wide variety of responses to specific situations and ideas. Yet in the end this does not really detract from the intrinsic interest of individual essays in the volume.

What they all demonstrate, to varying degrees, is the ways in which the historiography of the 17<sup>th</sup> century has developed since the days when Christopher Hill and A.L. Morton held sway and folk singers equated the Norman Yoke with the English class structure and a Conservative

government. Some of us might say 'more's the pity' but the detail of the research that underpins these essays makes fascinating reading and casts a light into some very dark corners of this intellectually turbulent period. However one defines radicalism, many of the origins of nonconformity both political and religious lie here. No matter how much the monarchy and its attached national church endeavoured to regain its sway the genie could not be forced back into the bottle.

The reviewer of such a diverse collection can only pick out a selection of the points that emerge. Two of them are closely linked, the crucial importance of differing shades of 17<sup>th</sup> century religious belief in shaping the political views of groups and individuals and the rise of a print culture based on the availability of a vernacular version of the scriptures. There is an excellent example of this in Mario Caricchio's study of the publications of the London bookseller Giles Calvert (chap.3)

But what also seems to emerge is how localised the pockets of so called 'radicalism' may have been. Possibly the metropolitan and Oxbridge emphasis of many of the contributions reflects the location of the conference and the research agenda of the host institution. Yet the inclusion of excerpts from the correspondence of two Leeds-born Presbyterians (chap.10) suggests that the study of provincial centres of population in the period might offer some different or comparable contexts for the emergence of 'radical' attitudes and activities (perhaps something that our Popular Politics group might like to consider)

Although not necessarily directly related to some of the other historical notions of 'radicalism' one of the most thought provoking essays in the book is Jim Smyth's 'Empire-building: the English Republic'(chap.6) which examines the idea of England as the elect nation entrusted with a divine mission to create an Empire of God-fearing people, presumably in anticipation of the second coming and starting with Scotland and Ireland. The other study that touches on Ireland is the correspondence alluded to above when although both originally from Leeds one of the protagonists is based in London, the other mainly in Dublin but briefly

in Amsterdam. The two men emerge not as ideological radicals but as generally broad-minded Presbyterians navigating their way through the shifting attitudes of their contemporaries in church and state as the Restoration settlement gave way to a period of constitutional realignment and limited toleration of religious dissent.

The toleration of philosophical if not political dissent in these decades also provides the subtext for a study of the library of the wealthy freethinking Essex bibliophile Anthony Collins (chap.11) a correspondent of John Locke and continental rationalists who, despite his apparently deist or even atheistic private views, yet retained the access to public office denied to those without influential connections.

At first sight, granted the title and express intentions of the compilers, it is difficult to see any good reason for the inclusion of a piece on William Hone, the radical bookseller and political satirist tried in 1817 for blasphemy ostensibly on the grounds that he had republished three of John Wilkes' parodies of the Book of Common Prayer. This was during the time of government paranoia in the face of the popular unrest in the years of economic hardship following the end of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic wars. The rather tenuous link with the previous chapters seems to be Hone's interest in the Levellers and some of the ideas that emerged from the 17<sup>th</sup> century debates but one suspects that the real reasons for the chapter's inclusion were that its author is a considerable authority on the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the need to show continuity between the this period and later more widely recognised radicalism. However for what it's worth it is the chapter which will the most readily commend the book to those involved in our Popular Politics project.

This review does not pretend to cover all the pieces included in the compilation which will be of more or less interest to individual readers but in the aggregate the overall impact is to make one very wary of the indiscriminate use of the term 'radicalism' in whatever context.

*Win Stokes.*

John Bohstedt, *The Politics of Provisions: Food riots, moral economy and market transition in England, c 1550-1850* (Farnham, Ashgate, 2010), 324 pp. ISBN 978-0-7546-6581-6, £65, hbk.

‘We’d rather be hanged than be starved’. These words turn up countless times in different accents in over three centuries of desperate protest over food shortage. Countless poor people suffered both. English history is strewn with the corpses of labouring men and women who fought back when faced with the twin violence of deprivation of basic necessities and the callous reactions of their masters.

John Bohstedt places the struggle over sustenance as a central dynamic in the shaping of Britain between the 16<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. He analyses nearly 800 riots, noting multiple bunches at several moments, including some 45 in 1740-41 to which he gives detailed attention. Unsurprisingly there was a coincidence between riot incidence and dearth producing hunger though he avoids any crude determinism. Every period of dearth did not result in riot and everyone did not riot as a response to dearth. The poorest and most destitute tended not to riot, the most prominent rioters being ‘masterless men’ and artisans. Food riots were largely an urban phenomenon and different town histories had different outcomes. Whilst it is true that the penalties for riot could be death by hanging, state murder was not inevitable. Neither was it meted out routinely or entirely arbitrarily. To this there were exceptions. In the 1790s against a background of war and revolution arrests were more frequent and the number of executions rose steeply. More common was a field of negotiation and compromise. People would riot, the governors would ‘find’ grain supplies, impose temporary bans on exports and bend the law. Alleged ringleaders might end on the gallows but could suffer lesser but still serious penalties; public whipping, transportation or short prison sentences. Many were even acquitted in a form of drama, the penultimate act taking place in that grisly theatre, the court room.

All of this may suggest a re-working of E P Thompson’s concept of ‘a

moral economy.’ John Bohstedt generously acknowledges his own debt to Thompson’s luminous essay of 1971, ‘The moral economy of the English crowd in the Eighteenth Century’ from which almost every voyager in this field of research takes his starting point. However he finds that the master’s explanation for crowd and elite behaviour is not adequate. In the author’s depth analysis of such a mass of material and that used by numerous others in local studies since 1971 the concept of the overarching moral economy does not hold up. He finds that very few participants in crowd activity cite even coded versions of a belief in an albeit hideously unequal shared polity beyond ‘they’ve got the grain, they should let us have some or we’ll take it.’ At most times passive acceptance of the state of things prevailed on both sides. In times of dearth that passivity might be replaced by desperate, though sometimes remarkably co-ordinated acts of resistance on the one hand and a wide variety of responses on the other. In the later phases of Bohstedt’s narrative the governors’ attitudes were as likely to be imbibed from the cups of Adam Smith or Thomas Malthus as any moral community sense or even Christian charity.

### **THREE PHASES**

He argues for three phases of roughly one hundred years in length.. In the first, the Tudor and Jacobean periods the struggle took place in largely local markets where rulers tried to impose stability in times of dearth by combining the remarkable Books of Orders with crude violence against dissent. The former was a policy involving detailed local surveys of corn by jurors and justices of the peace with arrangements for the weekly supply of the open market which might include the legal restriction of exports. In the second phase influenced by Britain’s widening world role some restrictions on free market development existed (the Old Poor Law) alongside a creeping free market in which the poor had to take their chance often unprotected by elite interventions. In the third phase elites largely abandoned lingering paternalistic responses to market swings using naked violence to repress the desperate responses of the hungry.



It's a very complex story which the author weaves with great dexterity backed with a sometimes overwhelming volume of detailed examples from different parts of Britain. The weight of evidence is from the south and west though the author is careful to question the degree to which the evidence is research driven. In other words does the thinness of evidence presented from the north indicate a truly different incidence of resistance or might further research suggest a more equal distribution?

Nevertheless readers of this journal will be eager to know what evidence there is of activity in the region. In the author's first century there are no reported activities. The Pilgrimage of Grace (1536) and its very bloody aftermath of over 200 executions, being a religious rising, falls outside his project. In the second century we have the Newcastle Guildhall Riots of 1740. The colliers of Heaton and Byker and the iron men of Winlaton combined to take corn and burned the Borough Records in the Guildhall to boot. They were faced by a hastily assembled militia of the local elite led by the Mayor Matthew Ridley on horseback. Some men ended up in court but perhaps the key point is that rioting worked. The same elite 'found' corn to stave off starvation.

In the same year a crowd of Stockton women, '[swore] that they will die before any corn shall be exported for that they had better be killed or hanged than they be starved.' In 1795, in the harshest year of dearth during the war, Stockton people were on the march again but also those in Durham, Sunderland, Cowpen and Blyth and Tweedmouth. There was further action in 1800 in Houghton le Spring and Newcastle. The last food riot in the region may have been at Sunderland in 1816.

The struggle over provisions seemed to have petered out after about 1820 by which time the first working class had been made and struggle passed from the direct environment of the market place and corn dealers to the factory and mine and the battle for the wages to pay for food.

*John Charlton*

Jennifer Newby, ***Women's Lives: Researching Women's Social History, 1800-1939***. (Barnsley: Pen and Sword Family History, 2011) 184 pp. ISBN 184884368-2, 12.99, pbk.

It is difficult to think, nearly forty years after Sheila Rowbotham first published *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight against it*, that a book like this one is necessary. However it is certainly true that working class women's lives are not very visible in history writing today and this is true even for the North East Labour History Society; it is thought-provoking to see that in the last five years of North East History fewer than a third of the articles focus on women's experiences.

*Women's Lives. Researching Women's Social History* is one of a series designed to enable those researching family history to go beyond the public records and the census, which often throw tantalisingly little light on women's lives; it gives researchers some tools to put flesh on the bones of women in their families so they are not defined solely as daughters, wives and mothers. One of its great strengths is the way it foregrounds the experiences of working class women and reminds us that most of them worked because they had to, although sometimes their male colleagues complained that 'wives should be in their proper sphere at home, instead of being dragged into competition for livelihood' (Henry Broadhurst at the 1877 Trade Union Council Conference)

After a general introduction, *Women's Lives* has chapters on women who worked in domestic service (in 1931 one in four of working women, which is an astonishing figure and is presumably based on the census though no reference is given), on the land, in factories and sweatshops. It also has chapters on Middle Class and Aristocratic women as well as one on 'Criminal Women'

Each chapter has an overview of the sector followed by lists of sources. The chapter on women in domestic service looks at how women entered service, sometimes from as young as seven in a 'petty place', the range of

work they did, the wages and conditions including the almost complete lack of privacy and a private life. The list of sources for women in domestic service includes apprenticeship registers pre-1844, workhouse admission and discharge registers, newspaper advertisements as well as estate records and parliamentary reports. Using this list as a starting point, it may be possible to track a specific domestic servant or research work in the sector more generally.

The women emerge as strong and resourceful in conditions that were usually unremittingly difficult. However it must be remembered that for at least the first half of this period few of the women were literate, so their stories have been recorded by middle class writers, who were broadly sympathetic to their situations but probably glossed over some of the exploitation.

The focus of *Women's Lives* is on women's social history and for the most part their political voices are not heard. There are only a few references to women and trade unions, no entry under the Chartists or co-operatives in the index, and the ones to women's suffrage refer only to the chapter on middle class women. There is however a useful 'Timeline of Key Events in Women's Social History' which does include reference to wider political and social events.

The popularity of history research of different kinds has never been higher as shown locally by the success of the NE Popular Politics Project and this book will be a useful resource in particular for novice researchers. It should be a starting point for extending our knowledge of the wide range of occupations in which women from the north east worked.

*Sarah Rennie*

Joseph M Fewster, *The Keelmen of Tyneside: Labour Organisation and Conflict in the North-East Coal Industry 1660-1830* (Woodbridge, Boydell Press, 2011), 222 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1843836322, £60, hbk.

Most Tyneside children will have sung and possibly learned the words of The Keel Row as part of the repertoire of traditional songs in school music lessons. Few will have learned who the keelmen were beyond the plain association of boats that carried coal on the River Tyne. Today the word survives in a pub's name on the river-side at Newburn, the new cycle route, the Keelmen's Way, stretching from Newburn along the river bank to South Shields and the Keelmen's Hospital on City Road.

For at least three hundred years till 1850 the keelmen were the most numerous, most visible and most contentious group of working people in the north east of England. They numbered up to 900 men on the Tyne and 700 on the Wear. They were in semi-permanent conflict with their masters, the hostmen and fitters (coal dealers), they were highly visible in a distinctive black jacket, yellow waistcoat, bell bottomed trousers and black hard hat and ribbon and a noisy and rambunctious presence at festivals and fairs. They occupied the Sandgate District at the eastern end of the Quayside just beyond the town wall and from 1701 had their own institution the Keelmen's Hospital. In a thirty year period from 1820 they almost completely disappeared leaving only their edifice and their song.

Their centrality to the development of the coal trade on which North East fortunes were primarily built has long needed a comprehensive narrative. In recent times historians like David Rowe (1968, 1969) and Eric Forster (1970) have examined parts of their story but only one, Joseph Fewster has devoted a life-time's work to the story. This is no casual phrase. Fewster first published a paper on the subject in 1957 based on his Durham University BA dissertation and here 55 years later is a comprehensive study. He spent his working life as an archivist in the Durham University Library and this work bears all the meticulous attention to detail of his profession. The often elusive story is built

with skill and authority from an array of fragments collected from an astonishing range of documents: state papers, borough reports, court reports, family papers, personal correspondence, memoirs, and early local histories. It is possible to imagine those files growing fatter by the year. The keelmen truly have their remembrancer!

The narrative is arranged round the series of strikes. In 1633 after a semi-riot in town it was recorded that the working population was ever 'apt to every pretence and colour of grievance into uproar and seditious mutinye.' This is the earliest example of the tenor of words spoken by scions of the town's elite as the keelmen clashed with them in 1654, 1671, 1710, 1719, 1738, 1740, 1744, 1750, 1767, 1771, 1791, 1794, 1803, 1809, 1819 and 1821.

## **THE CIRCUMSTANCES**

The book begins with an illuminating discussion of the circumstances in which the keelmen arrived on the Tyne (there is less detail on the Wear's keelmen) and became such a significant body of workers. It is part of the story of winning coal and delivering to the markets of the world from the late middle ages. Most of the early coal pits were situated on the banks of the Tyne, Team and Derwent all west of the town centre and its stone bridges. Before effective dredging was possible in the mid-19th century it was navigable for only relatively small craft (colliers) and then just to the Tyne Bridge by the Guildhall. The coal had to be brought down river on low draft barges (keels) which could carry up to 21 tons of small coals. As pits were sunk east of the bridge river conditions made docking difficult. In both cases the sea-going colliers had to be loaded off-shore. The method was with shovel over the side of the ship from the keel-boat.

The boats appear to have been owned and supplied by the fitters. Members of the powerful Hostman's Guild, they were the middle men between the coal owners and the ship-master. Fitters (Hostmen) were powerful figures who dominated the town council right down to the Municipal Corporations Act of 1835. They were also the core of the

magistrate's bench. Lord Eldon, perhaps England's most reactionary Lord Chief Justice ever, was born, John, son of William Scott, fitter and front-line adversary of the keelmen in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> Century.

Conflict was almost inevitable. There was a range of potential issues inherent in the system: the price per load, the size of the load, the quality of the load, the time taken and its consequences. The latter might result in a missed tide and a keelman unable to return to base and unable to load the following day. Theoretically he should get a fee but in practice fitters were reluctant to pay. There were several other issues including the means to create a welfare system for injured, sick or aged keelmen and their families. The resolution of many issues revolved round the state of the trade. High demand for coal strengthened the keelmen's bargaining power. It was such a set of circumstances that contributed to the levy on loads of coal which led to the building of the Keelmen's Hospital at the start of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, just as dips in trade could undermine this remarkable local mini-welfare state.

The issue however which eroded the keelmen's power and ultimately their very existence was 'new' technology, namely the introduction of spouts and the arrival and dissemination of steam power. Spouts were chutes located at the staithes used to pour coal directly into the colliers. Increasingly from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century the coal was delivered to the staithes by rail, the trucks pulled by horse till the advent of steam. Steam tugs came to the river after 1815 with the capacity to pull many keels without the aid of keelmen. These events were central to the last series of disputes including what was to be the final defeat of the keel-men in 1821.

## **LITIGATION**

The 1821 strike was not literally the end of keelmen's struggles. Extraordinarily, the failure to exert their industrial power led to their last ditch attempt at survival; the legal avenue. It is a recognition of the critical importance of the coal trade to the prosperity of the British economy that the keelmen's issue was fought out in the High Court by two of

the most celebrated lawyers of the period. Putting the keelmen's case was Brougham, Whig politician and the most prominent liberal lawyer of the day. The fitters retained Sir John Scarlett, of Jamaican planter stock, friend of Eldon and John Graham Clarke, the Newcastle West India merchant. The keelmen were advised that they could have no hope of winning if they focussed upon spouts destroying their livelihood. The chosen strategy was to argue that the accumulation of staites with spouts reaching out into the river seriously obstructed river traffic. Like a chapter from *Bleak House*, the case went on in all for almost a decade. Fewster tells the intricate story in very accessible detail. The weakest point in the keelmen's argument was that no ship owner supported them, a point exploited by Scarlett. The conclusion was almost foregone. Inconvenience alone could not stop the march of technical progress. Throughout the 1820s, with the court case a plangent back drop, more and more spouts were installed and more and more steam tugs hauled coal barges. The keelmen were doomed. By 1840 there were only a handful left working at tricky points on both rivers. Dredging and river widening projects settled the mater completely by 1860. Many of the keelmen fell into destitution whilst the youngest and fittest took other jobs on the river or moved away to the Thames making them 'pioneers' in a drift south to be faced by generations of north eastern workers.

Fewster's account touches upon on the issue of trade unionism. In a carefully argued chapter he places the keelmen firmly among the pioneers of trade unionism on account of their relationship to their employers, their persistent attempts at combination, their interest in welfare provision but perhaps most of all in placing collective withdrawal of their labour as the centre of their strategies rather than riot and destruction, though in one of their bitterest struggles and one of the few in which other groups of workers, pitmen and iron workers, the Guildhall was sacked and town records destroyed.

The author covers what the book's title says it will do. Its comprehensive detail would make it difficult for future writers to say anything original

about keelmen's industrial struggle but the reader might like to know more about some other aspects of their lives. We learn little about the character of their accommodation, their diet, their education, the women in their lives, their involvement in festivals, their religious affiliation (there were over 10 Presbyterian chapels in their part of town), and their politics. Fewster states, perhaps implausibly, like David Rowe and Norman McCord, that whilst on strike in autumn 1819 they showed no interest in the great reform demonstration which brought over 40,000 people onto the Town Moor. In such a massive turn out the opposite presumption is at least as likely to be true.

However none of this detracts from what is a superb monument to a forgotten group of working people who played a vital part in the development of Tyneside's most important wealth generator, King Coal and not least its reputation of a place where workers were never reluctant to stand up for their rights even when odds were stacked against them.

*John Charlton*

Ellen Phethean (ed.) ***Hook into the Past: The Story of Mat Making in North East England*** (Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2011), 112 pp. ISBN 978-1-85795-207-0, £9, pbk.

When I was a kid we had a clippy mat. Our 'clippy mat' was oval in shape, had two tones of blue in the border with a kaleidoscope of colours making up the central panel. One of our Nanas made it during the War, I think. It weighed a ton and my Mam would 'dadda' it every Monday. Our clippie mat adorned the kitchen of our two up and two down terraced cottage during the early 1960's, not that we appreciated, it for this was a moment of modernisation and change, a time of fitted carpets, cars and even foreign holidays. We had none of these things and our clippie mat reminded us that we had not yet joined Harold Wilson's modern world.



Clippy mats and Proddy mats were made from rags, cut into strips and held together by hessian into which one end of the cloth was pushed (clippy) or looped (proddy). These kind of mats were an almost entirely working class form, clippy and proddy maps were a sign of poverty, they were not respectable and the art of making them was not recognised or celebrated (least of all in the numerous needle work magazines of the Victorian period) until long after the Second World War. Yet paradoxically these furnishings represented many core Victorian values, thrift, family life and home and home making for example. But to the people who made them they were more than that, and more than something to put on the floor, to add warmth and colour to drab surroundings, for mat making was an outlet for frustrated artistic aspiration ( perhaps too much time has been spent studying the artistic forms working class people rarely practiced, writing and painting for example, and not enough on those that they did, such as mat making); a tabula rasa for the celebration of family and community and an opportunity for association and socialisation.

This book illustrates all of these things well, often in graphic detail. We are instructed in the arts and crafts, history, technology and the truly astonishing aesthetic of the clippy and proddy mat. Photographs, many of them stunning, and reminiscences, many moving and revealing, held together by the hessian of the subject matter, structure the book, and it works. This is one of the most successful examples of 'people's history' projects I have ever read. The contributors, not least Ali Rhind and Rachel Phillimore , produced this wonderful work by way of supporting patients at the Northern Centre for Cancer Treatment. I admire them deeply. Buy the book.

*Stuart Howard*

Marshall Hall, *Newcastle between the Wars – Byron Dawson’s Tyneside* (Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2011) 72pp. ISBN 978 1 857952 02 5 £7.99, pbk.

## **BYRON’S LIFE**

This is another publication from the City of Newcastle upon Tyne Libraries & Information Service, which consists of a brief biography of Newcastle artist Byron Dawson from his friend and pupil art historian Marshall Hall. The rest of the book provides a fascinating glimpse of street scenes of Newcastle produced by Byron between 1925 and 1939 for the *North Mail* and *Newcastle Chronicle*.

Byron was born in Banbury, Oxfordshire in 1896, sadly his mother died in 1906 so in 1910 aged 14 he moved to Newcastle to be looked after by his mother’s sister.

By 1925 he was working as an assistant master of painting at Armstrong College, where he met the man who launched his career William Redpath the editor of the *North Mail* and *Newcastle Chronicle*. His first drawing for the paper a study of ‘Bird and Fish market’ appeared in the paper on Friday October 9<sup>th</sup>.

From then until 1939 Byron sketched virtually everything that Newcastle offered, as a result private commissions & exhibits at the Royal Academy followed. However it was Redpath’s decision to leave the *North Mail*, as a result of a disagreement with owner Lord Kemsley that signalled the subsequent decline in both his output and health.

He converted many of his black and white sketches into water colours, but by 1955 his work consisted of occasional views of his favourite subjects, Durham and Newcastle Cathedrals.

When the author met him in 1956 he was struggling both artistically and financially, so Marshall became his pupil and assistant, helping him to mount his water colours. By this time he was sleeping in his studio in Saville Row and was increasingly plagued by poor health.

In 1965 he was helped to move to Plummer Tower, though a year later he was so ill that he was moved to the Wooley Sanatorium near Hexham where sadly he died 2 years later, probably of TB.

## **BYRON'S PICTURES OF NEWCASTLE**

The rest of the book consists of sketches and watercolours of Newcastle annotated by the author to clarify what was illustrated and what if anything remains today. As someone who moved to Newcastle I was fascinated and a little saddened at what we have lost since the inter war years.

I was a Newcastle United supporter in the late 60's and '70 and stood in the old Gallowgate End, which was remarkably like his late 1930's watercolour of 'St. James's Park'

Equally his picture of the 'Bigg Market' in 1936, took me back to my initial, not very successful attempts to be a public speaker. The Bigg Market was Newcastle's Hyde Park Corner. The Communist Party had a portable soap box, which was stored in the Old George pub and brought out on Sunday nights in the late '60's. I remember my baptism of fire in September 1968 when unusually there were larger than normal crowds and trying to convince the audience that British Communists supported the Dubcek government, unlike our stance in 1956 over Hungary. A photo of the Bigg Market in April 1930 shows Unemployed Marchers listening to speeches. By the mid '70's Bigg Market had lost its voice, together with the Old Town Hall and become partying centre of the 'toon'.

The sketch of the Northumberland County Council building next to the Castle brought back other memories, I worked on the 10th floor, though the nearby Bridge Hotel (sadly not illustrated) brings back warmer memories of working class struggle in the '70's and '80's. In the '70's the Quayside Sunday Market was still a magnet for bargains

The author uses quotes from Jack Common's 'Kiddars Luck' to bring to life the atmosphere of the Bigg Market and Fish Market, together with 'The Ampersand' in which he describes, 'the Ouseburn wound like the

sloughed-off skin of a yellow snake among abattoirs and factories and cobbled streets, past brick ruins and village rows' under Byker Bridge. This is a fascinating evocation of a Newcastle sadly much changed in the past 30 years and well worth reading.

*Steve Manchee*

Sandy Hobbs and Willie Thompson, ***Out of the Burning House: Political Socialization in the Age of Affluence***, (Newcastle, Cambridge Scholars Press, 2011), 166 pp., ISBN 13: 978-1-4438-2858-1, £34, hbk.

The authors of this book were students at Aberdeen University in the late 1950s and early 1960s; one immediately afterwards worked as a teacher in Glasgow while the other pursued research in Dundee. Both spent time in the Labour Party Young Socialists (one in Paul Foot's branch in Glasgow) at a time when that organisation was alive with political debate. Thereafter, in party membership terms, they moved in different directions. One, the historian Willie Thompson, joined the Communist Party in 1962 and remained an active member until it disbanded itself in 1991. Sandy Hobbs, a psychologist, was involved in the New Left, co-founding the Aberdeen Left Club with Ken Alexander, and was then a member of the International Socialists for two years; subsequently he was active in general campaigns. Their book is a joint account of those early years and a reflection on what may have contributed to their political formations and roads travelled.

Each author provides, in turn, chapters on their own background, university years, and some key political events for them. One such was the Glasgow Woodside by-election of 1962; on that occasion the Labour prospective parliamentary candidate had first appeared to be a CND supporter but, once selected by the constituency, quickly backtracked to meet the requirements of the Labour hierarchy. There are chapters in which

they look back and reflect on events and their own development. The material includes letters and other discussions between the two at different times, and some of their articles in the university journal from the period.

What makes these autobiographical accounts of any interest to a wider audience? The clue lies in the title: they are reflections of a wider trend, that of political socialization at a time of affluence. Neither of the authors came from a political background, their university city was not impoverished or marked by radical political activity, and at that time young students, a small elite in Britain then, could take future careers for granted. The stimulus for both of them came from international rather than domestic events: the debates about Hungary, the potential for reform in the Soviet Union, Suez, the danger of nuclear war, and activity in CND. In this of course they were not alone.

They recognise that a lot can hang on contingent events and developments, such as who you chance to meet. If Willie, like Sandy, had known some of the CP rebels of 1956 would he have taken a different route? If Sandy had not experienced the atmosphere of the left around the I.S. as unpleasant and sectarian, would his activism have remained channelled in a political party? These contingencies are factors in political socialization and it is useful to see them discussed.

In Glasgow Willie found the eccentric Socialist Party of Great Britain to be active, and the outer fringe of Trotskyism was represented too by an outfit calling itself 'The Left Fraction of the Fourth International in Opposition'. They dominated Govan Young Socialists and, during the Cuban Missile Crisis, looked forward to nuclear war because it would bring forward the world revolution with speed and certainty. More seriously, it will be difficult for younger readers to appreciate that during that Crisis there were many on the left at least who believed that a nuclear exchange was a matter of 'when' not 'if'. Perhaps more detail and discussion about the mental atmosphere of that time would have been useful here.

One of the appendices is an article from 1960 written by Eva Foote and Sandy Hobbs about women's equality and the societal obstacles to

it. This provides a particularly interesting example of what was being debated before the modern women's movement is popularly supposed to have begun, and certainly before there was a sense of modern feminism as a movement. These documents – others include Willie Thompson's attack on the right-wing Moral Rearmament movement – offer some objective examples of how their political thought was developing and must have been useful pegs in assembling their recollections.

Photographs and illustrations could have added much to the book but, unfortunately, they would also have added much to the cost. Therefore the book uses contemporary letters and articles without accompanying them with material from any photo albums the authors may have kept.

The authors state that journalistic accounts of the sixties like Dominic Sandbrook's *'Never Had It So Good'* are London-dominated and never mention, and could never explain, why for example in the early sixties the Communist Party was recruiting well and for a time recovered the membership numbers it had lost following its support of the suppression in Hungary. The authors believe that they have not set out to offer a rebuttal of accounts like Dominic Sandbrook's but in a sense they have. Those interested in an alternative 'take' on the sixties and one from well outside the metropolis will find much to absorb them here. Willie Thompson's contributions in particular often use a dry humour that I found entertaining. Both authors are aware of the potential pitfalls in using autobiographical material to explain political developments, but *Out of the Burning House* demonstrates how useful that material can be.

*Don Watson*

Martin Bashforth, *The 11<sup>th</sup> Durham Light Infantry: In Their Own Names* (Amberley Publishing, 2011), 288 pp. ISBN10: 1445602652, £14.99, pbk.

The fact that the 11<sup>th</sup> DLI was a pioneer rather than a fighting battalion give a special gloss to this World War narrative. That is, the men of the DLI built trenches (time permitting), fixed barbed wire, laid mines and so on. Consequently, though the list of casualties at the end of the book might tend to belie this, attrition rates as they were called were much lower than for the ranks of the infantry. This meant that battle honours for the regiment were relatively meagre consisting of a handful of DSOs and Military Crosses most of which were earned in three main battles: Guillemont (1917), Cambrai (1917), and the March German offensive in the last year of the war. Most casualties tended to occur when the 11<sup>th</sup> were obliged to drop the pioneering pro-tem and perform infantry shifts when circumstances required.

The big questions were probably the 'who' and 'whence' ones. Recruitment, reflecting diminishing job opportunities in the North East, was heavily working class and very much from mining backgrounds. Add to this the narrow geographical provenance of recruits being drawn almost entirely from Northumberland and Durham and a picture emerges of fierce class and residential solidarity. At least this was the case in the early stages of the war before death and injury forced the 11<sup>th</sup> to recruit from wider Northern outposts. The class background of officers was predictably more layered. Some came from Army stock; others were from the various professions and from middle class business families. Being middle class was often not adequate to propel recruits (graduates even) into the officer class if the parental social class did not make the grade. It was not until much of the officer class had been decimated that the advantage that social background had over elite education, whereby a public school recruit would trump a mere university graduate, diminished.

Bashforth attempts to answer the question of why anyone, officers or rankers, would want to join in the horrors of the Western Front. Certainly

the daunting initial casualty rates must have been a deterrent and would eventually necessitate conscription but motives still remained complicated. Officers might respond to the call of Empire and the responsibilities of social rank and a certain, if short lived, sense of adventure. The Northern working class, slow to join the emerging Labour Party, might also have responded to the quite recent imperial strains but were more likely to have been driven by family poverty, peer pressure and a sense of duty. Attempts to persuade schools in the North East to celebrate the recently invented Empire Day were extremely patchy and could not really be claimed as a major factor in rallying the workers to fight for King and country; as is the case with Afghanistan today. Furthermore, membership of the Territorials would provide a natural if unexpected route to the trenches. Above all, the 'Oh What a Lovely War' explanation for all of this was probably overstated given that recruitment campaigns might flourish in one town but not another, evidence of a somewhat typically perfunctory outlook to turning ploughshares into spears. Although Joan Littlewood's *bête noir* Lord Kitchener raised the tempo of recruitment somewhat and realised that the Terriers could be his angels in marble, war enthusiasm was in reality relatively muted and Darlington in particular was labelled unpatriotic and apathetic.

Further evidence of this restraint lay in the poignant attempt by some recruits to limit their service to three years only after which they could be discharged. Whether such a clause could be enforced is open to doubt but in any case most such signatories would have perished long before three years had passed. A parallel venture was the Derby Scheme designed to fill the gap between a faltering recruitment and the looming conscription by recruiting men in reserve who probably believed unwisely that the war would be over before they (some quarter of a million!) would ever be pressed into service. Needless to say Lord Derby's reservists, never as popular with any rank as volunteers or conscripts, were quickly measured for uniforms and found themselves at the front.

Meanwhile the 11<sup>th</sup> DLI were being augmented by a much more



heterogeneous intake and morale was never the same again. Bashforth points out that in general the conversion of civilians into soldiers was achieved with a large degree of success. Apart from obvious evidence of misfits and AWOL specialists, courts martial were rare and most rank and file soldiers called upon the occupational discipline and trade union solidarity that would ease their absorption, at least in the early days, into military routines.

Bashforth is especially adept in marrying personal and battlefield material. The latter documents in great detail the advances and retreats, the futile tactics, the individual courage and resilience. Much of this one will be tempted to skim over in favour of the documentary accounts of particular lives. We learn a great deal about a handful of soldiers trying to put the best possible gloss for the benefit of loved ones at home on their grim, often arbitrary experiences. Of course we then read of the telegram from the War Office and inscription on the war memorials and recall that although the 11<sup>th</sup> DLI was not a front line battalion relatives of those who served and died with it experienced as much grief as soldiers who might be said to have fewer chances of survival. Oddly enough the bureaucracy of death and commemoration was handled with a high degree of efficiency and some tact and names would where possible be recorded on an appropriate memorial at home and abroad and meagre belongings would be returned to the families who, however, now fought their own battles to get the sort of compensation that was essential but never enough.

Bashforth's final summing up serves up a couple of points that could resonate as contentious. The war itself was not simply as pointless and wasteful as the counter culture account would have it. German militarism had to be resisted and this resistance and its heroic interludes have led to a volume of remembrance which some find distasteful but is probably justified in allowing the directly bereaved some degree of resolution.

*Roger Hall*

Stephen Landells, ***Rescues in the Surf: the story of the Shields lifeboats 1789-1939*** (Tyne Bridge Publishing in association with Tyne & Wear Archives and Museums, 2010)

ISBN: 9781857951493, 296pp.illus., £12.99, pbk.

The North and South Shields lifeboats run by the locally based Tyne Lifeboat Institution until largely supplanted by the technologically more advanced RNLI craft in the late 1930s were the means of saving an estimated 4000 seamen's lives in the course of their 150 years history.

The 'surf' in the title is the key to their significance.

The mouth of the Tyne at the end of the eighteenth century was a hideously dangerous stretch of tidal water with the Herd Sands on the south side and the Black Midden rocks on the north and a shifting sandbar at the entrance with a minimum depth of water at low water of only 7ft. In the winter months with the prevailing winds from the North East or South East sailing vessels attempting to enter or leave the Tyne were at the mercy of the surf which threatened either to engulf them or cast them onto the rocks or the sandbank. As the coal trade expanded and colliers grew larger the complex system of loading at sea from keels evolved but many boats still needed to get into the river. The Tyne pilots, keelmen and offshore fishermen provided a reservoir of men skilled in negotiating the dangers of the river mouth but not equipped with the type of craft that in addition to a dozen or so oarsmen could accommodate those being rescued without capsizing and be sufficiently manoeuvrable to pull alongside a wrecked vessel in stormy conditions.

This is the story of the development and operation of such boats, of those who manned them and the rescues they effected. But it is not just an account of constructional ingenuity and personal heroism Stephen Landells also considers the administrative, organisational and financial problems that had to be dealt with and the effects of the inertia of the Corporation of Newcastle which had legal control of the river and benefited from the duties and tolls imposed on shipping but until forced

by public pressure to do so made little attempt to improve navigation at its mouth.

It was a committee of the Coal Trade meeting at Lawe House on the cliff at South Shields directly overlooking the river mouth that in 1789, after witnessing the crew of a wrecked collier brig perish only 300 yards from shore, took the initiative of offering a prize of 2 guineas for the design of a boat capable of operating in heavy surf. This was the beginning. The two contenders were William Wouldhave the somewhat eccentric self taught inventor who subsequently became parish clerk at St Hilda's South Shields and Henry Greathead a ship's carpenter turned boat builder of the town who both submitted models for testing. Neither was accepted but the committee laid down criteria based on features of both and by the end of the year Greathead's yard had produced a boat which was first put into service in a storm on 30 Jan. 1790. This became known as the 'Original'. But the Committee was concerned that the north bank of the river had no such provision. South Shields was a town of considerable affluence, North Shields less so. However most of the land there was held by the Duke of Northumberland and it was he who funded the North Shields boat and also provided other amenities for the seamen of the town. This second boat, also built by Greathead, was named Northumberland. The debate about whether Wouldhave or Greathead invented the first Tyne lifeboat continues to this day. Greathead became a successful builder of lifeboats but Wouldhave's model had refinements that were subsequently incorporated into the design. The Tyne, the boat now on display at the Pierhead in South Shields was not built by Greathead and the adjacent memorial honours both men

This is only the beginning of an account which as well as providing details of wrecks dealt with by the successive boats and their crews also looks at the provision of the slipways and boathouses that were an essential part of their operation.

It was not until 1850 after Newcastle Corporation had made successive attempts to reinforce its control that the Tyne Improvement Act which

provided for the election of 6 commissioners from Newcastle 3 each from North and South Shields and 2 from Gateshead finally reached the statute book helped as, sadly, such measures frequently are by a lifeboat disaster in the previous year. Proposals that had been in the pipeline for a decade, to dredge the river mouth and construct piers to protect it were now implemented. But the construction period which lasted for the best part of thirty years introduced new hazards and during these years further safeguards in the form of land based Volunteer Life Brigades using rocket launchers and breeches buoys were set up

The surf was not entirely conquered but once the piers were finished the stress was more on rescue offshore where motorised lifeboats replaced rowing boats as ultimately the national organisation, the RNLI, did the Shields volunteers but the ethos still remains and the North East coast is still a very dangerous place for a small craft in a winter storm.

Stephen Landells an ex-lifeboat man himself has provided a vivid picture of just how bad it was in the days when Newcastle grew rich on the coal trade and the Shieldsmen picked up the pieces. He has been well served by Tyne Bridge publishing who as always have produced an elegant well illustrated and well researched volume at a very affordable price.

*Win Stokes*

## **Popular Politics at Northern Stage Theatre**

*Close the Coalhouse Door*, which opened for the first time 44 years ago, was a sell-out then and had to have its run extended five times. This was to accommodate all the folk, including Durham and Northumberland mining communities, who wanted to see it. The 2012 audiences watching Sam West's updated version will be bringing a very different experience to this very North Eastern play. The contemporary context is acknowledged even before we take our seats – a lodge banner in the bar, Keith Pattison's

No Redemption photos of the 1984 Miner's Strike on display and, ominously, a billboard-size poster advertising the film about Thatcher, 'The Iron Lady', dominating the set – a boarded up brick building in a mining town.

However, the soul of the 3-act play is unchanging (to use Plater's own description in the preface to the Bloodaxe Book's 1999 edition of the updated script). It is a lesson in history, class struggle and family ties. I wonder how many North East Popular Politics Project amateur researchers like myself felt it brought to life the feelings, concerns and experiences we have been encountering in the dusty volumes of tracts and pamphlets in the archives – for me there were certainly echoes of the 1842 *Report of The Commission (under the Great Seal) For Inquiring Into The Employment And Condition Of Children In Mines And Manufactories*.

The narrative was structured round a family celebration (the Milburns' wedding anniversary) where the highs and lows of a mining community are re-told through stories of heroes, like Thomas Hepburn, and villains, like Lord Londonderry, but also through family anecdotes and recollections – the sort of valuable information passed down from father to son (in this case grandson). And, like all family get-togethers there are tensions – between the brothers who have taken different paths, the generations and, as the play is set in the 60s, the sexes. However, unlike many family gatherings such as this one, it was peppered with Alex Glasgow's famous songs, including – 'As soon as this pub closes', and 'The Socialist ABC' (John Charlton knows this from beginning to end) which is, of course, the title song. The script is littered with jokes, banter and musical hall humour but, as Lee Hall expressed in a recent interview, 'far from being an exercise in nostalgia, the play is more urgent than ever'.

The reach of the stock exchange, the greed of the bankers and shame of 'empty palaces' while people are homeless and hungry, are alive to us as we live through our own bit of history – the double dip recession, rising unemployment, Etonians in charge, and the challenge to find clean energy sources.<sup>1</sup> The final scene with its reference to the local economy's

reliance on the service sector (aka call centres) with its a largely non-unionised workforce, employed on partial (or even zero hours) contracts, in jobs vulnerable to being exported across the world, leaves us in no doubt – the soul of the piece is unchanged.

When it's run ends at Northern Stage, the play goes on tour to Richmond, Salford, Huddersfield, Guildford, Durham, Oxford and York.

*Judith McSwaine*

### **Theatrical treasure**

*Close The Coalhouse Door* was a bit hit on its first outing in Newcastle in 1968. Written by Alan Plater, using stories by Sid Chaplin and with music by Alex Glasgow, it told in punchy dialogue and moving songs the story of ordinary local people, in this case the mining communities of the North East. Though there had been plays and films that touched on the same material, few were so political and hard-hitting. Perhaps only the 1940 movie *The Stars Look Down*, based on A. J. Cronin's novel of the same title (1935) and set in the pit village of 'Tynecastle', came close. Joan Littlewood had pioneered some of the techniques used by Plater and there is more than an element of music hall.

The play was revived at the Northern Stage in Newcastle in Spring 2012 by director Sam West. Local playwright Lee Hall basically added 'bookends' to update the story. Ironic reference is thus made to the fate of the communities Plater and Chaplin had brought to stage life in the original. Indeed there might have been many in the audience who had no idea what an actual coal mine or mining community was like, such has been the obliteration of what used to be 'King Coal'. The modern audience's world is more likely to be one of office blocks, call centres, shopping malls and cul-de-sac housing estates.

But it is a story worth telling. Indeed it relates the rise of a force that

could be said to have developed quite revolutionary power (it overthrew one government in effect) but which focussed on reforms. By means of flashbacks, the desperate need for such reform is made clear: grinding poverty, brutal working conditions, terrible accidents, swindles like company-owned stores, the mass evictions from company housing. The first flashback tells how a union was first formed and, at various points, the play narrates other significant events in NE mining history. It is largely a story of big defeats and broken promises yet, over time, reforms were nonetheless won, thanks to collective action (as opposed to, say individual self-improvement or charitable measures from the powers-that-be).

These episodes are set in a narrative built around a wedding anniversary in the house of a retired pitman and his wife. There is also a grandson who works down the mine and his brother who has taken the escape route of university, a source of conflict between them. Other characters include the local vicar and an official from the mineworkers' union. It is a situation that is easy to satirise, indeed brilliantly so by the 'Monty Python' team.<sup>1</sup>

Yet Plater and Glasgow managed to put together a story that is informative, moving, witty and, yes, inspiring. Lee Hall's update does them proud, while actors and the production team carry off the whole show in a most lively fashion. The set alone deserves praise.

Thus, in one flashback we encounter 60s Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson. He is used as a platform for some frank observations about what was back-breaking work in filthy conditions. Adversity was, to a considerable extent, the mother of the much praised community spirit of pit villages and even then, as the dialogue spotlights at other moments in the narrative, solidarity was frequently absent. So the audience hears

Wilson waxing lyrical about the 'white heat' of technology and economic modernisation. But, in actuality, no real alternatives were to be provided and, essentially, mining communities were just thrown on the scrap heap.

Lee Hall's additions dramatically capture that fate. Rather than trying

to bolt on whole new episodes, he opts for a much more imaginative device in which... but that would be giving too much away. Hall does indulge himself a little bit too much in his vision of how things might have been. So there is talk of new technology creating 'clean coal', in actuality a complete pie-in-the-sky fantasy. Yet the core points Hall forcefully makes about gross inequality and the utter disregard of our ruling classes for ordinary working people do spotlight the nature of contemporary society under both 'New Labour' and the current ConDem. coalition government.

To be honest, there have been some utterly tedious 'agitprop' productions but that is not the case here. The original play was a treasure and this update has given it a good polish. Outside the auditorium was an exhibition of Keith Pattison's excellent 'No Redemption' photographs of the 1984-5 miners' strike. They too are well worth seeing if you get the chance.

*Sandy Irvine*

1 <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YPSzPGrazPo>

For a critique see <http://neengland.greenparty.org.uk/assets/files/Newcastle%20NL%202012.pdf>, pp.6-8



## SECRETARY'S REPORT 2011 – 2012

### Don Watson

In my Report last year I explained that I had taken over this role at the 2010 AGM due to the illness of the previous Secretary, Val Duncan. We wished Val all the best. It is sad to report that Val lost her battle with cancer in 2011. An appreciation of her political life appears in this issue. Val was one of those people who manage to combine being very efficient with being very pleasant, and as a Secretary of this Society she is a hard act to follow.

At the 2011 AGM Peter Crookston gave a presentation based on his book, *The Pitmen's Requiem*. This was partly an account of Robert Saint, the Hebburn miner, bandleader and animal welfare campaigner who composed the hymn tune *Gresford*. Written to be performed by colliery bands this music commemorating the Welsh mining disaster came to be played every year at the Durham Gala, at individual funerals, and at the formal closure of collieries. The other element of the talk was the demise of the Durham coalfield itself and how former mining communities retain their links with the colliery band culture, and *Gresford*, to maintain their identity.

The mining industry was also the theme of the talk by Lewis Mates in November. This was an exploration of the political influence of industrial unionism and syndicalism in the Durham coalfield before the First World War. At the time these ideas were popular with several important figures in the organised rank and file movements of the mineworkers: George Harvey and Will Lawther being examples.

Natasha Vall analysed developments in the post-war cultural infrastructure of the North East, together with its range of outputs. This was a useful reminder of the role and influence of popular cultural representations and the balance of forces that lie behind them.

2012 is the International Year of Co-operation and to mark this Nigel Todd explained how the Owenites established some substantial educational networks in the region in the 1860s and 70s. These included a school in Wallsend to promote key skills and co-operative values. The co-op movement was also behind house building for its membership. Nigel has written an article based on his talk for this issue of North East History.

At time of writing Mike Greatbach, who is an expert on the social and economic history of the Ouseburn area of Newcastle, is scheduled to talk about the radical politics there during the nineteenth century.

The 'First Tuesday' meetings continue on the first Tuesday of each month at the Tyneside Irish Centre. These are an opportunity for people to present and discuss something that interests them in an informal setting. This can be work in progress, and idea to explore, themes from a working life and so on; they certainly aren't expected to be polished and completed work. Over the last year members of the Popular Politics Project have talked about their activities on several occasions. Kath Connelly, who has written an article on her work for this issue, spoke on her research into an early Co-op project in Sunderland, and Sue King summarised her work on how the Newcastle Dissenters had to establish their own graveyards because of they were marginalised by the established church. The oral history elements of the Project were illustrated by John Stirling and Peter Brabban; John is recording the recollections of local trade union activists and Peter is taping the accounts of people involved in left politics and campaigns in the 1970s and 1980s. Both are keen to ensure that what these voices have to say is not ignored by future historians.

Peter Livsey and Brenda Moreland spoke about their work in the local archives, Brenda in particular describing how she was using original eighteenth and nineteenth century documents, the first time she had done work of this kind. Peter's on-going work concerning eighteenth century radicalism has been represented here in North East History.

John Charlton contributed an overview of the main developments in eighteenth and early nineteenth century radical politics in the region; Peter Brabban used his own family history as a route to explore the links between politics and business in seventeenth century Newcastle.

Outside the Project Tom Vickers from Durham University discussed his proposal for research into patterns of immigration into the North East, and Paul Mayne led a discussion about one of his personal interests, the role of the North East's engineer-entrepreneurs.

The Committee is keen to explore ways of making Society meetings more accessible, for example through the use of digital recording and our website. We would appreciate any ideas – and, more to the point, volunteers – to make this happen.

Both the NELHS and the Project have been represented at local events such as the Sunderland Local History Fair and the workers' history celebration at the Star and Shadow cinema. These can be good opportunities to showcase our work and make new contacts, and we are grateful to everyone who gave some time to run the stalls. In addition John Charlton organised our May Day river cruise and provided the historical commentary during the trip.

Finally I would like to thank all the Committee members who keep the show on the road in several different ways: bringing out North East Labour History, providing refreshments at the AGM, keeping the books, charring meetings and planning future activities. Can I stress that we are an open Committee? If members have any suggestions or would like to do something please get in touch.

**FUTURE MEETING DATES:**

**2012:** Tuesday 13<sup>th</sup> November

**2013:** Monday 18<sup>th</sup> February; Thursday 18<sup>th</sup> April; Thursday 13<sup>th</sup> June;  
Tuesday 17<sup>th</sup> September (AGM)

# NORTH EAST POPULAR POLITICS PROJECT

## PROJECT REPORT John Charlton

When North East History Journal went to press in summer 2011 the project was in its infancy. Already a large number of people had signed up as volunteers and some interesting material had been uncovered in the archives and libraries. Twelve months on it has enjoyed consistent growth in numbers of participants covering more sites and accumulated an ever expanding volume of relevant material meticulously organised by Sean Creighton. In the capable hands of Liz O'Donnell the Oral History strand has made great strides in training interviewers and taping and transcribing activists. (See John Stirling's brief at the end of this report) The project's success has been greatly assisted by the development of an effective co-ordinating group of a dozen volunteers.

A central part of the original proposal was 'to map the incidence of popular political events (drawn widely) and persons in the regions communities, archives, libraries and museums.' The mapping part has been very successful. The entire catalogue at Tyne and Wear Archive has been searched and relevant entries listed. There has been similar progress at the other regional archives though the numbers of volunteers recruited determines the pace of progress. Extensive work has been done in the enormous collection at Newcastle Central Library, like TWA led by Peter Livsey who has made inroads into the Lit and Phil holdings too. Dave

Tate and Don Watson have led a very thorough exercise at Gateshead in cataloguing the enormous Tom Marshall collection. South Shields, Sunderland and Middlesbrough and Darlington local studies libraries collections have also received a lot of attention.

In some ways though the most exciting work is that on specific topics sometimes through group work. At the Northumberland Record Office at Woodhorn there is a large group working on the local history of the Co-operative movement, Parliamentary Politics in the Wansbeck and Gateshead areas. The latter work is developed from the extensive papers of Joseph Wilson, the Gateshead liberal politician of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> Century and the former is grounded in the papers of Alderman Dan Dawson the formidable Newburn Labour politician of the inter-war years. Others there work on the Morpeth Poor Law, the early history of Thomas Burt, the first working class MP and Robert Blair, an early Blyth railway guard.

In north Northumberland, Valerie Glass has done pioneering research in the Berwick archives and local newspapers on the Women's Suffrage Movement. She has put together a lovely account of the Berwickshire leg of a great 400 mile Edinburgh to London march in October 1912. Valerie introduces us to the intrepid Isobel Cowe, the holder of the RNLI Gold Brooch for assisting in the rescue of passengers and crew of a ship wrecked off Coldingham. The Berwick Advertiser reported that, 'Miss Cowe has done splendid work en route, for the bicycle has enabled her to reach many of the out of the way farm-places and hamlets for signatures, and then rejoin the party. Her long experience of wrecks and storms at St Abbs...has made her hardy and helpful, and even in the roughest weather of the long evening she never missed a chance of getting a signature. Wearing a sou'wester, and holding a hurricane lamp and pen and ink, she made a picturesque figure.'

At Durham Record Office Dave Tate uncovered a fascinating story of early trade union struggle in Barnard Castle, today perhaps, an unlikely scene of such activity. Documents indicate a remarkable campaign to establish rights of combination in a long gone cotton mill. Workers

prepared closely argued legal advice, joined with other operatives from Lancashire and attended a meeting in Carlisle all against the background of the Combination Acts.

A Durham Group of volunteers, led by Kath Connolly, is also working on Co-op history. An early fruit of this labour is the article in the current journal by Kath on the Sunderland Poor store of the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This group is also involved in developing the Oral History side of the Co-op story.

In Newcastle Sue Pearson, a City Councillor, has become deeply involved in the life of William Newton, a physician and town Councillor in the 1850s. Sue is trawling the records to recover a life lived passionately for reform of public health, sanitation, working class education, free libraries and support for liberation struggles in Europe. Somewhat more exotic is the work of Sue King who on spotting an 18<sup>th</sup> Century tract concerned with the town's burial facilities for non-Anglicans pursued the story (TWA and Newcastle Central Library). She has found a gory tale on the Ballast hills (Ouseburn) and a political campaign stretching for some fifty years till the securing of Westgate Hill Cemetery in 1828.

In Newcastle and County Durham living activists are telling their stories of trade union, co-operative and political campaigns from the 1950s; peace, anti-apartheid, anti-poll tax, anti-war, anti-racism and women's liberation.

These are just some of the avenues being explored. Most research is still in its very early stages. Several of them should be ready for publication in future volumes of North East History. With almost a year left of the 'official' project many more stories will be told and those involved are already planning life beyond this stage.

Anyone interested should contact the project at email: [www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org) or [www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org) where you can also see the project's regular newsletters.

*John Charlton, May 2012.*

# THE POLITICAL IS PERSONAL: POPULAR POLITICS AND ORAL HISTORY

John Stirling

## NOT JUST LOOKING BACKWARD

The feminist argument that the personal is political is equally apposite when turned on its head as, every day, in all of our lives, the political is experienced personally. That's why oral histories are so important to a popular politics project but there are other reasons too: they enable us to see and shape our futures by understanding the past. Too often we are told to 'learn the lessons of history' and go on to neglect them or, as William Morris (1888) put it:

*'how men fight and lose the battle, and the thing they fought for comes about in spite of their defeat, and when it comes, it turns out not to be what they meant and other men have to fight for what they meant, under another name'*

Oral history in a popular politics project (PPP) is not, then, simply recording an ossified past or an exercise in nostalgia, it is about the 'fight' of both men, and Morris's neglected women, that repeats itself as David Cameron repeats Margaret Thatcher 'under another name'. Neither is oral history something best left to the historians. Indeed, many of the contributors to the PPP who are recording oral histories begin by proclaiming themselves not to be historians (and that list includes the current writer) and, whilst we may not be trained or professional historians with academic backgrounds in the subject, we can certainly talk to others, record, analyse and argue. We are also likely to know who to talk to because we are all part of the history of popular politics ourselves. Who to talk to is important too, as E. P Thompson (1968:13) famously put it:

*'Only the successful ... are remembered. The blind alleys, the lost causes, and the losers themselves are subsequently forgotten. I am seeking to rescue the poor stockinger, the Luddite cropper, the 'obsolete' hand loom weaver, the 'utopian' artisan and even the deluded follower of Joanna Southcott, from the enormous condescension of history'*

We might argue that some of Thompson's losers were also winners, as change occurs equally through mass political action as it does through the actions of the individual winners who write history. That aside, Thompson is surely inspiring oral historians with this argument – think if he had been able to listen to the words of the 'poor stockinger' rather than just chase them down through the records written by those 'winners'.

Oral history and the remembered past as it is recalled and recorded must be at the heart of the PPP and it will be driven along by the lives and interests of those who do the recording. It is not just about the listening, it's also about the learning, and with union membership cut from 13 million to 6.5 million since 1979 there's clearly a lot to learn.

## **ACTIVISM AND ACTIVISTS**

The particular approach to oral history developed here is to draw on ideas about *activism* and then understand its practice through interviews with activists. This is a work in progress rather than a finished product both in terms of thinking about what activism means, how that might be understood in a particular historical period in relation to trade unions and how it develops through personal life histories. This will mostly be developed through letting my respondent activists speak for themselves but two problems presented themselves before I got started. How might activism be defined and how to deal a potentially vast amount of existing material on trade unions, even if it is confined just to North East England.

The first point was forcefully brought home by at least two people who were unhappy with the word 'activist' itself. It is clear that something we might expect to approach positively has gained negative connotations for some. So 'activism' cannot be simply self defined and I do not intend



to torture readers with here with an ‘academic’ attempt to analyse the idea – it simply refers to an engagement which is ‘active’ rather than ‘passive’ – and we know it when we see it. The second, point about the unions, is dealt with partly through my own experience and by plenty of ‘reading around’.

The North East has a long, and proud, history of trade unionism particularly in those industries like coal mining and shipbuilding that were cradled in the region’s industrial revolution. The Durham miners’ gala or the Big Meeting at Woodhorn in Northumberland famously live on to commemorate those histories. It is a history that sees trade unionism still embedded in the Region that has the highest membership density of any in England but which is now focussed on the public sector and the significance of women’s employment.

Trade union activists are also hard to pin down as they might operate at all sorts of different levels and in all sorts of places. They might be representatives of workers at their workplace, full time officials of the union or active as a lay member in the democratic structures of their union. They may engage at all these levels at different times in their lives and their union activism might spill over into other areas of engagement. In short, there are plenty of activists with memories to draw on. At this stage of my personal data gathering I will focus on just four trade unionists who lived and worked in the North East.

## **BY WAY OF INTRODUCTION**

In what follows the trade unionists will speak for themselves but in anything that is less than a full transcript of an interview, the views of the writer interpose and editing is inevitable selective. We need to deal with both these issues in oral history. In saying that the ‘political is personal’ what, then are the personal politics that draws an individual to chase down particular people to interview? In my case this stems from being a trade unionist since I left school at 16, holding a number of workplace union positions at different times and being actively involved in delivering

trade union education for more than thirty years. Trade unionism has always been central to my political views so it's obvious that I come from 'somewhere' on the left. All this influences who I want to talk to, how I listen and, sometimes, how I recollect events that my interviewees talk about when I was also there. None of this makes what people have to say any less 'objective' but it should remind us that this is a point of view reflected through another point of view.

I am drawing on interviews that have been completed or half completed and, in one case, carried out by a colleague. I am also using pseudonyms although the tapes will be of named individuals when they are finally archived as part of the PPP project.

Mark, Ben, Steve and Sally are all trade unionists, with one exception, who were active from the 1970s although, for different reasons, each is less engaged directly with trade unions than in their respective pasts. Sally is the exception but she was engaged in a particularly long and bitter strike alongside her husband and other trade union members.

It is a significant starting point that they all came from working class families where trade unionism was a presence but not a dominating force. Trade unionism is seen as a 'part of life' rather than something that was 'taught' or 'instilled' as part of a wider political philosophy. This often came from the male side of families simply because it was fathers that were employed in the 'formal' economy with long term full time jobs in industries such as the railways, steel or shipbuilding. Women of this generation certainly worked both at home and, more often than not, in the 'informal' sector taking part-time jobs or bringing in homework. In effect, for most of those I talked to, trade unionism was not part of a conscious political ideology at home but more a tradition of solidarity and collective action.

## **IN THE BEGINNING**

Sally had a Belfast childhood before the family moved to the North East and she remembers her mother was in the Labour Party and she had

an uncle and aunt who were working near London and who the family visited.

*‘they were both convenors at Dagenham Fords and all I can remember about them was when we used to go and stay ... they always had this cupboard stocked up with loads of tins and it was because they were always calling them out on strike and so they were always prepared for the next strike. But as a youngster I didn’t think about it as anything political or anything. We just always used to wonder why they had cupboards full of tins’*

Ben was brought up in London and travelled to the North east through his union jobs. He had trade unionists in the family too but there was by no means a unified political view as he recollects in this very early memory.

*‘On my mother’s side my grandfather was a staunch socialist. My most distant memory was their ... golden wedding anniversary in 1952, I was six, and there was a big row in the house (no electricity in the house, just gas) and on the wall was a ‘gi-normous’ portrait of Stalin. The row that was going on was because there were photographers from the local press there who wanted to take a picture of them cutting the cake ... and half of the family wanted the picture taken down – they didn’t want it in the local press - the other half wanted it to stay up. I don’t remember any union activity on that side – he was a painter and decorator – but he was certainly a hard left character.’*

Mark’s family also included a long serving trade union father and a brother who later became a trade union official but he chose to go into the police.

*‘My dad was a [union] member for 50 years maybe, of what became the ISTC [Iron & Steel Trades Confederation] and although my dad wasn’t an active member his values rubbed off on the family. My mother worked all her life as well as bringing up 4 boys, big strapping lads, my brother Tony went into the finance industry [banking] and became a full time [union] official for BIFU [Banking Insurance & Finance Union] ... About the time I was in the Police he was progressing through the union. We were very, very close as brothers, probably closer than the other brothers and his influence rubbed off*

*on me a lot as well. My dad was a steel worker and in the 70s I was on the picket line opposite him. He could see me and we were trying to get some scab labour through the picket line – it was really quite a traumatic experience.'*

Each of these trade unionist they had grown up with an awareness of trade unionism and Labourist or socialist politics but its immediate impact was quite different although it was, perhaps, the ideas of collective solidarity that stayed with each of them.

## **GETTING GOING**

Through the 'lens' of activism, I was interested in whether something had triggered them to get involved in some sort of action. Steve had had a 'culture shock' in moving from a quiet rural area to university and describes his 'trigger point' as follows.

*'As part of some student organisation we visited a school in [a deprived working class area]. I happened to be walking back from the school through some back streets ... and there was a piece of derelict land ... there was a guy there who was building something ... and he had just been appointed to establish an adventure playground ... so that weekend I went up there to help out and spent most of my time working up there'*

For Sally, it was her mother who got her started.

*[She] 'rang me up and said 'will you come on the march through Darlington with me against the poll tax?' and that was the first time I'd actually ever been out and got involved in a march and a protest about anything, but it was so outrageous that you just felt you had to'*

For Mark, it was the experience of somebody sorting out a problem for him and the direct experience of trade unionism in the bus industry.

*'The trade union had told me when I arrived that you could do no more than two very late shifts in a week and asked me to watch that carefully because they thought there was favouritism going on. Anyway, I did a week where there were three late shifts, then the following week I did three more. I was complaining about it in the canteen and a guy said go and see Tony he's your shop steward ... He marched me into a corner, picked the telephone*

*up and said we've got a new driver here. You gave him three backshifts last week and he's got two this week I want him on early tomorrow and I want him off this backshift. Then he turned round, passed me a note and he's got a shift down starting tomorrow about 8 o'clock and said 'that's it – you're off the backshift'.*

For each of these individuals and others there is commonly something related to their particular personal experience that finally triggers their activism but they also need an opportunity to express it such as getting involved in their union or a strike or some sort of community action

### **OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS**

A number of the people interviewed saw the 1970s as a time of particular opportunity as the recollections from Ben and Steve make very clear.

By the 1970s Steve had become involved in another community project that was funded through local authority expenditure.

*'You're given this budget and told right, set it up and make it happen without a lot of guidance really ... There were people there with a Marxist background ... and on the organising side some people who had come from a Trotskyist tradition and a very worked through feminist revolutionary. We did a lot of political education ... we'd run training [on] how the council works ... we'd take activists away for weekends to Northern College ...'*

Ben was also given the opportunity to take initiatives and develop actions within his union.

*'I loved it. I felt myself in my element – motivating people to come out on strike, raising support for them, raising money for them, doing the publicity, and I learnt a lot about industrial action. I learnt how difficult it can be to get people back at times; how difficult it was to actually win something and began to learn, over time, how to measure success and failure – that it wasn't all black and white ... [in 1973] there seemed to be a strike a year – well even more than that. I think that became, it sounds weird saying this, but that became my expertise organising strikes and getting people back into work undefeated - trying obviously to win ... Sometimes there were national*

*strikes, sometimes they were regional and sometimes they were local'*

There are a number of readable but more academic accounts of strikes and union organisation at that period including Huw Beynon's breakthrough analysis using the voice of workers themselves (Beynon, 1973, Lane & Roberts, 1971). The optimism and the opportunity to 'make it up' as you went along and having the funding to do so was in marked contrast to Sally's strike experience in the 1990s.

*'I suppose I still get emotional about it because I've seen what those families have been through and a lot of those men died quite young after they'd been on that picket line nearly two years and standing over them braziers and all that. I think it was the stress of it all. At the end, the unions wanted us out of the way because they thought, "oh well, we've got a result now" but really, they did turn their backs on us. But I don't want to take anything away from the men because what they went through... having to put up with all the insults with the scabs going through and laughing at them'*

Steve felt equally distressed with his union and the isolation that he felt.

*'When [they] took an injunction to stop us taking strike action that was really lonely ... [they] went for an injunction and 5 hours before the strike was due to start they got it ... the only contact I'd got with the Regional Office was when they all arrived in our office to say ... we're here to stop you doing anything stupid. The next morning they appeared on the picket line putting a leaflet out telling people to go to work ... they were the enemy ... for a layer of our activists they'd never experienced anything like that.'*

Such contrasting views from different periods are illuminating but, equally, require contextualising. For example, the raft of anti-union legislation simply did not exist in the 1970s and union membership was moving to its peak of half the employed workforce.

## **NEVER ENDING STORY**

I began with an argument that the past must inform the future and be

a guide to action too. It would be easy for trade union activists today to comment on the problems and difficulties that they encounter (not least because it would be true) but Mark's story provides a suitable ending on how the past does indeed continue to inform the future and with potentially great success.

*'The second campaign we identified was in the ... North West of the Borough ... we were conscious through door knocking for the Labour Party that the BNP were really quite active in a local election campaign a couple of years ago. So we decided we'd have a really high profile event ... led by the trade union movement but inviting other groups in. One of the leading groups was Show Racism the Red Card ... It was the last weekend before the kids went back to school and it just so happened that there was a brand new Play Centre opening ... so his [the play centre leader] campaign was to get kids involved, our campaign was to get the anti racism message across ... He didn't have enough clout to draw the great event, we didn't have enough clout to draw the great event so we merged together ... It just went from about mid day to about midnight ... there was bands playing and we got a massive response. The TUC stall's materials just flew off the shelves – everyone's wearing them 'with pride not hate' badges and all this sort of thing ... when the local elections came round the BNP were wiped off the floor – hardly registered a vote'*

As the saying goes: the struggle continues.

## **References**

- Beynon, H. (1973) *Working for Ford*. Penguin.
- Lane, T. & Roberts, K. (1971) *Strike at Pilkingtons*. Collins/Fontana.
- Morris, W. (1888) *The Dream of John Ball*. Date of first publication but widely available in anthologies.
- Thompson, E.P. (1968) *The Making of the English Working Class*. Penguin.

# NORTH EAST LABOUR HISTORY SOCIETY

## **Officers & Committee**

President:	Archie Potts
Vice President:	Maureen Callcott
Chair:	Paul Mayne
Acting Vice Chair:	John Creaby
Treasurer:	Mike Cleghorn
Secretary:	Don Watson
Journal Editor:	John Creaby

## **Committee Members:**

John Charlton (Newcastle)  
Kath Connolly (Chester le Street)  
Jenni Corner (Tynemouth)  
Kevin Davies (Blyth)  
Lynda Mackenzie (Newcastle)  
Steve Manchee (Newcastle)  
Lewis Mates (Newcastle)  
Sarah Rennie (Newcastle)  
Ben Sellers (Durham)  
Wyn Stokes (Tynemouth)  
Willie Thompson (Sunderland)  
Nigel Todd (Newcastle)



## THE SID CHAPLIN LABOUR HISTORY TROPHY



### **Past winners**

1988	Kit Pearce	2004	Craig Turnbull
1989	Elaine Knox	2005	Craig Armstrong
1990	Sylvia Clark	2006	Elsbeth Gould
1991	Martin Searles	2007	Candice Brockwell
1992	David Ridley	2008	Ruth Blower
1993	Pauline Lynn	2009	Rob Doherty
1994	Kathleen Smith	2010	David Reed
1996	Reg Brown	2011	Deborah Smith
1997	Angela Goldsmith		
2000	Robert Hope		

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.

# 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 AGM shall be held open to all members of the Society.

**Subscriptions:**

The annual subscription shall be determined by the AGM 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 AGM.

**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 AGM. 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 AGM and not subject to re-election. There shall be one or more Vice Presidents elected at the AGM 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, North East History. 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 AGM, and a motion outlining proposals for change must be submitted in writing to the Secretary at least 28 days before the date of AGM.

**north east labour history society**

I would like to join the society

rates

institutions £25

individual (including overseas) £15

concession £5 (student/retired/unemployed)

subscription includes journal

£2 p&p

address .....

.....

.....

email:.....

cheques payable to North East Labour History

send to: Mike Cleghorn (Treasurer),  
17 Woodbine Avenue  
Gosforth  
Newcastle on Tyne  
NE3 4EV

**north east labour history society**  
**STANDING ORDER MANDATE**

(Please return to the Treasurer, NELHS, 17 Woodbine Ave., Gosforth, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE3 4EU)

To The Manager .....Bank  
Address.....  
..... Sort Code.....

Please pay the following beneficiary in accordance with the following details:

<b>BENEFICIARY</b>	North East Labour History
<b>BENEFICIARY'S BANK</b>	Unity Trust Bank Plc
<b>BRANCH TITLE</b>	Birmingham
<b>SORT CODE</b>	08-60-01
<b>ACCOUNT NO.</b>	58254950
<b>AMOUNT IN FIGURES</b>	£15.00
<b>AMOUNT IN WORDS</b>	Fifteen pounds only
<b>DATE OF FIRST PAYMENT AND FREQUENCY</b>	1 <sup>st</sup> October 2012 and thereafter every year on 1 <sup>st</sup> October until you receive further notice from me in writing.

**ACCOUNT TO BE DEBITED**

**ACCOUNT NO.**

Please debit my account accordingly. Please also cancel any previous standing order or direct debit in favour of the above beneficiary.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Note:** The Bank will not undertake to

- 1) make any reference to Value Added Tax or other indeterminate element
- 2) advise payer's address to beneficiary
- 3) advise beneficiary of inability to pay
- 4) request beneficiary's banker to advise beneficiary of receipt



Gateshead Local Government Branch

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

**Terry Edwards** (Branch Secretary)  
**Dave Walkden** Branch Chair

Gateshead Local Government Branch  
Suite 5, New Century House Gateshead NE8 1HR

Tel: 0191 4776638

Fax: 0191 4776613

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





# north east history volume 43



Follonsby Lodge, Wardley banner carried in the Durham Miners Gala 2012



The north east labour history society holds regular meetings on a wide variety of subjects. The society welcomes new members. We have an increasingly busy web-site at [www.nelh.org](http://www.nelh.org) Supporters are welcome to contribute to discussions

journal of the north east labour history society

<http://nelh.org/>