

North East History

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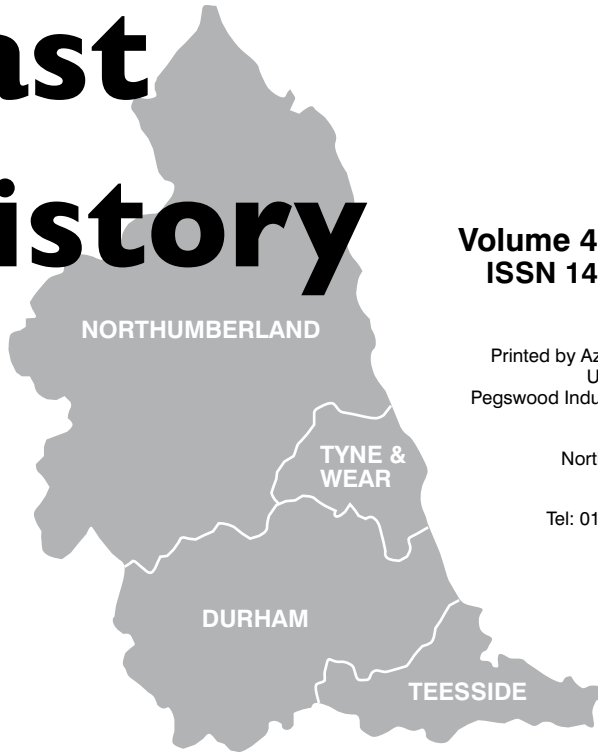


"Well, if all the men are to have medals, why not us?"

Journal of the North East Labour History Society

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Enabling greater sharing and understanding of our regional history. We hold regular meetings, and are building a skills bank and a directory of venues.

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The WEA North East Green Branch champions environmental adult education. It arranges workshops, talks, and courses, and holds regular meetings.

Secretary: Nigel Todd - ntodd@wea.org.uk



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Note from the Editors

Keeping with tradition, this year's volume opens with the Sid Chaplin prize-winning essay. Leanne Smith's essay is one of two contributions that focus on reactions to wartime labour shortages in coal mining. Smith's work considers the Durham Miners' Association's refusal to agree to the introduction of female labour at pit-heads in the period 1914-1918. Liz O'Donnell uses interviews with Bevin Boys to discuss their role and experiences in the region between 1944 and 1948.

Archie Potts, who was given access to an unpublished memoir, chronicles the eventful life of John McNair. Brought up on Tyneside, McNair's involvement in left-wing politics took him into national and European arenas. An example of international elements encroaching on North East life and politics is present in Rosie Serdiville's essay on Germans living here during the First World War, and is based on a larger collaborative project. By contrast, Brian Bennison's study is unashamedly parochial, examining employment and day-to-day existence in an isolated and generally overlooked mining district in Northumberland.

At the risk of being accused of blowing our own trumpet, we include Peter Nicklin's survey of our jubilee year. It was a special twelve months for the North East Labour History Society and the successful programme of celebratory talks, lectures and one-day conference deserves to be recorded.

We continue last year's innovation of reporting on commemorations of interest to our readers. We publish a brief account of the life and work of the playwright Tom Hadaway, the subject of a plaque in North Shields, and look at initiatives taken by a group of Stocktonians to organise a commemoration of the day in 1933 when local people chased British Union of Fascists marchers from their town.

The journal also includes an appreciation of Phil Lenton, a union official whose concern for rights of working people went beyond the North

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East, and an illustrated piece by photographer Damien Wootten about his Radical Roads project. The journal concludes with reviews of books on a range of topics, some of them authored by Society members.

Brian Bennison

Mike Greatbatch

Win Stokes

Sue Ward

Elizabeth O'Donnell

How to Submit an Article to the Journal

The North East Labour History Society is committed to making our journal reflect the diverse range of historical experiences of working people in the North East region.

We aim to reflect all communities and groupings in the North East and would encourage contributions from those who live and work in them, those who research them and those who write about them. We want to hear from individuals, community organisations, local history societies, students and teachers and all who have something to say about our region.

If you have a research interest that could form the basis of a written article and would like to discuss this, please contact our Secretary or the Editors – contact details are on page 140.

If you have an existing article that you would like to submit for publication, we can send you a set of guidelines to ensure that the article and its endnotes are presented in a format that is appropriate to our journal's style.

The Society holds limited numbers of back issues of the North East History journal, and details of how to obtain copies can be found on the Society's website: <http://nelh.net/>

A searchable index of articles and reports can also be found at our website: <http://nelh.net/>



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Notes on Contributors

Brian Bennison is a former Secretary of the North East Labour History Society and Editor of *North East History*.

Keith Hodgson is currently co-chair of the North East WEA. He worked as a union organiser and educationalist for thirty-five years in the Northern Region, first for NUPE, and then UNISON, from where he retired in 2004. He was active in many anti-privatisation campaigns, pay disputes, and international project work in South Africa, Palestine, Cuba, Russia, Germany and Sierra Leone. He was also involved in establishing the Trade Union Studies Information Unit (TUSIU) which was one of the first regionally-based research and education organisations supporting workers resisting de-industrialisation. He was brought up in Prudhoe.

Peter Nicklin worked for many years researching and developing information technology for health. He was an active member of the Popular Politics Project and he is currently membership secretary and web editor for the North East Labour History Society. He was active in the Anti-Nazi League in the early 1980s and, for very many years, in CND, taking part in the 1962 Aldermaston march at the age of nine (accompanied by his father of course).

Elizabeth O'Donnell taught history in further and higher education in the North East for three decades before leaving for a job at Northumberland Archives as an outreach worker and oral historian. Her research interests are broad, primarily focussing on women's rights campaigners in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but also encompassing the social, economic and political contexts of her oral history projects.

Archie Potts taught for many years at Newcastle Polytechnic. He is a founding father of the North East Labour History Society and is its current President. He is the author of several books and articles on working class history.

Rosie Serdiville is a local historian and writer with a particular interest in radical history, particularly as it pertains to women. Her work as a historic interpreter allows plenty of opportunities to use costume and domestic gear to let modern Northerners try out the lives of their ancestors.

Leanne Smith was awarded the 2017 Sid Chaplin Memorial Prize. She entered the University of Sunderland as a mature student, graduating in 2017 with a First Class Honours Degree in History. She is currently studying for a Masters in Historical Research. Her essay is based on the final chapter of her undergraduate dissertation.

Damien Wootten, a photographer living and working in the North East, was a photographic educator for many years on North Tyneside and more recently was a visiting lecturer at the Northern Centre of Photography at the University of Sunderland and at Newcastle University's School of Architecture. He has exhibited, published, and worked on a range of commissions for organisations and has been the recipient of Arts Council England, North East Photography Network, and Royal Photographic Society grants, bursaries and awards.

The Struggle over Female Labour at the Durham Coalfield, 1914-1918

Leanne Smith

'To be Born a Woman has been to be Born, within an Allotted and Confined Space, into the Keeping of Men'.¹

At the outbreak of the First World War, very few understood the extent of the challenges Britain would face. The war effort placed extraordinary demands upon industries such as coal and munitions, which struggled with the loss of many of their skilled workers. During this period, traditional attitudes towards acceptable jobs for women began to break down, as they entered hitherto male-dominated industries. This was, however, not the case everywhere. Despite severe labour shortages during the war, the employment of female workers was a contested issue in the Durham coalfield. The Durham Miners' Association (DMA) in particular actively resisted the use of female workers at the pits.

The purpose of this essay is to explain why, when faced with a shortage of manpower, the DMA refused to consent to the introduction of female labour at the pit head. Women had not worked in the Durham coalfields since the eighteenth century, and the DMA had unsuccessfully campaigned against their continued employment in other districts, such as Scotland and South Lancashire.² Bates has attributed the DMA's attitude to female labour to the union's concern over the undercutting of wages.³ However, this paper will argue that the rationale behind their decision

was rather more complex. The DMA sought to defend a sexual division of labour that was central to coal mining communities such as those in the Durham coalfield. As Howard argues, the miners' wives were engaged in an ancillary role within the community, and without these supportive services, production would be brought to a halt.⁴ Yet the practice also preserved gender hierarchies and with it a sense of meaning and social status for the male miners.

The Impact of the War upon the Coal Industry

In 1923, Sir Richard Redmayne, Chief Inspector of Mines from 1908, published a detailed study of the coal mining industry during the war. As he explained, with the loss of foreign export markets, there was initially an excess of coal available for home consumption. Many pits were temporarily closed or put on short time, leaving many miners out of work, and consequently within the first seven months nearly 19% had enlisted. However, this downturn in production did not last and in 1915, with a shortage of miners, increasing need for coal, and demands from other foreign markets, the coal industry was in crisis. From the beginning of the war until February 1915, the industry lost 250,750 miners and output decreased by 11%. The Coal Mining Organisation Committee (CMOC) was formed in February 1915. This Committee consisted of representatives from the Mining Association of Great Britain (MAGB, the employers' association), and the Miners' Federation of Great Britain (MFGB, the trade union organisation), to which the DMA was affiliated. The aim of the committee was not to involve itself in the day-to-day running of the industry, but rather to organize it so that it could attain the highest possible production of coal.⁵ The CMOC 'relied on voluntary co-operation from the industry' and was therefore careful to 'avoid proposals which might seem sensitive or provocative'.⁶ A key concern for the CMOC was how to replenish the mining work force. Redmayne, who was by now employed as advisor to the committee, reported that within the CMOC's first year, one suggestion was to consider the employment of women. Whilst in

Lancashire and Scotland females were already employed at the pit head, for many other districts this was not the case. In the Committee's view, although 'experience has shown that the work is not degrading, and that it was healthier than factories', to force the introduction would 'only lead to disturbances' and therefore the decision was left to the discretion of the individual districts.⁷

The Durham Miners' Association Response

The first attempt to employ women on the Durham coalfield was made in June 1915. The DMA recorded that there had been an 'incipient attempt', on behalf of the colliery managers to introduce women at the pit head. John Wilson, General Secretary of the Durham Miners' Association and Liberal MP for Mid-Durham from 1890 until his death in 1915, was a long running opponent of women's labour at the pit head, in 1903 describing 'the employment of women and girls in that way being one of the foulest blots on the mining industry'.⁸ In 1915, he claimed that they had put an immediate end to this practice, and whilst acknowledging women worked at other pits, in their opinion pit top work could 'partially destroy, if not totally eliminate, the finer attributes ...with one's ideal of womanhood'. Furthermore, should a time arise when there would be a need for the reorganization of labour it would be done in a way, which would be 'least demoralizing'. Wilson attributed the colliery owners' actions to an attempt to increase profits, citing a 'superfluity' of 'boy labour' available at the collieries.⁹

In February 1916, reflecting the urgency of the need to secure more labour, the mine owners approached the DMA requesting that women be allowed to substitute for the boys at the bank allowing them to work underground.¹⁰ The DMA Executive wrote that, for the miners of the Northern Counties, the 'idea of their women folk working in or about the pits has always been one of the utmost abhorrence to them'. The DMA suggested that retired miners could return to replace the boys, which would also allow the men to cope with the rise in the cost of living.

The CMOC issued a letter to the MFGB in April 1916, explaining that, 'owing to the paramount necessity of meeting the irreducible demands for home consumption and export of coal, it may be necessary and practical' to introduce female labour. The letter further recommended that those districts opposing the recommendation should arrange for representatives from either side to convene and discuss the matter. The letter contained the assurance that 'if any increase of such labour is adopted, it should continue only for the period of the war'.¹¹ It is hard to establish whether the meeting took place, as the DMA minute books for the period from July to December 1916 are missing. In June 1917, however, a meeting was held with representatives from the enginemens, mechanics, cokemen and miners' sections, and it was unanimously agreed that 'there was no necessity for any additional employment of female labour'.¹²

The penultimate year of the war witnessed an increasing concern about the 'shrinking coal supply'.¹³ Although coal exports had reduced because of an increase in domestic use 'the situation had reached crisis point'. The winter of 1916/17 had also been especially harsh, and combined with further expansion in munitions, supplies now 'dropped below pre-war levels'. The crisis was no longer contained to the munitions industry, but was now a threat to public order. During the summer of 1917 domestic rationing was introduced in London. For the war cabinet, the morale of the nation's citizens was now 'a prime consideration'.¹⁴ The Durham coalfield supplied coke for the London gas, electrical, and industrial markets, which explains why the government, up until 1918, had applied no real pressure on their industrial relations.¹⁵

This would soon change when it was discovered that London had only two weeks' supply left. In August 1918, Sir Guy Calthrop, the Controller of Mines, met with the DMA and the colliery owners. He explained that at the same point last year the capital had six weeks' supplies in hand, and that the situation was critical. Attempting to draw upon working class sympathies, Calthrop drew the DMA's attention to the fact that the principal consumers of gas from one of the works they supplied

were members of the working class. He argued that for the purposes of maintaining morale, the gas supply should not be interrupted and further stressed that the DMA's principles, which he described as 'perfectly fair and correct', should not be the overwhelming reason during such a time of crisis. The owners confirmed that they could supply 391 women to work in four collieries calculating that this would allow 237 hewers to return underground, producing 936 tons per day, thus providing a total yield of 243,399 tons per year. The DMA contended that if men were to return from the shipyards, and injured men came back from the front, then these women would not be required. Calthrop reassured the DMA that he would use his influence to remove female labour after the war. Several days later the DMA Executive reaffirmed their position and stated they 'cannot see their way clear to recommend the county to agree to the employment of female labour' and put forward that the county would work on 'pay Saturdays' instead.¹⁶ The declaration of an armistice on 11 November 1918 would draw this debate to its close.

As we have seen, the coal industry was in crisis and there was a considerable need to increase the workers available at the Durham coalfield. The record of discussions within the CMOC demonstrates that although they resisted female employment, the DMA was willing to accept other forms of dilution in the form of unskilled workers and increased hours. The next section will discuss the complex reasoning behind the DMA's stance regarding female labour.

Mining Communities and Gendered Labour Culture in Durham

This section will explain why the DMA opposed women working at the pit head so strongly. According to historian Barry Supple, within the coal industry the war 'involved a heightened perception' of the trade union's role in relation to the 'systems of authority and control'. Rather than bringing reform, 'the war brought about a determination within the industry to defend their customs', which was manifested through a 'militant conservatism'.¹⁷ Another historian, M. W. Flinn, has argued that the

Durham coalfield operated within a strict sexual division of labour 'which was a prominent feature of the industry, and formed a major element in social experience, and contributed to the self-image of communities'.¹⁸ The separation between gender roles within the mining villages was more defined than any other community, and to relax these roles would have a detrimental effect upon the industry, and the community. According to one observer, women in the mining community occupied 'a situation of paradox, they were both central and marginalized, critical to the operation of the family and thereby to the husband and the mine, but often socially excluded and publicly undervalued'.¹⁹

The sexual division of labour was important in the mining community and to understand why, we firstly need to understand the way in which the community was established. Mining villages of the North East were 'constructed communities', built with the sole purpose of 'winning coal'.²⁰ Howard explains that these communities 'unlike other industrial towns', rested 'firmly upon a single economic platform', coal.²¹ The villages, built around the coal reserves, were often isolated which enabled the colliery owners to develop a system of paternalistic control.²² The colliery owners understood that they required a certain type of man to work at the pit, and as viewer John Buddle had written in the eighteenth century, these men 'must be bred to their work from childhood. Their number cannot be recruited from any other class'.²³ Therefore, the colliery villages of the Durham coalfield 'were organized in a way which best supplied and serviced men and boys for the pit'.²⁴ The owners often erected company housing for the miners and their families, which had two vital functions. Firstly, it 'tied' the miner to the colliery, and in the North of England 90% of miners lived in these houses, and secondly, it promoted the advantage of having a family.²⁵ The housing policy of the colliery management was often more favourable towards the fertile family, over those who were single or widowed.²⁶ This facilitated reproduction, thus securing the future generation of miners.²⁷ For example, miners' leader and MP Jack Lawson recalled in his autobiography that his family could move to a 'four roomed'

house because they had more workers.²⁸ The isolation of the villages also contributed to the maintaining of the sexual division of labour, in that there were no other possibilities for employment for women.²⁹ Edward Welbourne has argued that 'the pitmen ... denied them any outside occupation, holding that the care of their houses, their families and their man was work sufficient'.³⁰ Williamson considers that this attitude was consistent with the dominant Victorian attitude that a women's place was in the home.³¹ Girls within the mining community grew up to be women in the home, just as the boys grew into men in the mine. Boys and girls had clear and distinct careers, and 'in their construction, ideas of sexuality and gender were of central importance'.³²

The paternalist nature of the colliery community extended further during the nineteenth century. When, for instance, owners such as Straker and Love began to offer the community access to education and medical assistance, these benefits increased the dependence of the mining family upon the colliery owner.³³ However, it is incorrect to claim, as Joyce has, that the working class of these northern communities displayed passive and deferential attitudes.³⁴ As Thompson argues, the working class were active in their own creation, and this can be seen clearly through the institutions the miners established to act as a defence against further capitalist exploitation.³⁵ The trade unions, co-operative societies, friendly societies, were all built to try and protect the men and the community. As Williamson explains, these institutions were 'distinct from those of the coal company' and allowed the men to create 'a way of life which was theirs and not simply a reflection' of the colliery owners.³⁶ However, these institutions further defined the division between the men and women in the community. These male exclusive environments, from the trade unions, to the Working Men's Clubs, were 'the preserve of menfolk'.³⁷ These traditionally defined roles were being challenged, and it was this that the DMA were fighting to defend. As Masterman wrote, 'there is not one high wall but two high walls between the classes and the masses, and that erected in self-defence by the exploited is the higher and more difficult to climb'.³⁸

Masculinity and Women's Role in the Home

Although written before the period in question, a letter by Ellis Lever in the 1880s indicates the threat posed by pit brow women. Lever argued that pit work brutalised women and altered the nature of men, resulting in a reversal in the gender roles. The women became the breadwinners and men shirked their 'duty to maintain the family'.³⁹ For the Durham miners, reflecting the ideology of the period, it was their sole responsibility to provide for the family, and their ability to do so was something for which they received praise.⁴⁰ The brutalisation of women was also mentioned in an earlier Commons debate, in which Mr Mundella expressed his horror at seeing women employed at the other pit heads, who had taken on the appearance of men, dressed 'in attire almost like that of men, with coalheavers' hats on their heads, smoking pipes with the men, drinking with them in the public-houses'.⁴¹ This was also a concern shared by the DMA, as the executive argued that women would be subjected to the 'brutalising influences inevitable in mining work'.⁴² As Williamson argues, a man's attitude to others, 'grows, at least in part, out of the terms and conditions under which he works'.⁴³ For Lawson, the pit 'hardened' his 'body and developed it, bringing experience and soaking me in the ways of the mine'.⁴⁴ It was through working in these dangerous and awful conditions that the men developed an extreme sense of masculinity. Pit-hardening according to Williamson, was the process in which the miner attained 'certain special attitudes and dispositions towards work' shaping the character of the miners, and 'setting them apart from others'. This masculinity was often expressed through the use of the sexually explicit language known as 'pit-talk', and whilst this was common place at the pit, this would be unacceptable behaviour in front of women.⁴⁵ It has been argued that this extreme masculinity and swearing enabled the men to cope with the perilous subterranean working environment.⁴⁶

Alongside physical and mental changes, the men who worked at the pit experienced a change in status. Lawson wrote that his status changed when he became a trapper, aged twelve years old; no longer having to help

at home, he was entitled to extra meat at dinner times, and no longer had 'cast off boots'.⁴⁷ The status of these men was elevated within the community and they viewed occupations such as clerical or shop work as unmanly.⁴⁸ 'In Durham, to be a 'man' was to work in the mine; and this had value'.⁴⁹ To allow women onto the pit head not only threatened the miners' hyper-masculine image and ability to work but would also potentially de-skill and feminise the role.⁵⁰

Carr has argued that the miners and trade union leaders held an over-inflated view of women's roles within the community. They were considered 'goddesses of the domestic hearth occupying the high moral pedestal'.⁵¹ For instance, Lawson spoke of his mother as an example of true 'heroism', and that the 'wrestle and risk of the pit was infinitely preferable to life in that kitchen'.⁵² As feminist historian Angela John has explained 'the pit brow woman was the prime example of degraded womanhood, seen as an aberration in a masculine domain torn from her 'natural sphere', the home'.⁵³ The type of work involved at the pit was simply not suitable nor respectable employment for women. As previously mentioned this debate had its roots within the nineteenth century, and opinions were not confined to the Durham coalfield. The National Miners' Association argued in 1863 that it 'degraded the future mothers of the mining population'.⁵⁴ In 1886, John Wilson, at the time MP for Houghton-le-Spring, argued that the work 'was only fit for strong muscular men and that it was 'a woman's place' to do much more delicate work'.⁵⁵ In fact, Hall suggests that the opinion held by the miners was that collieries employing women were practising slavery.⁵⁶ Along with the concerns that women working at the pit would feminise the job it was also feared that the nature of the role would 'partially destroy, if not totally eliminate, the finer attributes one cannot fail to associate with ones ideal of true womanhood'.⁵⁷

Women's Moral and Economic Contribution

Women in the mining community, whilst excluded from the mine and many of the social institutions within the village, contributed significantly

to the production of coal.⁵⁸ Women were a stabilising factor within the community. Up to the middle of the nineteenth century miners had a reputation for 'drinking, gambling and brawling'. The Methodist movement, in particular the Primitive Methodists, had a substantial influence in transforming the ways of the miners, and according to Hall, this reputation was improved further, through the behaviour of the miners' wives.⁵⁹ Lawson also recognised that alongside Primitive Methodism and trade unionism, women had done much to civilise the community.⁶⁰ They not only set high living standards for themselves and their families, but were also able to alleviate the psychological traumas involved with subterranean work.⁶¹ Whilst hyper-masculinity allowed the men to cope with the dangers of pit work, it also created uncivilised behavior, such as drinking and fighting.⁶² As Stuart Howard explains, within the community 'it was the job of women to save men not from themselves, but from their insatiable desire to demonstrate to their peers the potency of their manhood'.⁶³ The women were able to do this by raising the moral standards within the village, primarily through providing a home which was clean, comfortable, quiet and a complete opposite of their working conditions.⁶⁴ The miner's wife, according to Carr, 'bore the psychological risks' of their husband's job, and was therefore crucial to maintaining a stable community.

The family was a principal influence in the process of socialisation, and the wife's role within this process was vital to the supply of the next generation of miners and pit-wives.⁶⁵ The traditional division of labour, clearly evident within the Durham coalfield, was reinforced within the home environment.⁶⁶ The children were 'taught to conform to, and identify with, rigid and clearly differentiated roles'.⁶⁷ A girl would be raised to know 'the life of her mother', and would understand her position within the community, how to behave, and the high standards expected from her. Boys were raised in preparation for work in the pit and what to expect from their future wife. They would witness the traditional domestic duties performed by the females within the family and would 'grow into a set of attitudes and ideas very consciously' excluding women.⁶⁸ As Lawson

confirmed, his status changed within the house when he began working at the pit. Men were treated like kings at home and the girls were raised 'to support the notion that they were kings'.⁶⁹ Had the DMA conceded to the proposal to allow women at the pit, this could have impacted upon the future generation of pit-men and pit wives.

It was the woman's role at home which truly made it possible for the miner to be able to work. As Beynon and Austrin explain, whilst the mine 'permeated' every aspect of the pit-woman's life, and her daily activities, in turn, contributed to the production of coal. However, the home was also the woman's realm and one in which she was in full control. 'the skills, the strengths, the organization and perceptiveness fullness of the women ... were the mainstay of the social fabric which made up the coal mining village'.⁷⁰ 'Housework,' Williamson suggests, 'was central to the winning of coal, as the graft of the miner underground'.⁷¹ Through the domestic duties undertaken by the women the miner was 'prepared day in and day out to return to his work'.⁷² Without the women's ancillary contributions, Stuart Howard argues, 'coal production would grind to a halt'.⁷³ It was within this realm that women were, in part, able to take control over their lives through 'determining the nature of their own domestic role'. Wives through domesticity could earn 'self-respect and the recognition of others'.⁷⁴ To be a respectable wife was to ensure high levels of cleanliness and well turned-out children.⁷⁵ However, the difficulty in maintaining these high standards was compounded by the poor conditions of the village and the overcrowding. As Sidney Webb noted, regarding the 1901 and 1911 census, 'Durham and Northumberland had a larger number in the same house than any other mining community in England'. Webb further commented that the duties for a pit wife were 'terrible overwork' intensified through poor housing conditions.⁷⁶ He contended that the women's work could be alleviated slightly by the building of pit head baths, sarcastically asking if it was 'too much to expect that the miner of tomorrow will ... have the opportunity of keeping his pit clothes' in his own locker, with changing and washing facilities.⁷⁷

Lawson recalled that his mother and sister spent 'day and night, year in, year out,' meticulously cleaning, washing, cooking and preparing.⁷⁸ According to Carr, 'there was hardly any break from the continuing toil. If a woman stood at the doorstep for a breath of fresh air, she was usually knitting'.⁷⁹ This was intensified through the shift pattern at the pit since, as Williamson has written, 'the work done in the house followed directly the routine of the pits and its different shifts'.⁸⁰ The multiple shift system dictated the routine of the pit-wife and, as one miner recalled, his 'mother would go months on end without going to bed through the week' because of the shifts. When his father was on the night shift, he explained, 'Dad would come in about midnight. She got his supper ready, and he got bathed', filling the tin with water heated in pans and the boiler. One of his other brothers would be on the 'first shift at about two o'clock in the morning, so it wasn't worth mother's time to go to the bed, so she would just lie on the couch'. Another one would need to leave in two hours' time and then Bill would also need to get up at seven to get ready for school. 'So, mother would not go to bed at all, just snatch a half an hour or so's sleep'.⁸¹ Webb argued that the shift system had not been fully considered, and if by considered, he means the way in which it impacted upon the women's lives, then he is correct. The household routines were established 'as a necessary part of the production of coal', and not introduced to assist women in their domestic chores.⁸² Whilst the women of the Durham coalfield were not in paid employment, as Lawson wrote, a 'pit-woman's work never ends'.⁸³ They did work, and the ancillary services they provided were vital to the production of coal.

Conclusion

This essay has shown that through the loss of miners to the armed forces, and an increase in home consumption, the coal industry was in crisis by the mid-point of World War One. It has also shown that the DMA's refusal to allow female labour was not in response to a concern over possible undercutting of wages. Their staunch opposition was based on

their acute awareness of the contributions and the impact the women had upon the work. Coal mining communities had been constructed around concepts of strictly defined gender roles which, in their view, needed to be maintained. The work of a pit brow women was seen as simply not suitable or respectable work. Pit work was considered a masculine sphere and women working at the pit threatened the miner's identity and masculinity. Furthermore, women were a stabilising factor in an often-volatile industry and essential in terms of ensuring the future of mining, as they provided and prepared the next generation of miners and their wives. Without the women performing their domestic duties, day in day out, the men would have been unable to work at the pit. It was these reasons that led directly to fervent resistance to the request to employ women.

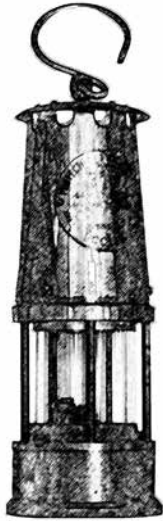
Notes

- ¹ J. Berger, *Ways of Seeing* (St Ives: Penguin Books, 1972), p. 46.
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The Past We Inherit, the Future We Build



DMA

Durham Miners' Association

www.durhamminers.org

Fifty Years of Activism: 2017, the North East Labour History Society's Jubilee Year

Peter Nicklin



*Society members at the talk given by Michael Chaplin at Redhills.
Reproduced courtesy of Bethany Elen Coyle.*

Nearly every year since 1967, the Society has published its annual journal (*North East History*), reporting on North East labour history as well as reflecting the changing preoccupations of our times. The journal (or Bulletin as it was originally called) started as a mimeograph, produced 'under the radar' at an obliging university department. It is now a printed and bound volume of around 200 pages.

In 2017, the Society decided it was time to celebrate. We did this by having well-attended and well-received talks from excellent speakers and a day school at which over seventy people could choose between nine workshops on topics reflecting the activism of today and the last fifty years.

In June, Professor James Walvin spoke about Slavery in *Small Things: Slavery and Modern Cultural Habits*. His talk explored the cultural legacy of slavery through commonplace daily objects, tracing the relationship between slavery and modern cultural habits through an analysis of objects, including sugar, tobacco, tea, maps, portraiture, print, and more.

The following month Michael Chaplin talked about the life and work of his father, Sid Chaplin. He described his career from the pit villages of Country Durham through years spent editing the NCB Journal, and his emergence as an essayist and screenwriter. The talk was part of the Education4Action Gala Week programme at Redhills in Durham.

In September, we held a day school in collaboration with the Histories of Activism Group at Northumbria University. Each of the nine workshops began with a talk from the workshop leader, which informed the subsequent debate. The topics were popular music and politics in the North East, labour activism, the women's movement, environmental activism, the peace movement, politics, cooperatives, trade unions, and the growth of ethnic diversity in the North East. In his keynote speech, John Charlton talked about the changes that had happened over the last half century, setting them in the context of Brexit and what Brexit tells us about the current state of the labour movement, including the remarkable turnaround in Labour's fortunes in the June 2017 election.

The grand finale to the Jubilee events was a terrific talk given by Professor David Saunders about Matvei Fisher, an old Bolshevik who lived in Newcastle for many years and his son Willie, better known as Rudolf Abel, the subject of the film 'Bridge of Spies'.¹ Appropriately enough, the talk was given on the exact 100th anniversary of the October Revolution: 7 November (25 October, old style).

The Jubilee has given the Society an opportunity to think about what it was and what it has become. This is perhaps most concretely illustrated by the changes in the journal over the years. The first issue was almost entirely devoted to 'labour history' in the strict sense of the phrase; the Labour Party, the Keelmen, and the rulebooks, in full, of a number of benevolent societies and trade unions associated with the Wear Shipwrights.² The 2017 journal, volume 48, has two essays on gender and community development projects, and one on Yemeni seamen in South Shields, as well as more 'mainstream' trade union history.

A quick survey of the last ten journals (2008-2017) reveals a number of broader themes in addition to labour history: women's suffrage, women's rights and women in wartime – especially WW1, midwifery, nursing and health - the Spanish Civil War and the North East, race relations and black consciousness, the slave trade and its North East connections, education, art, film, music and literature.

Before we become too smug at our new-found eclecticism, the contents lists of the first fourteen issues show an early interest in women's issues: Volume 5 (1971) has women's work as its theme and there is also housing, public health, and the arts.³ However, in the main, the emphasis then was very much on the academic study of the labour movement.

This is another notable change; a move away from academia and academic credentials to more broadly-based contributions, both in the journal and in our monthly First Tuesday talks. We still welcome fully referenced, academic essays but we are also very open to pieces which give opinions, re-tell experience, or record events in a less formal style.

The Society originated as a publisher of its *Bulletin*, the precursor to the journal, receiving three to four papers over the year that were 'read' at meetings of the Society and then published in the *Bulletin*. We now hold ten First Tuesdays every year and publish around fifteen essays in each journal, plus book reviews and 'appreciations' (obituaries). The journal goes to each member of the Society every year, and a good number of university libraries and other institutions also subscribe.

The Sid Chaplin Labour History Trophy was established in 1988 as a memorial to the great writer and playwright. It is awarded for the best essay submitted by someone who is not a professional historian, and is intended to encourage interest in North East labour history. The winning essay is always published in the journal and, in keeping with the trend in the Society, topics have included: accounts of the mining industry (including the great strike of 1984-85), the origins of district nursing in the region, controversies over vaccinations, the Irish communities on Tyneside, working-class attitudes to the Empire, and the building of the Tyne Bridge.

In 2014, the Society established its website, to advertise meetings and enable people to join. More recently it has added resources originating from the Society's efforts, particularly the Oral Histories and the database that was created by the Popular Politics project (2012-13). The decision has now been taken to start putting past journals on-line.⁴ There is also a plan to add video recordings of some of our talks.

First Tuesday talks range from fully-worked pieces from experts to opportunities for graduate and post-graduate students to use us as a sounding-board for their developing ideas. Others are simply interested enough to come and talk to us about their activism or their work. Maintaining such a flow of interesting, relevant talks is a considerable task, which falls mainly to the Secretary of the Society.

A recent speaker, Dr Julie Scanlon, has researched the 1976 Women's Liberation Movement weekend conference at Kirkley Hall in Ponteland. To this writer, her talk somehow encapsulated the time of the Society. Starting with the pressing need forty years ago to establish forums for women to share their experiences and establish and benefit from their solidarity at these conferences, culminating in the #MeToo movement, where millions of women are able to instantly identify and communicate with each other. Julie spoke of one young woman in Washington (not DC) whose *only* contact with the Women's movement forty years ago was the copy of *Spare Rib* that her newsagent obtained for her and kept 'under the shop counter'.⁵ She attended the 1976 Conference but left after the

first morning, disillusioned because some people objected to her make-up and feminine dress. This same woman is still active and prominent in the movement in the North East. But, for all that has been achieved, this battle is far from over.

The North East Labour History Society was founded during the time of the first Labour Government since the early 1950s to have a big enough parliamentary majority to make significant gains for the British working class. Along the banks of the Tyne, Wear and Tees and in the coalfields and steel works it was a time of optimism and self-confidence. The unions were solid and there was increasing activism on the left. Then the 1980s saw the North East taking the brunt of the brutal programme by the Tory Party and their allies to break the power of the trade unions, to reduce the welfare state to a minimum last resort and to destroy the gains of the post-war period: the nationalised industries and the National Health Service. In the 1984/5 miners' strike police from other parts of the country were bussed in to the pit villages of Northumberland and Durham, part of a national police force which used whatever tactics it deemed necessary to break the NUM and its members.

It was during this low ebb for the labour movement, that the Society moved beyond its earlier 'labourist' and academic focus to the more 'diversified' form we see today. This now intersects with the revitalisation of the Labour Party and growing efforts to unionise the 'gig' sectors of the economy and defend working rights, pay and pensions. Labour needs to respond, and is responding, to a different set of aspirations for the present: equal pay and opportunities for women, employment rights and freedom from fear for recent immigrants, student fees, global warming, foreign aid, the problems of Brexit and so on. Some of these things that have become the staple of the Society are now in the political mainstream.

A recent British Election Study (BES) paper on the 2017 election has found that, rather than a big jump in turnout by the 18-24 year olds (the so-called 'youthquake', which they say didn't really happen), it was a large movement to Labour by people under fifty-five years that boosted the vote. Labour won a majority of voters in this group and it was only the pensioners

who kept the Tories in power.⁶ There was an increased turnout in the 24-44 age group and those under 24 who did vote gave Labour a margin of 50%. The Tories have an age problem. Labour's problem is to ensure they retain and build on the gains they made last year.

How will the Society develop over the next 50 years? Looking around our First Tuesday meetings, it has to be said that we are a little grey and grizzled, but the September day-school was a different matter. There was a strong representation of younger people and this was probably by virtue of our collaboration with the University of Northumbria and our extensive publicising of the event around academic circles. A number of these young people made a considerable contribution to the debates at the day-school, iconoclastic, unafraid to challenge some of 'our' more cherished assumptions.

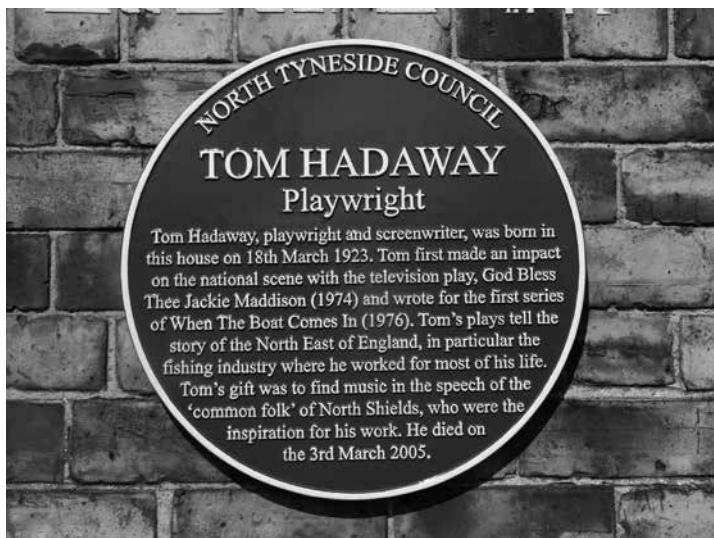
Whilst the Society has moved away from being exclusively academic, I believe it is among young people who are interested in ideas as well as activism that we should be looking for our main audience. Many, but by no means all, of these people will be in universities. As already mentioned, we have graduate students giving First Tuesday talks and the Sid Chaplin essay prize is mainly aimed at younger people. Perhaps a more focussed effort to get this group to address us and bring their critical view to bear on our, perhaps a little cosy, assumptions would be good for everyone?

Notes

- ¹ An 'Old Bolshevik' was someone who had been a member of the Bolshevik Party before the October Revolution.
- ² A draft scanned version of this first issue of the journal is now available on the NELH website as the first step of an ambitious, long-term plan to make all our past journals available online. See <http://nelh.net/the-societys-journal/past-issues-of-the-journal/>
- ³ See <http://nelh.net/the-societys-journal/previous-issues/> for indexes of our previous issues, as well as a list of libraries that take the journal.
- ⁴ See <http://nelh.net/resources-library/> for Oral Histories, the Popular Politics database and other Society resources.
- ⁵ Whether keeping *Spare Rib* 'under the counter' was to ensure that someone else didn't buy it or because this periodical was too incendiary to put on display, Julie didn't say.
- ⁶ <https://www.economist.com/news/britain/21736163-supposed-surge-turnout-among-youth-people-was-overstated-myth-youthquake-2017>

Commemoration: Tom Hadaway 1923 – 2005

Archie Potts



On 18 March 2018, which would have been playwright Tom Hadaway's 95th birthday, actor Tim Healy unveiled a blue plaque on the outside wall of his birthplace at 6 Howdon Road, North Shields. The unveiling ceremony was held on a bitterly cold day and attended by the Mayor of North Tyneside, Norma Redfern, and a large gathering of Tom Hadaway's relatives and friends.

In a short address, Tim Healy told the crowd that the playwright had been his 'mentor and friend' who had 'opened doors' for working class actors such as himself. Tom's plays, mainly on local themes, had

provided good parts for local actors who had gone on to achieve national recognition.

Tom was born on 18 March 1923. Orphaned at an early age he was brought up by an aunt and then by foster parents, spending part of his teenage years living on the tough Ridges Estate in North Shields (renamed the Meadow Well in 1968). He was educated at Ralph Gardner School, which he left at fourteen years of age to start work on the Fish Quay in North Shields.

During the Second World War he served as a petty officer in the Royal Navy. His future wife, Barbara, served in the Women's Royal Naval Service (WRNS) and was on the secretarial staff of the code-breaking unit at Bletchley Park. As a member of the 'Ultra' team she was sworn to secrecy about her work and never discussed it.

Tom began writing when in his forties, publishing his first short story in 1970. He went on to write sixteen stage plays, seven television plays and three screenplays, as well as numerous short stories and poems. Tom was a natural storyteller and he had the talent to write authentic dialogue. He wrote about 'the commonfolk' – a term he preferred to 'the working class' – and he wrote about them from experience.

Tom did a spell as writer-in-residence at Durham Prison, and spent several months researching material for a television play about British orphans taken to Australia in the early years of the twentieth century. For reasons never fully explained, the BBC killed off the project before Tom had completed his final draft.

Tom died in Belfast on 3 March 2005. He had gone to Ireland to co-operate with his daughter, Pauline, on a play about Laurel and Hardy's visit to the North East in 1932.¹

Notes

¹ Much of this information is taken from his obituary in the *Guardian*, 11 March 2005, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2005/mar/11/guardianobituaries.artsobituaries1> [accessed 14 May 2018] and V. MacLane, Introduction, in Tom Hadaway, *The Prison Plays*, (Sunderland: University of Sunderland, 2004).

Phil Lenton (1946-2017) A Personal Appreciation

Keith Hodgson



Phil Lenton whilst on a visit to the Cuban Medical Mission in Honduras in 2004. Photographed by Ailie Hodgson.

Phil Lenton, my old friend and union comrade of nearly forty years, died unexpectedly after a short illness in a Newcastle hospital on 24 November 2017, aged 71. He worked for the National Union of Public Employees (NUPE) and UNISON from 1971 to 2000, firstly as a union organiser, then as Divisional Officer in the Northern Division and, eventually, as National Secretary in UNISON, in charge of the challenging process of ensuring branch mergers in the new union.

Phil was a remarkable man who lived a full and eventful life, always committed to supporting working class people in struggle and fighting imperialism. For me, he is always someone who lived his dreams.

Phil was born into a political family in Twickenham, South West London. His father, Walter, was a trade union representative for the Railway Union before the war and then became a union official in the water industry. Phil was a lifelong communist and, following his sister's activism in the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), set up the youth CND in Feltham and was active in the Young Communist League.

Phil left school at sixteen after a fairly bruising educational experience at the direct grant Hampton Grammar School. In the early 1960s he busked around Europe and Scandinavia, and managed to get arrested in Grosvenor Square on an anti-Vietnam demonstration. Aged twenty, he applied to Coleg Harlech in Wales, a college for mature students. His former headmaster had written a reference saying 'in my view any public money spent on further education for Lenton would be wasted'. Asked at the interview if he could explain this, Phil said he was the only son of a plumber at the school, a communist, and the Head was class-biased. 'That'll do for me – you're in' was the reaction of the interviewer.

In 1971 Phil started work for NUPE under Alan Fisher and Bernard Dix.¹ He was sent to Newcastle, on his motorbike, to work with the Divisional Officer Rodney Bickerstaffe. This was the start of their lifelong friendship and "Bick" was an inspirational mentor and guide throughout Phil's union career. In the first NHS ancillary workers' strike in 1972, Phil learnt much about organising and industrial action and recruited in the Royal Victoria Infirmary (RVI), the very hospital in which he died. Phil was an impressive organiser. He had courage, and was brave in dealing with hostile employers. He was always prepared to take risks and we were all fortunate in having Bick as a national guide when things sometimes went wrong. Phil had a dogged determination and always brought a wider analysis and understanding of class struggle to his work.

There were numerous disputes and strikes Phil was involved in organising, with others, during the 70s and 80s, especially in response to Thatcher's attempt to destroy unionism in Britain. But a couple were particularly significant. The first was the 1982 NHS strike which lasted eight months and saw us organising, with the National Union of Miners (NUM), picketing of pits in Durham and Northumberland in support of the nurses. Phil was instrumental in building these links, which became a matter of reciprocal solidarity when the miners were faced with their own year-long battle against pit closures and Thatcher's attempt to destroy them in 1984/85. The second big struggle was the anti-privatisation campaign in the Northern Division against Thatcher's attempt to impose compulsory privatisation of hospital and local government services. From the start Phil, together with other organisers, developed a strategy of vigorously opposing any discussion of privatisation by the Regional Health Authority and District Health Authorities. For a year or more this was very successful. The next stage was to fight any attempt to cut wages to 'win' a bid against contractors.

Phil was the organiser of the major dispute, again at the RVI, when the management called for drastic cuts in pay for the low paid domestic staff in order to undercut bids from three contractors. Three days of strikes were called and Phil requested solidarity support from other trade unions. This led to around 5,000 workers turning up to support the RVI picket line, a completely spontaneous march through Newcastle and a rally in Leazes Park. When the police asked 'who was the organiser of this illegal march', Phil pointed to the back and said 'some bloke down there!'. The management eventually backed down and accepted the in-house bid on existing terms and conditions. By 1987, the Cleaning and Catering Contractors Association complained to the Regional Health Authority about being denied contracts because of 'unfair union action'. For many years they avoided the Northern Division, which had the effect of protecting workers' wages. We called it 'creative industrial action'.

Phil was also instrumental in developing the tactic of workers' occupations in the Northern Division. The week long occupations of the Water Treatment Plant at Howden in 1983, and the NHS Cook Freeze Unit in Newcastle in 1986 were especially significant. There was also the 12-hour strike of nineteen care workers employed at Craigielea, a private nursing home in Gateshead, that Phil organised in order to protest against their bad treatment and low wages in 1988. A ruthless management, using Thatcher's new anti-union laws, sacked all the staff and refused to negotiate. This terrible defeat was eventually turned into a major success by the staff as they recorded their own protest song and, with Northumbria University, developed their own play, which toured all over the country. After nine months they all got new jobs and legal compensation. Many said it was the best nine months of their life.²

In 1994 Phil was asked by Head Office if he would be willing to be deployed to work as an organiser in Durban with the African National Congress (ANC) for the first free election in South Africa. This request for support had come direct from Mandela, who was dealing with the threat of civil war between ANC and the Zulu Inkatha Freedom Party, and needed experienced organisers to help. Phil agreed, despite the perceived risks, and the understandable concerns of his family.

Within a month he arranged for me to join him to help with voter education. As 'ANC comrades' we were able to work in squatter camps with the most dispossessed of Africans. We were at the last rally of the election at Kings Park in Durban in front of the whole leadership of the ANC: Mandela, Sisulu, Tutu, Naido, Mbeki. Maybe half a million Africans piled into the park. It was the biggest rally we had ever seen. After the rally and the call to go out and vote, the crowd surged forward. Fearing we were going to be crushed we were forced to dive under the stage and came up in the dignitaries' area, which was interesting. It was probably the most significant political event in our lives.

Later that night Phil said 'what could ever be better than this?'. As all the ANC comrades had talked about the role Cuba had played in bringing

about the end of apartheid, we both agreed that ‘maybe only the Havana Jazz festival in Cuba’. We called this conversation ‘dreamtime’ because, a week after we returned to work in Britain, Phil received a letter from UNISON International Department asking if our region could host a visit from the General Secretary of the Cuban Health Workers’ Union. We did go to the Havana Jazz Festival the following February and Phil went on to develop the most remarkable links and solidarity with Cuba and the Cuban health workers. He managed to organise the filling of three ships with a large number of ambulances and buses, and tons of medical equipment and powdered milk, under the banner of ‘Health - a Trade Union Ship for Cuba’, helping to breach the USA blockade. He promoted the idea of twinning between regions of UNISON and the Cuban Health Workers’ Union, and between individual hospitals. He was instrumental in successfully persuading the TUC to change its policy on Cuba. Phil was awarded Cuba’s Medal of Honour in 2002 in recognition of his achievements in support of the Cuban International Medical Brigades.

Phil loved African and Cuban music and in advance of the merger with UNISON, NUPE was hosting a delegation of South Africans from our sister union, the National Education Health and Allied Workers Union (NEHAWU) in November 1992. Phil had been instrumental in developing twinning arrangements between NUPE and NEHAWU. As part of our solidarity exchange Phil, as Divisional Officer, managed to get agreement to fund and organise a concert for our comrades. He arranged for the top South African reggae band Lucky Dube to play at Newcastle Civic Centre.³ Over 600 attended one of the largest multi-cultural events at that time in the north. When the music management company saw the success of the Lucky Dube concert they offered to bring African superstar Fela Kuti to Newcastle as part of his visit to the UK. It was always one of Phil’s regrets and a source of reflection on what might have been, that the prospect of accommodating the 26-piece band, plus his entourage, made it financially impractical.

Phil never really retired and, after leaving UNISON in November 2000, he started working on international projects for Octagon, a

charitable company channelling funds to help develop self-help in Africa, Latin America and the Middle East. Of particular note was his work in Chupanga, Mozambique, which had been devastated by flooding, and with the Yarmouk Palestinian refugee camp in Syria.

More recently, Phil was active in helping to develop the Friends of the Durham Miners' Gala and ensure its long term survival as the biggest working class event in Europe, and he was instrumental in securing the future of the Easington Colliery Brass Band. The Durham Miners' Brass Band played at his funeral and he would have been intensely proud of their powerful rendition of the miners' hymn *Gresford*.

Phil is survived by his wife Rosemary Lockett, whom he married in 1984, and by their two children, Annie and Daniel; and sons Sion and Joseph from his first marriage. The children all spoke movingly at his funeral in Gateshead. He was a remarkable trade unionist and a remarkable man who somehow managed to make dreamtime a reality.⁴

Notes

¹ Phil Lenton, 'NUPE in the North', *North East History*, Vol 47 (2016), 113 -130.

² Keith Hodgson, 'Campaigning at Craigielea', as above, 131-133.

³ Northern News and Views: Commemorative Issue, *Journal of the Northern Region NUPE* (Newcastle upon Tyne), May 1993.

⁴ An obituary appeared in the *Guardian*, 31 December 2017, and can now be accessed via <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/dec/31/phil-lenton-obituary>.

We Cut The Coal: Bevin Boys in the North East of England, 1944-48

Elizabeth O'Donnell

In 2008, formal recognition was finally given to the surviving men who had been conscripted in World War Two to work in coal mines rather than serve in the armed forces, when the 'Bevin Boys', named after Minister of Labour, Ernest Bevin, were presented with a commemorative badge. An oral history project run by Northumberland Archives at the time collected the memories of former Bevin Boys who had worked in the North East of England. This essay, written seventy years after the demobilisation of the last of the Bevin Boys in 1948, considers the scheme through the perceptions of those interviewed. Although each man's story is unique, all were deeply affected by their experience, and several common threads emerge. Firstly, however, the reasons it was necessary to conscript young men to work in the pits, together with general perceptions of the industry and the miners' responses to government entreaties to boost production, will be examined.

Nineteen of those interviewed had worked in Northumberland or Durham: nine were local men, three each were from Scotland and the North West, and four from London. A woman worker from a Bevin Boys hostel was also interviewed and one man working in Yorkshire. They were either contacted through the Bevin Boys Association or had responded to a press appeal for former Bevin Boys to come forward.¹ After an initial telephone conversation, most interviews took place in their homes, the session generally lasting three hours, generating about an hour of recorded material.

Historian Alessandro Portelli has defended the partial, selective and subjective nature of oral history as evidence, arguing that ‘it tells us less about events as such than about their meaning’.² Thus, interviewees talked about ‘what happened’, such as training and work practices, but were also encouraged to express their emotional responses to their service and reflect on its impact on their subsequent lives.

Every Individual Effort Counts

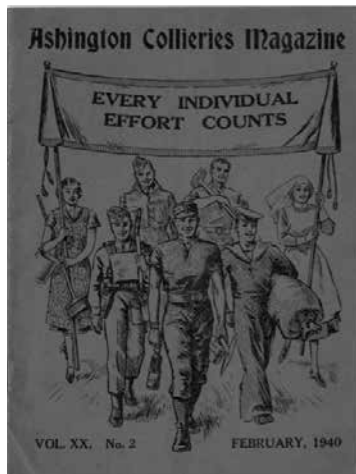
In October 1942, Churchill addressed representatives from the mining industry in Westminster Central Hall, concluding:

[S]omeday, when children ask: ‘What did you do to win this inheritance for us, and to make our name respected among men?’ one will say: ‘I was a fighter pilot;’ another will say: ‘I was in the submarine service;’ another: ‘I marched with the Eighth Army;’and you in your turn will say, with equal pride and with equal right: ‘We cut the coal.’³

His rhetoric, equating mining productivity with military success, was only one of many attempts by the government to avert a looming fuel crisis. Familiar representations of the ‘People’s War’, promoted by the Ministry of Information and aimed at fostering national unity, cast ordinary citizens as heroic figures, cheerfully enduring the hardships of war. The artwork for the cover of the *Ashington Collieries Magazine* in February 1940 exemplifies this view, depicting servicemen, a labourer, nurse and housewife, marching together behind a coal miner, under the banner, ‘Every Individual Effort Counts.’ In the previous month a dialect poem in Ashington Colliery’s magazine had hammered home the same point:

Ye can taalk aboot wor Air Force, wor Navy and wor Army,
But folks that say that’s aal wor strength, wey man they’re
taalkin’ barmy!

We're fighting in the cause of peace whereivvor wheels gan
roond;
Whereivvor hearts beat willingly t'rhythmic hammer-sound.
And ivory time a pitman says, 'Be Gox' Aa'll see this through!
It's one mair vital target-shot t'make a tyrant rue.
And ye can see the evidence of good owld British pluck
Whereivvor coals come flowin' doon t'fill the waiting truck.⁵



Ashington Collieries Magazine, February 1940. Reproduced with permission of Northumberland Archives (NRO 00538/249/15).

The reality, however, was very different. Kay Exton explains how military service was considered 'the epitome of citizenship', and the quintessential duty of young men.⁶ In the same issue as the poem, 439 men from the five Ashington collieries who had volunteered for the armed forces were listed, subtly challenging the sense of patriotism, citizenship and masculinity of those choosing not to fight. Indeed, the recollections of the former Bevin Boys are overwhelmingly coloured by feelings of thwarted ambition, bitter disappointment and shame.

Miners Remember the Time When Their Labour Was Not Required

When planning for war, the government, wary of exerting direct control over the coal industry, assumed that both production and labour force would be sufficient, so did not apply an Essential Work Order (ESO), which would have tied miners to their work.⁷ In the first two weeks of war, 27,000 miners joined the Forces. Temporary pit closures due to loss of overseas markets and transport problems brought unemployment - over 15,000 between September 1940 and March 1941 in County Durham alone. Miners left for better paid work elsewhere as well as volunteering for active service. The departure of so many men at the peak of fitness resulted in an ageing workforce (over 40% of miners were aged forty years and above by 1941), and a fall in the output per man-shift. Other factors adding to the deteriorating output and dwindling workforce include resentment about low wages (between 1938 and early 1942, miners ranked 59 out of 97 in the industrial wage league table) and deeply rooted friction between workers and coal owners within an industry notorious for its poor industrial relations, inefficiency, fragmentation and variable quality of management.

In May 1941, with a workforce at least 30,000 lower than the minimum deemed necessary, the extent of the labour crisis was finally acknowledged. The ESO was meant to stem the flow of men from the industry and deal with persistent absenteeism. Henceforth, absentees could be fined or even imprisoned. The first prosecutions in Ashington in December 1941 were aimed at challenging miners' reluctance to work the Saturday midnight shift, with between 20 and 25% habitually absent.⁸ An appeal for 50,000 ex-miners who had left for other industries to return to the pits generated only 16,000 responses. Debating the ESO in Parliament, Robert Taylor, Labour MP for Morpeth mocked colleagues, for 'your sincere regard, your deep affection, your great love for the miner. It is only in wartime that we get love for miners.'⁹ Men were not only leaving the pit, but, he continued, 'boys, on account of the low, miserable wages, have not been coming into the industry; and the parents have not been encouraging them to do so.'

The high accident rate in 1941, with 126 killed in collieries in Durham and Northumberland, was also cited as a reason for low juvenile recruitment.¹⁰

The government now had ultimate authority over the recruitment, dismissal and discipline of the workforce; paradoxically, the recruitment of boys into the industry fell even further, because now, if they started work at the pit, they would be prevented from joining the Forces when they were eighteen. Then, during the winter of 1941 and 1942, with the government seriously considering the rationing of coal, discontent in the coal fields over pay and conditions spilled over into industrial strife. Man days lost through strikes were eight times the pre-war average, to say nothing of the 'Ca Canny' ('Go Slow') work practices being applied. To secure the miners' cooperation and increase efficiency, the government was forced to strengthen its practical control over the industry through a system of Regional Controllers under a National Authority. Pay was increased within a national framework, medical services improved (to prevent abuse of medical certificates and enable better rehabilitation of the injured or ill) and the number of canteens increased from 250 in 1940 to 912 by 1945.

Coal owners were suspicious that increased government control over the industry would inevitably lead to nationalisation, while miners could not forget their appalling treatment in the interwar years. It would 'have needed a miracle of biblical proportions for the aches and pains of the interwar slump to have been wholly spirited away', writes contemporary historian Peter Hennessy, and nowhere did this apply more than to Britain's coalfield communities.¹¹ Reacting to criticism of miners, one *Evening Chronicle* correspondent wrote:

Not one miner, given the opportunity, lacks the courage to face the enemy hand to hand; the number of miners serving in the Forces proves this. Miners remember the time when their labour was not required three, four, and even five days a week. They are still not sure that conditions will be better after the war.¹²

Between August 1939 and March 1943 pay had risen 58% - miners were now 10th in the industrial wages league table - but absenteeism increased from 9% in 1941 to 16.3% in 1945. A North Seaton miner, absent 74 out of 130 shifts, defiantly stated, 'When I come out [of prison] I will not go back to the pits. Is this a free country? Is there forced labour in this country? I want to be released to go into the Forces, to do something worthwhile.'¹³ The refusal to change shift patterns or abandon the custom of stopping all work in a pit when a fatality occurred, was derided, while dissatisfaction over pay anomalies provoked a rash of unofficial strikes, with stoppages or partial stoppages at ten Durham collieries. The conflict even threatened preparations for the Second Front in Spring 1944. The public's sympathy towards the miners, even in colliery districts, was stretched to the limit, as seen in the following letter to the *Evening Chronicle* in September 1943:

After reading about all the various strikes etc I feel I must write and give part of a letter from my husband, who has been 3 years with the 8th Army: 'When the boys out here read about the strikers at home they all want the job of returning with Tommy guns. You can guess the rest.'¹⁴

But mineworkers were newly confident, successfully using their industrial muscle to enhance pay and conditions for the first time, and were quick to defend their actions:

[W]ould you like to risk your neck far underground where your ceiling and floor are 2 or 3 feet apart, to do this all your life, not just for a few years, and not want some financial inducement?...it takes 'guts' to be a miner and more so when your wage is 14s 5d per shift.¹⁵

Efforts to increase the labour force continued. Ernest Bevin appealed directly to sixth form boys:

None of you would funk a fight with the enemy and I do not believe it would be said of any of you boys that you failed to respond to the call for coal, on which victory so much depends... [and is] just as vital as service in the armed forces.¹⁶

30,000 former miners were forcibly returned from non-combatant roles in the Forces between 1941 and 1943, and other industries trawled for more. Men under 25 who registered for military service were given the option to enter the mines and in September 1943 an appeal was made for 50,000 men and boys to volunteer. What was needed more than anything were men to work underground, but attempts to force surface workers to do so when they turned eighteen, with fines or imprisonment for refusal, incited more industrial action. Magistrates were unsympathetic to those refusing to work underground; in March 1943 a North Seaton man was told in no uncertain terms that ‘if there were many like you we could close the pits and tell Hitler we are finished.’¹⁷

Eventually, in December 1943, the momentous decision was made to compel a proportion of the young men called up for national service to undertake this vital work. To make the scheme as fair as possible, allocation of the work would be through a random ballot. All those with service numbers ending with a digit drawn from a hat (said to have been Bevin’s own bowler) would be directed into the mines. The first draw was on 14 December 1943 and over the following eighteen months over 21,000 young men were directed this way to work in the coal mines. Their role was to free up regular miners to do the highly skilled work at the coalface, mainly through operating the underground haulage system. In the same period, about 30,000 opted or volunteered for the same service. The belief that conscientious objectors were also directed to the pits is erroneous as this happened in only 41 cases. Unsurprisingly, about 40% of those selected appealed against their allocation, but almost all appeals were rejected, with exemptions only for men in highly skilled occupations. Even

those who had done some initial training in pre-service organisations, such as air cadets, were unsuccessful.

Mr Bevin's Raffle

On 17 January 1944, the *Evening Chronicle* reported the arrival at the training pit at Annfield Plain, County Durham, of the first young men who had been conscripted to work in coal mining.¹⁸ The earliest to appear, at 9.20 am, was a 'little cockney lad', who, never having seen a colliery before, 'looked bewildered as he gazed at the gaunt headgear of the Morrison Old Pit.' The editorial commented,

For good or ill we suppose they have been christened the 'Bevin Boys', these young fellows who have now arrived in the North to learn the craft of a pitman...these youths, called in their country's hour of need, deserve, and will receive, sympathetic treatment in their strange environment.¹⁹

Roy, another early arrival, lived near Denton Burn pit in Newcastle, and knew only too well the filthy and back-breaking work that lay before him.²⁰ Roy had worked at Isaac Whalton's, a gentlemen's outfitters in the city, and had 'hands like a girl's'. The first interviewee in the Northumberland Archives project, he recounted his experiences with great good humour, describing his allocation in the ballot as '[t]he only raffle I've ever won', but also conveyed the powerful sense of disappointment and bewilderment felt by the majority of the interviewees:

Then I came downstairs and sees a little envelope from the Ministry of Labour...and it said, 'Report to the Morrison Colliery, Annfield Plain, for training in the mines.' I thought, 'This is a mistake. I've had my medical for the navy', so I went to the offices which were in New Bridge Street, and I said, 'You've sent me this by mistake...'

Exton found a similar pattern in Bevin Boys' accounts, which often began with a description of the interviewees' military aspirations, a 'sorrowful narrative of stunted ambition.'²¹ Angus from Lemington, an office worker at Vickers Armstrong, was so traumatised by his experience that he was unable to talk about it for over 60 years. He described his feelings as his eighteenth birthday approached:

The age when I was ready for military service I was looking forward to it as was in keeping with the climate of the times. Of course all the young men were looking forward to serving their King and country....I received an official document from the government, opened it eagerly...²²

'It was a very great shock and a tremendous disappointment' when he discovered he had been directed to the coal mines, but with 'draconian' penalties for failing to comply, 'all I could do was to go forward and take my medicine.'

All but three of the group expressed their reactions on being directed to the mines in similar language: as 'a bombshell – a death sentence', 'a bitter disappointment', '[I] cried my eyes out', 'it was a bad day for me', '[I was] down-hearted'. One exception was Kenneth of Barrow in Furness, who, having failed his pharmacy exams (pharmacy was a reserved occupation), decided he would rather be a miner than fight and so volunteered to work underground.²³ He felt that, considering what other people had to put up with during the war, it would have been churlish to complain, a sentiment endorsed in letters to the *Evening Chronicle* at the time:

Going down a pit to a normal person should not be any more dismaying than going to sea for the first time. Certainly not as forbidding as entering the firing line...
[the miners'] war lot...is, after all, not quite so bad as lying on snow-covered steppes, or in the hail and sleet of the Italian battle line.²⁴

John, a law student from Jarrow, was only interested in football and athletics so did not really care what he did as long as he could still play and train, while Sam, of Newcastle's West End, was pleased to escape unpleasant work in a factory.²⁶ But overwhelmingly, the emotions were of great frustration and distress at being denied the opportunity to express their patriotism fully. Many appealed against the decision: John of London, an electronics engineering trainee, thought it was poor use of his abilities; his father, who was in the Navy, asked his Captain to intervene, to no avail.²⁷

Another reason for the men's shock was because of widely-held negative impressions of mining communities, exacerbated by the interwar strikes and denigration in sections of the press. They were seen as insular, remote, with their own peculiar customs and language. In 1943 a mining lecturer at King's College, Newcastle, blamed 'some novels and films [which] over-emphasise to the layman the dangers and hazards of the work' – such as *The Stars Look Down*, the 1939 film of the 1935 A. J. Cronin novel set in a northern pit village – for the reluctance of boys to enter the industry.²⁸ Roy saw miners at his local pit 'going to work and coming back – 'cos they didn't have any pithead baths there – all black and dirty-looking', and remembered some of his relatives calling them 'lazy brutes', and Reg (who worked in Yorkshire) was very self-conscious when travelling to and from his workplace as he was aware that miners were seen as socially inferior.²⁹ Even more embarrassed was Billy of Stanley. Family members, including his father, had been pitmen, but Billy was proud to get a job as a wages clerk in the Louisa Pit. Now he was afraid that people would think he had been fired from his 'posh' job and so preferred shifts where he would not be seen returning home in his filthy pit clothes.³⁰

The Bevin Boys also felt deprived because they had no uniform to demonstrate that they were 'doing their duty.' The fiancée of John of London broke off their engagement because she wanted a man in uniform, and Kit of Amble, turned down by a girl at a dance, complained to the master of ceremonies when she immediately got up to dance with an airman. Because Kit was well-known in the community – his father had

been killed working underground and his older brother recalled to the pit from the army – the couple were ordered off the dance floor.³¹ Not all were conscious of negative reactions from members of the public, but several reported anger and humiliation when they were accused of shirking their military duty or even of being conscientious objectors. Those responsible for finding billets for Bevin Boys in Bedlington had encountered reluctance to house them, but by April 1944 were able to report that '[t]he whole trouble at the outset was that many people thought these chaps were conscientious objectors, but that was entirely wrong, and since then people have realised that they are really good boys.'³²

Angus hated being dirty, wet and cold all the time but found some consolation in the friendliness of the miners, 'a marvellous body of men'. There were very few instances recounted of pitmen behaving badly to the Bevin Boys, although any of the latter seen as 'snooty' could get on the wrong side of their workmates. Roy felt completely accepted, looked after 'as if I was a baby', apart from one miner who refused to work with 'one of those bloody pansies.'³³ Millie, a canteen worker at the New Kyo Bevin Boys' hostel, came from a Northumberland pit village, and sympathised with the young men.

A lot of people used to say they felt sorry for them because none of them wanted to be down the mines. You could tell, when they came in, on a Monday – we used to get about a hundred coming in on a Monday morning every once a month... and you could see they weren't made for the mines.³⁴

Her sentiment that Bevin Boys 'weren't made for the mines' was affirmed by Eddie from Glasgow - 'you don't train lads to be miners, you bring them up to be miners'.³⁵

Settling in to their new surroundings could be very difficult and there were examples of Bevin Boys absconding. Bob, fed up with travelling to

work in Seaton Burn pit from his Newcastle lodging, simply took himself home to Dunoon. After a couple of months he was arrested at home and only saved from jail by agreeing to go back.³⁶ Ron of Stoke Newington resorted to malingering:

I went to the doctor and told the doctor that I had a bad back and he would give me a sick note for a couple of weeks and I used to go back home to London... and worked for two or three weeks – all depending on how long my sick note would last. So I did that a few times cos I wasn't very happy being there.³⁷

Bob from Catford worked renovating bomb-damaged buildings in London whenever he was on leave and his employer unsuccessfully argued for Bob's release for this essential work.³⁸ Eight of the nine local boys were allocated work near their home, enabling them to live there rather than in a hostel or lodgings.

Several Bevin Boys became reconciled to their situation when they found a local girlfriend. Ken of Preston recalled how a friend had jokingly warned him not to fall in love with the landlady's daughter, but he did; they went on to get married, and 'what had been the worst day of my life became the best.'³⁹ Ron of Stoke Newington's malingering came to an end when he met the girl who was to become his wife 'and I was content of being up here and I took working in the mines as a job and I came to like it.'⁴⁰ Both continued working in the mines after demobilisation, as did four other interviewees. Ronnie, a former apprentice plumber, went home to Chester, but there was no provision for keeping open the jobs of Bevin Boys, unlike those serving in the Forces, and he could only find work as a labourer.⁴¹ He also found that he missed the camaraderie of the pits, so he returned to Northumberland where he worked as a coalminer until 1981.

Why Should A Miner Have Medals More Than a Gun-Maker?

When the war ended, the Bevin Boys faced fresh frustration when they found that they had not been included in the government's initial plans for demobilisation. Despite being promised that they would be released at the same rate as the army, by the end of 1946, none had received a release date. In October 1945, during the debate in the House of Commons on Directed Mineworkers, Conservative MPs showed more sympathy for this group than Labour. Although they had been told their work was just as important as serving in the Forces, Bevin Boys not only had no job to return to, but there would be no 'demob' suit or service medals. Moreover, while working, they, unlike the military, had to pay for their board and lodging and equipment, including helmet, steel-capped boots and even carbide for their lamps. All they would leave with was a week's wages and a travel warrant. Alan Dower, the Conservative MP for Penrith and Cockermouth urged 'fair play' for the Bevin Boys; they should be awarded medals as if they had fought because 'they will mix with their contemporaries and will have nothing to show what they did in the war.' Ness Edwards, Parliamentary Secretary to the Minister of Labour, retorted, 'Why should a miner have medals more than a gun-maker? If we are to give medals, we must give them to the whole civilian population, and not least to the housewives of Britain.' A cartoon in the *Evening Chronicle* had made a similar point in 1944, humorously illustrating the hardship caused to housewives because of rationing.⁴³ Jack Jones, MP for Bolton, also objected to Bevin Boys getting privileges, arguing that they had only been shouldering their fair share. Coming from a higher class, they were fitter and better educated than boys from the pit villages; moreover, he continued, the coal industry had been allowed to degenerate before the war by the same people who objected to their sons going underground. It was not until 1948 that the last Bevin Boys were demobilised, the main reason for the reluctance of the government to release them was the desperate need to retain labour in the industry – 'we cannot afford to lose a single man in the industry this winter.'



Evening Chronicle, 2 February 1944. Copyright Trinity Mirror. Created courtesy of the British Library Board.

Conclusion

All of the former Bevin Boys, interviewed sixty years after the last were demobilised, narrated vivid tales of their service, often through well-rehearsed anecdotes but also through apparently spontaneous recollections. Inevitably, these were shaped by their later lives. With the possible exception of Angus, they judged it to have been a worthwhile experience, although it would be interesting to establish how long afterwards they were able to take such a positive view. Angus's misery was so acute that a doctor was persuaded to downgrade his medical status, exempting him from work in the pits (which required the highest medical grade) and qualifying him for a role in the army. However, by then the war was over, so he believed he had never been able to serve his country adequately. Through the intimate atmosphere created by emotions evoked or relived during the interview, the session had given rise to 'traumatic remembering'; on the other hand, Angus himself was eager to place his testimony 'on the record' and found the opportunity to do so cathartic.⁴⁴

The representation of the Bevin Boys as 'toffs' by the Bolton MP was a crude generalisation, since the random ballot meant that all classes were represented. Of those interviewed, two had previously been working in unskilled occupations, there were two sign writers, a plumber, a trainee pharmacist, several clerks and a few working in engineering. Only three could be described as coming from a middle-class background - a law student, a trainee chartered accountant, and a police photographer. The recollections of those who remained in the industry, building their family lives within mining communities, tended to be less negative, their memories of working underground during the war blending with accounts of their subsequent career. Fewer than half the group resumed their pre-war work, so possibly the experience had led them down a new path in life. Incidentally, although the initial agenda was set by the interviewer, an interviewee's own priorities often emerged during the session. For example, one man, after a brief account of his time underground, steered the interview towards a lengthy and detailed discussion of his later work in stock control.

The scheme, by introducing these young men to previously isolated mining communities, had undoubtedly inspired a deep admiration and respect for pitmen, in spite of numerous negative depictions in the media. The political views of many were profoundly influenced through their contact with miners; Ken from Preston, politicised through his activities with the miners' union, went on to become a local councillor and magistrate and Eddie from Glasgow also became a union official as a tram driver after demobilisation.⁴⁵ In universally condemning the handling of miners during the 1984-5 strike, the interviewees were articulating a strong sense of identity with mining communities.

The Bevin Boys Association called themselves the 'Forgotten Conscripts', because it would be fifty years after the final demobilisation before Bevin Boys were allowed to join the parade at the cenotaph on Remembrance Sunday and a further ten before they were awarded commemorative badges (not medals).⁴⁶ Ambivalent attitudes amongst the

interviewees were palpable – pride mingled with bitterness, together with an awareness that they may have owed their lives to being directed to the mines – Ken of Preston remarked that he was the only one to survive out of five boys named Kenneth in his class at school.⁴⁷ By and large, the men had come to terms with their wartime service and incorporated the experience into a meaningful story about their past. Perhaps they were not as proud as they might have been if they had actually seen action, but they all – including Angus - were ready and eager to share their stories.

Notes

- ¹ The Association is still active, at <http://www.bevinboysassociation.co.uk/> (accessed 4 June 2018).
- ² Alessandro Portelli, 'The Peculiarities of Oral History', in *History Workshop Journal*, 12:1 (Autumn 1981), p.99.
- ³ Barry Supple, *The History of the British Coal Industry Volume 4: 1913 – 1946 The Political Economy of Decline*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 560.
- ⁴ *Ashington Collieries Magazine*, 20:2 (February 1940).
- ⁵ As above, 20:1 (January 1940), pp.13-16.
- ⁶ Kay Louise Exton, '*The Forgotten Army of the Mines: The Community, Citizenship and Remembrance of the Bevin Boys*', unpublished MA dissertation (University of Lancaster, 2006), pp.13-15.
- ⁷ Unless otherwise noted, the account of the industry in this section comes from Supple.
- ⁸ *Blyth News and Ashington Post* (henceforth BNAP), 22 December 1941 p. 1.
- ⁹ *BNAP*, 2 June 1941, p. 1.
- ¹⁰ *BNAP*, 20 April 1942, p.1.
- ¹¹ Peter Hennessy, *Never Again: Britain 1945-51* (London, Vintage, 1993), p. 45.
- ¹² *Newcastle Evening Chronicle* (henceforth *Chronicle*), 22 September 1943, p 3.
- ¹³ *BNAP*, 15 March 1943, p. 1.
- ¹⁴ *Chronicle*, 23 September 1943, p .6.
- ¹⁵ As above, 15 September 1943, p. 3.
- ¹⁶ As above, 12 November 1943, p.1.
- ¹⁷ *BNAP*, 12 April 1943, p. 1.
- ¹⁸ *Chronicle*, 17 January 1944, p. 4.
- ¹⁹ As above, p. 2
- ²⁰ Oral history (henceforth OH) interview with Roy Hails, 3 October 2007, Northumberland Archives, (henceforth NA), T422. Interviews cannot be accessed online but summaries are available from Northumberland Archives. The interviews can be listened to in the Study Centre's soundproof booth.
- ²¹ Exton, p.39

- 22 OH interview with Angus Winter, 9 October 2007, NA, T423.
23 OH interview with Kenneth Fell, 17 January 2008, NA, T471.
24 *Chronicle*, 29 December 1943, p. 2.
25 As above, 8 March 1944, p. 2.
26 OH interviews with John Marron, 30 November 2007, NA, T459, and Sam Franklin,
12 November 2007, NA, T458.
27 OH interview with John Marshall, 12 November 2007, NA, T432.
28 *Chronicle*, 29 September 1943, p. 2.
29 OH interview with Reg Taylor, 6 November 2007, NA, T431.
30 OH interview with Billy Bell, 20 March 2008, NA, T486.
31 OH interview with Christopher Rollo, 7 November 2007, NA, T433.
32 *BNAP*, 17 April 1944, p. 4.
33 OH Roy Hails, 3 October 2007, NA, T422.
34 OH interview with Millie Stenning, 22 January 2008, NA, T473.
35 OH with Eddie Conway, 22 October 2007, NA, T427.
37 OH interview with Ron Harper, 6 October 2007, NA, T460.
38 OH interview with Bob Stenning, 22 January 2007, NA, T472.
39 OH interview with Kenneth Roach, 1 November 2007, NA, T430.
40 OH Ron Harper, 6 October 2007, NA, T460.
41 OH interview with Ronnie Jones, 5 October 2007, NA, T421.
42 <https://api.parliament.uk/historic-hansard/commons/1945/oct/23/directed-mineworkers>
(Accessed 17 April 2018) for this and subsequent quotations from this debate.
43 *Chronicle* 2 February 1944 p.3.
44 Robert Perks and Alistair Thomson (eds), *The Oral History Reader*, Third Edition
(London: Routledge, 2016), p. 136.
45 OH Kenneth Roach and Eddie Conway.
46 See Warwick Taylor, *The Forgotten Conscript. A History of the Bevin Boys*. Second Edition
(Gainsborough: Babash Ltd, 2003).
47 OH Kenneth Roach

Plashetts Revisited: Life and Labour in a Coal Mining Outpost

Brian Bennison

Fourteen miles north west of Bellingham, twenty-three miles south of Hawick and some distance from the main coalfield, Plashetts was the most notable outlier amongst North East coal mining communities. In 1919 a local newspaper had called Plashetts ‘the celebrated, but somewhat isolated metropolis of the upper North Tyne’.¹ By 1932, newspaper readers outside the region were being informed about Plashetts the ‘ghost village’ and ‘the bleakest and loneliest’ of places.² The number of jobs in the colliery and brickworks fluctuated substantially over the years and the number of families domiciled there waxed and waned. The press showed occasional interest in the comings and goings, but little has been written on the fortunes of Plashetts and its inhabitants.³ What follows is an attempt to piece together a bit more about the economy and life of the place.

The Role of the Railway

The creation of a colliery village at Plashetts was testimony to the interdependence of mineral wealth and railway construction. There had been some mining at Plashetts prior to the railway but the arrival of an efficient means of transport meant mining on a commercially viable scale became possible.⁴ Knowledge of unexploited coal deposits stimulated a railway project and reinforced a commitment amongst would-be railway investors, and the prospect of a railway line encouraged mining enterprise. Plashetts owed its existence as a mining location to the Border Counties

Railway (BCR) which ran up the North Tyne valley to join with other networks. The succession of the fourth Duke of Northumberland in 1847 had reinvigorated the call for a line into the Borders, signalling quite a departure for the Percy family. The new Duke 'furthered his own interest' and brought himself 'into contact with and familiarity with the world of capitalists, industrialists and company promoters'.⁵ He instructed his mineral agent to survey his North Tyne estates, including land around Plashetts acquired in 1828. Most of the Duke's influence was exercised through agents and much of their evidence submitted to Parliament on behalf of the BCR in the years that followed dealt with the promising nature of the Plashetts coalfield. Two historians later observed that the coalfield was talked about 'in terms used about the same time to describe California gold workings' and in 'Yukon-type dimensions'.⁶ The railway link to Riccarton, where it met up with the Waverley Line, was opened in 1862.

A Coal Mining Village Is Created

At one stage it was rumoured that the railway company intended to work the Plashetts coal on its own account but the Duke of Northumberland let part of the coalfield to a partnership of three individuals, Messrs Tone, Fryer and Laws (trading as the Plashetts Coal Co.), with close ties to the Duke and the railway that crossed his land. The first sod of Plashetts Colliery was cut on Whit Monday 1861. Coal was reached by Christmas, a waggonway was built from the coal winnings to the main line, and in the following summer the first six truckloads arrived at Hawick station.

In the mid-nineteenth century, there were only thirty-three houses on the 28,225 acres within the boundaries of the township, a figure which had hardly changed over the previous five decades. However, as Table 1 illustrates, by 1871 the population had more than trebled and the housing stock was over four times larger. The census return for 1861 shows a growth in population of 214 males and 51 females and a rise in the number of dwellings over the previous decade. The building of the railway required

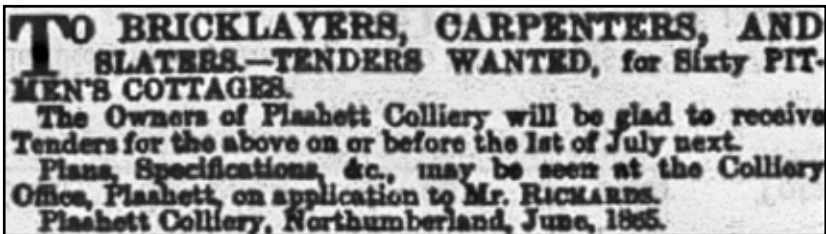
squads of navvies to be in the vicinity. The census for that year recorded twice as many railway workers as agricultural workers. Over half of the residents recorded in Plashetts were there on a temporary basis because of the construction of the railway.⁷ They were accommodated in railway huts, lodged with families or occupied derelict property. Overcrowding was rife. For instance, a railway worker with a wife and two sons had eleven Irish railway workers boarding under the same roof and, amongst other similar examples, a married couple had nine Irish labourers lodging with them.

At the end of 1861, according to trade papers, 'a thriving colony of miners' and 'a considerable village' was taking shape, although this is not borne out by census details.⁸ For this period in Plashetts' history, before the publication of official listings of mines, we are reliant upon occupational data in census returns to estimate the numbers employed in coal mining. Journalists occasionally gave approximate figures for the colliery's payroll or offer vague impressions; in 1862, for instance, it was reported that 'already a number of colliers are at the field' and later that the pit had 'not sufficiently developed to admit of the employment of a strong force of colliers'.⁹

Table 1. Population and House Numbers in Plashetts, 1800-1871								
	1800	1811	1821	1831	1841	1851	1861	1871
Population	209	214	234	249	222	229	494	766
Houses		38	34	36	42	33	61	151

In 1864 the colliery was looking to recruit an additional forty hewers and putters, promising to pay the expense of moving to Plashetts and telling potential employees that 'good wages are made'.¹⁰ Masons and bricklayers were also being sought. In the summer of 1865 the coal company advertised for bricklayers, carpenters and slaters, and invited tenders for the construction of sixty pitmen's cottages. Two mining hamlets were

developed in Plashetts in addition to some initial settlement at Seldom Seen. Bank Top, where the school, shop and chapel were to be sited, was towards the high point of an incline that ran from the station, with cottages either side of the waggonway. Further along the line, housing was constructed at Far Colliery. The initial shortage of housing for incoming pitmen was highlighted in 1865 when a miner told how he and his wife travelled from Usworth and found work in Plashetts but were 'compelled to seek shelter in a brick shed'.¹¹



*Advert for bricklayers and carpenters to build sixty Pitmen's Cottages at Plashetts, Newcastle Daily Chronicle, Saturday 24 June 1865, p.4.
Reproduced courtesy of Newcastle City Libraries.*

Markets were opened up in Scotland and Northern Ireland, and in 1867 a special dinner was held to toast 'the flourishing condition of the mine'.¹² By 1870 daily production was said to be 400 tons.¹³ There were, however, some internal misgivings about the colliery's ability to compete effectively. The coal company had sought reductions in rent because capital costs had proved to be higher than estimated, the seams were thinner than forecast, and the coal itself contained impurities which made it less efficient for coking. The greatest dissatisfaction was with the price that coal could command.¹⁴

Job Insecurity

The year 1875 opened on a positive note as the *Mining Journal* reported that Plashetts Colliery was producing 250 tons of coal daily which was 'readily disposed of at Hawick and other inland towns' with the summer

surplus 'shipped to Silloth'.¹⁵ But it wasn't long before the situation for the workforce became less assured. In the middle of 1876 all miners received termination notices, after which around half the men were re-engaged at reduced rates.¹⁶ In March 1877 Plashetts pitmen – 'over 70 in number' – were laid off for a few weeks and in May 1879 the owners announced that they were once more 'compelled to close the pit' because of the depression in the coal industry.¹⁷ Shortly afterwards a newspaper stated that the colliery was to re-commence 'in all its pristine vigour' at the very time when the school board was informing Whitehall that the coal company was withdrawing its support because of the uncertainty surrounding a mine which only had work for twelve hewers.¹⁸ There had clearly been a cut in the workforce, which was confirmed in September 1879 when the coal company challenged the poor rate bill it had received, the owners telling the overseer that 'only half a dozen men are employed just now'.¹⁹

The 1881 census suggests that around fifty or sixty were working at the colliery and gives a population 43% down on the total for 1871.²⁰ Of the 140 houses in the parish, only eighty-five were occupied. Half of these households consisted of six or more persons. The number of pupils on the roll of Plashetts school had dropped from sixty in 1877 to twenty-five in 1880.²¹

The pattern of employment at the colliery had become one of intermittent and uneven working, and in 1882 it was said to be operating 'on a decidedly smaller scale'.²² New coke ovens near the station were supplying the lime kilns of Liddesdale, but departures from the mining settlement were in progress. Yet from time to time a positive picture was painted. A contributor to a directory published in 1886, based presumably on a visit in a previous year, put the colliery's average output 'when in full working order' at 300 tons per day, and talked extravagantly about the number of hands employed ranging from 100 to 150.²³ Work on a new drift was also said to be imminent and the number of cottages erected for miners was put at ninety.²⁴ In 1886, however, the colliery closed again. At the end of the summer term there were only twenty-four pupils on the school register.

Table 2. Population & House Numbers at Plashetts, 1881-1931

	1881	1891	1901	1911	1921	1931
Population	440	340	545	597	576	246
Houses	140	135	113	-	117	57

New Beginnings

Nothing more is recorded about Plashetts until the announcement in 1889 that 'Mr Slater of Newcastle and Mr Roscamp, very intimately connected to Acomb Colliery, together with other gentlemen, have secured a valuable concession from Duke of Northumberland'.²⁵ The partnership cut the first sod for a new pit in July 1889, but the census of 1891 recorded a population nearly 25% less than recorded at the previous census, with less than twenty residents identifying themselves as colliery workers. Only seventy houses were occupied on the night of the census. Not only had the number of households fallen as families moved away, but there had been a reduction in the degree of overcrowding; ten years earlier half of households consisted of five or less persons, by 1891 the proportion was two-thirds. Some of this was the result of the more mobile single lodgers moving on. However, the actual state of the accommodation available at Plashetts did not go unnoticed. In 1895, for example, Bellingham Rural District Council was demanding work be done by the colliery-owners on privies and ash-heaps, and in 1900 a preacher who stayed in a miners' dwelling found the cottage 'all very primitive and the outlook dreary'.²⁶

By 1901 more than 90% of the housing stock was in use and the boost given to coal mining by the new ownership prompted a 60% rise in population. A total of 120 children took part in the village Coronation festivities in 1902. From the late 1890s accurate listings were published of numbers employed at every mine in the UK. Table 3 illustrates that employment at the colliery became relatively stable, followed by an increase in activity to a new, sustained level. A new company - the Plashetts Coal & Coke Co. Ltd - took control in 1907, and new machinery was introduced

and working methods remodelled. Perhaps as a result of Plashetts Colliery's apparent success, others were tempted to try mining nearby.²⁷

Table 3. Numbers Employed at Plashetts Coliery, 1900-1911²⁸

Year	1900	1901	1902	1903	1904	1905	1906	1907	1908	1909	1910	1911
Employed	86	80	74	70	70	75	76	108	112	107	106	108

The census of 1911 showed a marginal increase in population compared to the figure ten years earlier, to 111 households, of which thirty contained seven or more occupants. Living conditions continued to be closely monitored by Bellingham District Council, whose concern centered on improving sanitary systems, drains and ashpits, and the search for suitable springs to improve the water supplies. In 1914 it was found that a water tap serving Bank Top village's 186 residents was not functioning, sanitary arrangements were in 'the worst possible condition', several drains were choked, and five yards from one row of houses ran an open ditch into which were emptied 'all sorts of unmentionables'.²⁹

Other aspects of Plashetts made life difficult. There was no road into the village, something that created problems at times of illness and death, when the ability to get speedy medical attention depended upon the railway timetable. The nearest doctor was at Bellingham and if there was no train at the time he was wired, he had to motor to Falstone and walk the last four miles. At times of death, with a hearse unable to reach the village, a coffin had to travel by train, but the railway company refused to transport the coffin if death was from an infectious disease. In such a case the body was carried over the hill to Falstone cemetery.

The First World War

During the immediate pre-war period more miners were taken on, though employment levels were to drop during the war. The workforce at Plashetts Colliery reached what would prove to be a high point of 133 in 1919. The

quality of housing still left a lot to be desired and was thought to require considerable expenditure to meet even the dubious standards in other regional coal mining settlements, the coal company having 'neglected their duties towards their employees from the commencement'.³⁰ In 1919, Bellingham Housing Committee inspected sixty-four colliery-owned houses, finding 'every one practically unfit for use and should be condemned'.³¹ Fourteen houses had earth closets, eighteen shared a closet, fifteen had home-made closets and seventeen were without closets. There were forty-five two-roomed houses that had six or more persons living in them, a three-roomed house with nine occupants and a four-roomed building housing ten people. It was reported that after each shower of rain 'the inhabitants of Plashetts are in many cases housed worse than pigs in a sty'.³² Shortly afterwards the coal company was inviting tenders for the building of forty-one privies and twenty ash pits. The parish's population of 597 in 1911 shrank marginally to 576 in 1921, and still contained more men than women.

Table 4. Numbers Employed at Plashetts Colliery, 1912-1919								
Year	1912	1913	1914	1915	1916	1917	1918	1919
Employed	125	124	126	99	106	96	107	133

Decline and Closure

Plans were drawn up in 1920 for a new brickworks at Plashetts but within months the men were working on a day-to-day basis and speculation was strong that the colliery had little time left, with one trade paper inaccurately reporting the closure of the colliery with 'about 200 miners affected'.³³ In fact job numbers held up well in the early 1920s (see Table 4), but living conditions remained rudimentary and the *Labour News* described most Plashetts houses as 'one-storey shanties in a most dilapidated condition' with a drainage system which 'would bring disgrace upon a Hottentot' and sanitary conveniences that 'would bring nausea to a London sewer man'.³⁴

The *Hexham Herald* thought the article ‘grotesquely exaggerated’ in order to foment ‘discontent and the fostering of Bolshevism’, but a year later Hexham’s MP said it was well-known that Plashetts was ‘a village where the conditions were abominable’.³⁵

It seems that the men at Plashetts were slow to unionise and took no part in the national strikes and lockouts of 1912 and 1921.³⁶ They did, however, participate in the so-called General Strike of 1926 and when a newspaper correspondent visited the settlement in the seventh week of the dispute he found a ‘small village bravely smiling’.³⁷ Children were getting hot meals prepared in two empty houses and served in the chapel, whilst the men ran quoit handicaps and organised football matches between married and single miners. Later investigations by a school medical service showed the weight of children in Plashetts’ during the period of school feeding had increased almost three times more compared to normal home feeding.

There was some damage caused by water during the dispute, but the men returned in the second week of November and at the end of 1926 sixty-two men were employed, though one source says seventy-four men went on strike.³⁸ One resident later blamed the demise of the colliery on a schoolmaster who ‘persuaded the men to join the union’ and ‘when the strike came they were called out and by the time it was over, the pit had flooded; Plashetts was finished’.³⁹ But this was not the case. The coal company soldiered on with a workforce of the same magnitude until 1928, when it finally ceased mining. Sixty-four men lost their jobs and questions were asked in Parliament about the insistence that some of them were required to report to Hexham Labour Exchange every month.

Table 5. Numbers Employed at Plashetts Colliery, 1921-1928								
Year	1921	1922	1923	1924	1925	1926	1927	1928
Employed	74	84	93	91	92	62	64	64

It was reported that 'practically the whole of the population' quickly moved away, but in 1930 a gang of mining men from Haltwhistle turned up in the hope of finding new ways of extracting coal from old drifts.⁴⁰ The school was scheduled to close at the end of 1931 when there were only three children attending, but was given three months reprieve in the hope that new pupils would emerge as mining recommenced.⁴¹ The *Colliery Guardian* had stated that Plashetts Colliery was 'to reopen after seven years of idleness' but not only was this estimate of the length of the pits' inactivity incorrect, its confident assertion of a re-opening was mistaken.⁴²

The efforts of nine men engaged in development work were halted by tragedy in 1932. Joseph Slater, whose family were synonymous with Plashetts mining, had opened a drift at Bank Top and had a team of men driving a second at Seldom Seen. Work at Bank Top had been impeded by water and when Slater went to see if it had subsided he did not return and his body was later found. Nevertheless, work did resume and by the end of 1932 around a score of men were employed.

Optimistic reports about Plashetts surfaced in 1933. The *Hexham Courant* and the *Colliery Guardian* wrote of 'between 20 and 30 men' employed, 'over 20 families in residence' and Plashetts restarting with '30 miners'.⁴³ Official listings, however, showed only five mining jobs at the colliery and within two years there were none. By then, Plashetts had about sixty untenanted cottages, an unfinished welfare hall and only four permanent families in residence.

Fitful attempts to win coal in Plashetts continued into the post-war period. A small drift mine at the entrance to Plashetts was providing work for sixteen miners in 1955 and for five miners when it closed in 1964. In 1963 the mining village, by now the property of the Forestry Commission and consisting largely of derelict buildings in a dangerous condition, was demolished. Finally, in 1974 Parliament approved plans for the Kielder Water reservoir scheme that was to flood the valley and submerge what was left of the station, the mine and some of the waggonway and housing.

Notes

- ¹ *Hexham Courant*, 19 April 1919, p. 7.
- ² *Hull Daily Mail*, 31 August 1932, p. 7; *Gloucester Citizen*, 31 August 1932, p. 1.
- ³ The only published work on Plashetts would seem to consist of outlines of its history in a regional journal and a couple of books about the area, the sentimental reminiscences of a schoolmistress and a detailed account of the colliery school. See E. Ashton, 'Plashetts in the North Tyne Valley: a Deserted Colliery Village', *Tyne & Tweed*, Volume 61 (October 2007), pp. 29-31; B. Charlton, *Upper North Tynedale. A Northumbrian Valley and its People* (Newcastle: Northumbrian Water, 1987); G. N. Wright, *The Northumbrian Uplands* (Newton Abbott: David & Charles, 1989); J. B. Smith, *By Goey. Its Plashetts* (Newton Stewart: Galloway Gazette Press, c.1960); I. D. Roberts, 'Plashetts Colliery School' in I. D. Roberts and Bellingham WEA Group, *Telling Tales Out of School. A History of Education and School Life in North Tynedale and Redesdale from 1870 to 1944* (Seaton Burn: Northern Heritage Publishing, 2008), pp. 108-117.
- ⁴ In 1812 the Duke of Northumberland advertised the lease of Plashetts Farm that included a working colliery.
- ⁵ F. M. L. Thompson, *The Economic and Social Background of the English Landed Interests 1840-1870, with Particular Reference to the Duke of Northumberland* (Unpublished DPhil Thesis, University of Oxford, 1956), p. 410.
- ⁶ D. W. Moore, *The Promotion and Extension of the Railways in Central Northumberland, 1850-1886* (Unpublished MA Thesis, University of Newcastle, 1984), p.198.
J. Thomas, *The North British Railway*, Volume 1 (1st ed.) (Newton Abbot: David & Charles, 1969), p. 99.
- ⁷ An analysis of the census suggests that there were around 120 railway workers and just over 50 working on the land. Only three individuals described themselves as miners. 1861 Census, RG.9/3868. All figures for population and house numbers cited in the text and in the tables, are taken from the published Census Reports for the appropriate years.
- ⁸ *Mining Journal*, 30 November 1861, p.796; *Colliery Guardian*, 4 January 1862, p.12.
- ⁹ *Newcastle Courant*, 31 January 1862, p. 8; *Carlisle Journal*, 1 August 1862, p. 3.
- ¹⁰ *Carlisle Journal*, 7 October 1864, p. 4.
- ¹¹ *Newcastle Journal*, 28 December 1865, p. 2.
- ¹² *Hexham Courant*, 21 August 1867, p.7.
- ¹³ See Charlton (1987), p.74.
- ¹⁴ See Moore (1984), pp.198-9.
- ¹⁵ *Mining Journal*, 2 January 1875, p.12.
- ¹⁶ Those kept on by the colliery took a cut of one penny per ton and 'other slight modifications', *Morpeth Herald*, 24 June 1876, p. 2.
- ¹⁷ *Glasgow Herald*, 6 March 1877, p.3; *Hexham Courant*, 10 May 1879, p. 5.
- ¹⁸ *Hexham Herald*, 23 August 1879, p.5; Roberts (2008), p.110.
- ¹⁹ *Shields Daily Gazette*, 1 September 1879, p. 2.
- ²⁰ The occupational survey gave forty-eight males 'working in minerals' in Plashetts. An

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analysis of the census returns points to sixty men giving an occupation commensurate with working for the colliery company.

- 21 Figures and further references to numbers on the school roll are taken from Roberts (2008).
- 22 C. T. Clough, *Memoirs of the Geological Survey. The Geology of Plashetts and Kielder* (HMSO: London, 1889), p. 53.
- 23 T. F. Bulmer (ed), *History, Topography & Directory of Northumberland, Hexham Division* (Manchester: T Bulmer & Co., 1886), p. 587.
- 24 A newspaper estimate in 1877 had put the number of houses controlled by the colliery company at 102; *Newcastle Daily Chronicle*, 1 June 1877, p. 8.
- 25 *Hexham Courant*, 22 June 1889, p. 5.
- 26 *Hawick News*, 27 November 1931, p. 6.
- 27 The Falstone Coal Co. was formed in 1908. It opened a drift mine, built nine houses and had thirty miners on its books in 1913, the year before it closed.
- 28 Figures for numbers employed in this and subsequent table are extracted from the annual Home Office, *List of Mines in Great Britain and Ireland and Isle of Man* for the relevant years.
- 29 *Hexham Courant*, 16 May 1914, p. 3.
- 30 *Hexham Courant*, 14 February 1920, p. 4.
- 31 *Hexham Courant*, 12 July 1919, p. 6.
- 32 *Hexham Herald*, 15 October 1921, p. 4.
- 33 *Colliery Guardian*, 9 September 1921, p. 741.
- 34 *Hexham Herald*, 4 February 1922, p. 5.
- 35 *Hexham Herald*, 4 February 1922, p. 5, and 10 November 1923, p. 6.
- 36 In 1912, for example, one newspaper stated that 'the greatest industrial dispute of our time' had left the town's mills unaffected 'thanks to Plashetts Collieries', *Hawick News & Border Chronicle*, 12 April 1912, p. 3.
- 37 *Hexham Herald*, 25 July 1926, p. 4.
- 38 J Clarke & J. Leonard, *The General Strike, 1926. An Archive Teaching Unit for the Study of the Great Industrial Dispute with Reference to Coal Mining in the North East* (Newcastle: Newcastle University, 1971).
- 39 Quoted in Charlton (1987), p. 77.
- 40 *Hexham Courant*, 9 December 1933, p.16.
- 41 In 1932 a shepherd living four and half miles away was granted an allowance of five shillings per week towards the cost of maintaining a pony to carry his son to and from school. The school remained open with a small number of pupils until 1939.
- 42 *Colliery Guardian*, 18 December 1931, p. 2063.
- 43 *Hexham Courant*, 9 December 1933, p.16; *Colliery Guardian*, 15 December 1933, p.1131.

John McNair: From Tyneside Boy Orator to a Life in Socialism

Archie Potts

Introduction

John McNair (1887-1968), General Secretary of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) from 1939 to 1954, was brought up on Tyneside and first became involved in politics here, but then spent many years working in Paris. He returned to Britain to work for the ILP before travelling to Spain during the Civil War, narrowly escaping arrest in Barcelona in 1937. He became General Secretary of the ILP, stood for Parliament and wrote widely, including a biography of James Maxton. When he retired from his post at the ILP, McNair



came back to the North East and enrolled as an ultra-mature university student. His own autobiography, *Life Abundant*, completed in 1961, remains unpublished.¹ This essay draws on his autobiography, and on other articles and writings, to trace his full and fascinating life on the Left.

Early Life

John McNair was born in Boston, Lincolnshire, on 6 October 1887, the eldest of five sons, two of whom died in infancy. His father, also called John, was a travelling salesman for a Spalding drapery firm. His mother, Caroline (née Leafe) worked in a drapery shop in Boston and her parents owned a small bakery business in the town. McNair senior was a Scot from Johnstone in Renfrewshire. He had been brought up in a strict Calvinist home and his father had hoped his son would become a minister in the kirk. However, this had little appeal to John senior, who left home at nineteen and moved to England in search of work. The young Scot was well-educated and well-spoken, and soon found employment as a salesman.

The younger McNair had a peripatetic childhood. At the age of three, when his mother was expecting a third child, he was sent to stay with his grandparents in Johnstone. The McNairs had mellowed with age and they lavished love on their young grandson. John spent a happy year in Scotland and in his absence his mother had given birth to another child and the family had moved to South Shields, where his father became a brewery drayman. As John later observed, if he had remained with his grandparents he would have been raised as a 'Scots laddie', instead he was brought up a 'Geordie'.² However, his links with Scotland remained strong. He kept in close touch with his grandparents and spent holidays with them.

The McNairs moved house three times in South Shields, with John attending Ladygate Lane Infant School. When he was eight years of age the McNairs moved across the Tyne to Howdon and John changed schools, first to the Addison Potter Board School, then to the Stephenson Street School, finally ending his schooling at the senior Bewicke Schools. He was happy enough at school; he received a sound basic education and the discipline was not harsh. While a schoolboy, he became a voracious reader. In addition he attended the local Congregationalist Sunday school, and as a teenager he accompanied his mother to church. This early contact with religion had no lasting effect on McNair, who in adulthood became an agnostic. When he was twelve he became a part-time delivery boy for a local grocer, paid a

shilling a week for working a Friday evening and all day on Saturdays. He was also given a meal, to be eaten in the rear of the shop.

At the age of thirteen and eligible to leave school, John McNair obtained the post of office boy at the Wallsend Slipway and Engineering Company at a weekly wage of 5s. He found the work boring but stuck it out. He mastered shorthand and typing, and in due course became a correspondence clerk. He was then promoted to checking specifications and when he reached nineteen his wages were increased to 19s a week.

His leisure time was packed with activities. He developed an interest in classical music and poetry, played football for local teams, went walking and cycling, and was an active member of the Tynemouth Amateur Debating Society. Finally, he developed an interest in politics. He was excited by the Liberal electoral victory of 1906 but then came under the influence of a friend who was a member of the Social Democratic Federation. McNair, however, did not find Marxism entirely convincing. In his own words, 'I was groping my way to a human, libertarian, international type of socialism' and he found what he was looking for in membership of the Independent Labour Party (ILP), which he joined in March 1907.³

He was recruited into the ILP by a foreman at his place of work, and together with this foreman and another friend McNair became one of a trio of ILP activists who carried the socialist message across Tyneside. Often mounted on a stool or orange box McNair learned the art of public speaking at open-air meetings, and he developed into an accomplished platform speaker, becoming known as the 'boy orator'.

France

McNair continued to be employed at the Wallsend firm, which had turned a blind eye to his out-of-hours political activities until he attempted to set up a branch of the National Union of Clerks, and he was then informed that he should concentrate on his job. He decided it was time to move on and he obtained a post as a clerk in Alfred Herbert's machine tool firm in Coventry. He reported for his new job after the firm's Christmas holidays in 1910 and

was given the task of updating the firm's catalogues. After ten months at Herbert's he was offered a vacancy at the firm's branch in Paris, which he accepted. He fitted in well with his new colleagues and enjoyed living in Paris, where he sampled its art galleries, concert halls and opera houses. He made an effort to learn French and within two years he was fluent in the language. He soon built up a circle of French friends, including students, and through them he was able to attend lectures at the Sorbonne.

After eight months living in Paris McNair decided to move to the picturesque village of Le Vésinet near St Germain, and to commute by rail to his office. Returning from work one evening he saw some boys playing football on a patch of waste ground. He stopped to watch and ended up promising to organise a village team. He went on to found the Le Vésinet Sporting Club and played a leading role in raising the money needed to build a stadium for the club. Under his guidance the team was eventually admitted into the French Football League.

McNair had not lost his interest in politics and contacted the French Socialist Party who invited him to join. However, as a foreigner he felt it would be wrong to get involved in another country's domestic politics, but he was happy to be allowed to attend their meetings and listen to the great French orators. McNair was in the YMCA club in Paris when French mobilisation was announced on the evening of 31 July 1914. He heard the crowds shouting their support for war and heard the two revolver shots that killed the Socialist leader Jean Jaurès as he dined in a small restaurant in Montmartre.

McNair volunteered for the British army at a special recruiting office set up in Paris but was rejected on medical grounds: his eyesight was defective and he was found to have a weak heart. Most of the British staff at the firm reported back to Britain for military training, while McNair stayed on in France and took on extra work to cover their absence. In 1917 he was put in charge of the firm's branch in Lyons.

While working in Lyons, McNair came close to getting married. He was thirty years of age and his fiancée was five years younger. She was a devout

Roman Catholic, and although McNair was prepared to compromise on most matters of importance to her, as an agnostic he felt it would be rank hypocrisy to pretend to be a convert to Catholicism as was being demanded of him. He could not go this far and the engagement was broken off.

McNair was now anxious to return to Paris and he believed he was being underpaid by the firm. By chance he met a former English acquaintance attending the Lyons fair in May 1919. His friend had built up a small business selling leather goods. Orders were pouring in during the post-war boom and McNair was offered a job running the firm's office in Paris. Terms were agreed, giving McNair a substantial increase in pay plus commission on sales, and he moved back to the capital. He was employed in the business for four years. He enjoyed working in a small firm and was well paid for his services, but felt that he had been away from Britain too long: it was time to go home, taking with him his savings of £3,000.

McNair spent three weeks visiting his family and looking up old friends on Tyneside and was shocked by the impact of the post-war recession on the area. He resolved to become politically active once again and he offered his services to the ILP's general secretary, Fenner Brockway, at the Party's head office in London. His offer was accepted and he became Brockway's personal assistant. The ILP's chairman, Clifford Allen, who had observed McNair at work, then offered him the post of organising secretary on the head office staff. His first task was to organise the ILP's summer school for 1923, and here he met James Maxton for the first time and began a lifelong friendship.

When Stanley Baldwin called a general election for 6 December 1923 it was agreed that McNair should take over the duties of general secretary, releasing Fenner Brockway to contest the Lancaster constituency. McNair worked in the ILP office during the day and after five o'clock he assisted George Lansbury's campaign in the Bow and Bromley constituency. The evenings were cold and there was often a thick fog to contend with. John McNair picked up a chesty cough that developed into bronchitis. His doctor advised him to return to France and stay there until his health improved. He returned to live in Le Vésinet. He maintained his links with the ILP,

who made him their Paris correspondent, and over the next four years he furnished the party with regular reports on political developments in France.

As soon as he was well enough McNair re-entered the leather goods trade on his own account and made good profits until the market shrunk after 1929. However, he still managed to make a decent living and to enjoy a good life in Paris. During these years he developed a particular talent as an interpreter at international conferences. He proved to be very good at it and Leon Blum was among those whose speeches he translated from French into English. He continued his efforts on behalf of the Le Vésinet Sporting Club and managed to gain the support of the celebrated cabaret star, Josephine Baker, for his fund-raising activities.

By 1936 John McNair had spent the previous twelve years of his life in France, marred only by the growth of fascism and right-wing extremism in French politics. He had observed the growing aggressiveness of the fascist regimes in Italy and Germany and when, in July 1936, a military revolt broke out in Spain, McNair felt he should become politically active again, so he wound up his affairs in France and returned to Britain.

Spain

McNair reported to the ILP's head office in London where he received a warm welcome and was taken back on the staff. The ILP's National Administrative Council (NAC) came out strongly in support of the Spanish Republic and a special Aid to Spain campaign raised £500 in a fortnight. Because he had no other commitments, McNair was chosen to deliver this money, in British banknotes, to the ILP's sister party in Barcelona: the Partido Obrero de Unificación Marxista (the Workers' Party of Marxist Unity, known by its initials POUM), and to report back to the NAC on the prevailing situation in Spain.

McNair left London on 15 August, passed through Paris and Perpignan, then crossed the French border into Spain. A car was waiting to take him to Barcelona where he met the POUM's executive committee. McNair found that he could communicate with them in French. The money was gratefully

received and he spent a fortnight in Catalonia and the Basque country where he was shown the workers' control of the factories and the poor conditions in the hospitals. When he reported back to the NAC McNair recommended that the ILP should send medical supplies to the beleaguered Republic and the NAC accepted this recommendation. Another Aid to Spain campaign was launched to raise the money and McNair toured the country reporting on what he had witnessed in Spain.

In October 1936 the POUM sent a letter to the ILP suggesting that John McNair should return to Barcelona, take up residence in the city, and serve as an *agent de liaison* between the two parties. The POUM also suggested that one of the ILP's MPs should accompany McNair on a short fact-finding visit. The NAC accepted both suggestions and John McGovern, the MP for Shettleston, was chosen to partner McNair. The two men set off from London on 5 November 1936, and together toured Barcelona, Valencia and Madrid. After he had seen McGovern safely across the frontier into France McNair returned to Barcelona where he set up his ILP office in the Ramblas.

One day in early December George Orwell reported to McNair's office wanting to join an anti-fascist fighting unit. This first meeting between the two men was rather strained, but as they got to know each other better they became close friends. On this occasion, after some discussion, McNair took Orwell to the Lenin Barracks where the writer was enlisted in the POUM militia. A month later a 35-strong ILP contingent arrived in Barcelona under the command of Bob Edwards. After ten days of military training the ILP recruits were enlisted in the POUM militia and posted to the Aragon front. It was McNair's task to be the liaison officer between the ILP volunteers at the front, the POUM in Barcelona, and the ILP leadership in London. In February 1937 McNair managed to wangle George Orwell's wife, Eileen, into Spain to assist him in his Barcelona office.

Tensions were sharpening among the Republican political parties in Barcelona. The Communists and their allies were infiltrating the Catalan government and increasing their power at the expense of the Anarchists. The POUM was uneasily allied to the Anarchists. Communist policy favoured

a more centralised and structured state, and they worked to achieve this end. Not surprisingly the Anarchists opposed this policy. The Anarchists controlled the telephone exchange in Barcelona and on 3 May 1937, in a confused situation, Communist-led forces attempted to take over the exchange. Shots were fired and within a few hours barricades were thrown up as local militias across the city attempted to defend their districts. John McNair stayed in his office during the fighting, leaving it only to deliver cigarettes to the ILP militiamen who were defending POUM-held buildings in the Ramblas. After four days of sporadic fighting a cease-fire was arranged and 5,000 assault guards from Valencia occupied the city. Anarchist and POUM units were ordered to the front.

The POUM was accused by the Communist press of having attempted an uprising against the Republican government and this was widely believed. On 16 June the POUM was outlawed and its leaders arrested. Over the next few days the police net was thrown wider as rank-and-file POUMistas were arrested. McNair was roused in the middle of the night, and his room searched for incriminating evidence. The police found none but McNair knew they would return to arrest him. He woke up Stafford Cottman, a young ILP militiaman who had a room in the same building, and they slipped out into the street. McNair read in the next day's newspapers that there was a warrant out for his arrest on charges of embezzlement of party funds.

George Orwell, who had spent a month in hospital after being shot in the neck, returned to Barcelona on 20 June. He had been discharged as unfit for service and was looking forward to being reunited with his wife and then for both of them to return home. Instead, the Orwells, together with McNair and Cottman, had to evade arrest until their exit visas were ready to be picked up at the British consulate. This meant they would have to spend three days on the run. Eileen stayed in her hotel room, and on the first night, McNair and Cottman squatted on the floor in Eileen's hotel while Orwell slept in a ruined church. During the day they split up and sat on seats in the park or lingered over cups of coffee in cafés. The second night the men spent together sleeping in the open, and on the third night they risked sleeping in

a small, friendly hotel near the railway station. Eileen picked up their travel documents from the consulate, and on 23 June the four fugitives boarded a slow train that took them on a nerve-wracking journey to the French border town of Perpignan.⁴ Here the party split up; the Orwells remaining in France for a holiday, while McNair and Cottman returned to Britain.

Party Leadership

McNair arrived back in London in July 1937 and was appointed the ILP's international secretary. He was in demand as a speaker and toured the ILP's branches across the United Kingdom. He was also kept busy as an interpreter at international conferences, and helped welcome many refugees from fascism to this country. At the ILP's Annual Conference of Easter 1939 it was recommended by the Party's NAC that John McNair should replace Fenner Brockway as general secretary, and this was approved by the delegates attending the Annual Conference. The change was made without dissent. John McNair was to serve as general secretary for sixteen years; a longer consecutive period than any of his predecessors.

The war years 1939-45 were particularly difficult for the ILP. When war broke out the Party announced that it would oppose the war: 'The quarrel between two capitalist states is not a workers' quarrel. We support neither British Imperialism nor German Fascism'.⁵ This line was held throughout the war, but the ILP membership was far from being united on the issue and there was much lively discussion inside the Party. The pacifists in the Party were able to support the line, although ILP policy was not pacifist, but there was a sizeable non-pacifist minority who favoured support for a war against fascism. Even some of those who supported the official line had occasional doubts about its validity. John McNair wobbled when German panzers converged on Paris, in June 1940, and had to be reassured by James Maxton that the ILP's imperialist war line was the right one. He swallowed whatever doubts he had and loyally supported ILP policy for the remainder of the war. In February 1943 he stood as the ILP candidate in a by-election at Bristol Central, where he achieved the distinction of being the only ILP

by-election candidate of the war years to lose his deposit. A special factor was the intervention by the former ILP MP, Jennie Lee, standing as an Independent Labour candidate. McNair's share of the vote was 7.4%, as Lee picked up 38.2% and Lady Apsley, the Conservative candidate, won with 52.1%.

Although John McNair was a good administrator it was a feature of his style as general secretary that he delegated much of his routine office work to others so he had time to visit the branches. He was by nature a conciliator and his good-natured tolerance, together with his contacts with the rank-and-file in the branches, did much to hold the ILP together under difficult circumstances. Indeed ILP candidates polled extremely well in the last two by-elections of the war, but it proved to be a false dawn.

The death of James Maxton on 23 July 1946 came as a blow to the ILP, for he was held in great affection by its members and they were loyal to him. The three surviving ILP MPs joined the Labour Party within two years of his death, and other ILP stalwarts such as Fenner Brockway, Bob Edwards and Walter Padley left the ILP and went on to become Labour MPs. McNair was saddened by this exit from the ILP ranks, and not only were long serving members leaving but few young people were joining. McNair read the signs and observed that the ILP had become 'a lone voice from the past'.⁶

The ILP had one last major attempt at influencing events when in 1948 it launched the Movement for the United Socialist States of Europe, a bold attempt to create a third force, neither capitalist nor communist. John McNair threw himself into the campaign, and several conferences of socialist parties were held. However, the ILP's initiative was overshadowed by the more right-wing and better funded United Europe campaign. The two organisations attempted to co-operate, but their political differences could not be bridged and the ILP wound up its campaign.

McNair performed one last service to the ILP. The James Maxton Memorial Committee asked him to write a biography of the ILP leader, and his book was published to good reviews in the spring of 1955, a few months after McNair's retirement from the post of general secretary.

Retirement

John McNair retired in September 1954 in good health except for suffering from varicose ulcers and a touch of bronchitis every winter. He went to live with relatives in Howdon on Tyneside. He had no money worries, having retained some capital from his years in business, was paid a small pension by the ILP, and travelled to Paris every year to act as a paid examiner in commercial English at the Sorbonne. He had time to read, play chess, and go for long walks along the Northumberland coast, and yet he felt unfulfilled. He realised he wanted to go to university, and more specifically to King's College in Newcastle upon Tyne, at that time a constituent part of Durham University. He had no paper qualifications, but the university statutes laid down that the Matriculation Board could consider special cases. He was duly interviewed by the Board and offered a place on the General Arts degree course to commence in October 1955.

John McNair enjoyed his time at university, especially the opportunity it gave him of studying the French classics. In 1958, when he was in the third, and final, year of his course he was invited to return to Le Vésinet. A development plan for the village proposed selling the football stadium and using the land to build a school. As the President of the Le Vésinet Sporting Club, McNair's agreement was required. At the same time he was to be presented with a gold sports medal for his services to French football. McNair arranged to go a fortnight before his final examinations. He agreed to the selling of the stadium so that a school could be built on the site, with the proviso that the money from the sale of the land would be used to finance the building of a new stadium. When the stadium was built President de Gaulle intervened to insist that it should be called the McNair Stadium, and this was done. McNair met de Gaulle in London in August 1940, and the General had not forgotten the Englishman who had spoken excellent French and provided him with useful information on British politics, before visiting wounded Free French soldiers being treated in London hospitals.

The presentation of the gold medal had been followed by a banquet held in Le Vésinet's town hall. After drinking his share of wine, McNair

had slipped on the town hall steps when leaving the building and had fractured two ribs. He spent six weeks in a French hospital and the sitting of his final examinations had to be postponed to the September. However the examinations went well for him and he had the satisfaction of graduating at the age of 71 with an Upper Second. Two years later he was awarded an MA degree for a dissertation on 'Some aspects of the thought of George Orwell'. He then completed an autobiography, titled *Life Abundant*, which remains unpublished.

John McNair's attendance at university had been well publicised in the press and he had become something of a local celebrity. During the last few years of his life his friendship with George Orwell tended to overshadow other aspects of his past in the public mind. Failing health began to take its toll on him and he had to curtail many of his activities. He died on 19 February 1968 at the County Hotel, North Shields, where he had lived for the last two years of his life. He was buried in Preston Cemetery, North Shields, two days later. In addition to relatives and friends there were representatives from the ILP, Newcastle University and the National Union of Students at his funeral. McNair had never married. He had pursued several love affairs when he was living in France but claimed that he would have made a poor husband because he liked to spread his time and energy over many interests and doubted if he could change.

John McNair's Writings:

Books:

James Maxton – The Beloved Rebel (London: Allen & Unwin, 1955); *Life Abundant* (1961), an unpublished autobiography in the possession of John McNair's niece, Mrs Hilda Proctor of Howdon, Tyne and Wear.

Pamphlets:

In Spain Now (London: ILP, 1936); *Socialism Can Defeat Nazism* (London: ILP, 1940); *Make Britain Socialist Now* (London: ILP, 1942); *The General Election and the ILP* (London: ILP, 1945); *Socialist Life versus Atomic Death*

(London: ILP, 1946); *The ILP and the People* (London: ILP, 1951); *Spanish Diary*, edited with commentary by D. Bateman (London: ILP, 1975).

Articles:

McNair published numerous articles in the ILP weekly newspapers *New Leader* and *Socialist Leader*.

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The Times, 21 February 1968; *Socialist Leader*, 2 March 1968.

Notes

- ¹ This unpublished autobiography is in the possession of McNair's niece, Mrs Hilda Proctor of Howdon, Tyne and Wear
- ² McNair, p. 3.
- ³ As above, p. 52.
- ⁴ There is a rather different description of this escape in McNair and Bateman, *Spanish Diary* (London: ILP, 1975) pages 25-27, available on <http://www.independentlabour.org.uk/main/wp-content/uploads/2015/11/John-McNair-Spanish-Diary.pdf> [accessed 14 May 2018]
- ⁵ *New Leader*, 1 September 1939.
- ⁶ McNair, p. 306.

The Battle of Stockton Campaign

Rosie Serdiville

Now it's Sunday morning and the fight is o'er
And all the world may not care or know
But the Tees remembers as she winds her weary flow
When our grandfathers
Our hungry grandfathers
Our desperate grandfathers
Said 'No!'

This final verse of a song written by Sean Cooney for the folk trio *The Young 'Uns* celebrates the people of Stockton, who saw off an attempt to march in the town by the British Union of Fascists (BUF) in September 1933.¹ It also raises a number of questions. Why Stockton? What made the BUF think it was ripe for the picking? And why did the town prove that 'low-hanging fruit' may not be easy to grasp? The 'Battle of Stockton' has been largely forgotten but a group of local campaigners are working to change that by answering some of these questions and to obtain the same recognition that has so long been granted to similar events in Cable Street. Stockton's victory took place three years earlier. Yet Cable Street is the one remembered every year. We would like to see the same happen here in Stockton.

The Battle of Stockton Campaign (BoS) aims to immortalise the events of September 10 1933 and fix their place in the imagination of the town. At a time when similar right-wing activity is happening all over the country,

we need to remind people why our grandparents resisted in the 1930s and celebrate their achievements. One of our objectives is to tell the stories of the individuals involved and remind people what they have to be proud of.

Sean Cooney is not the only one inspired by the tale. One local man, investigating these events for the first time, was amazed to discover that his grandfather's tales of the day were authentic history, rather than just tall stories. Knowing your past can change family imagination too.

The job of the BUF, said Oswald Mosley a few years later, was to seize power; seize it from the streets rather than through the ballot box.² By early 1933 the BUF had the beginnings of an organisation on Teesside, centred on Stockton. Small towns hit hard by unemployment were seen as prime recruiting grounds. They were perceived as lacking the strong opposing political culture of the big industrial cities with their labour movement partnerships. In Stockton, the first attempts by the local BUF Branch to hold street meetings had met determined opposition from members of National Unemployed Workers Movement (NUWM), the Independent Labour Party (ILP), the Labour Party and Teesside Communist Party. John Warburton, who left a memoir of his time in the Blackshirts, maintained that it was this opposition that prompted the BUF across Northern England to launch a counter attack.³

News of the rally planned for Stockton in September 1933 somehow got out, quickly coming to the notice of the BUF's Teesside opponents. But crucially, this intelligence did not seem to reach the ears of the local police, something that played a key part in what was to follow.

The BUF's motor coaches pulled up at Victoria Bridge just before 6pm on 10 September. They started to march along Stockton High Street heading for the market place where they planned to hold their meeting. But they were not alone. An opposing crowd, according to contemporary press accounts, some 2,000 strong, was ready and waiting in ambush. The BUF then attempted to take control of a section of the market place immediately north of the Town Hall and start their meeting, with a number of speakers attempting to make themselves heard through a megaphone.

Both sides had come prepared; wooden staves and pickaxe handles were wielded, stones and razor blade studded potatoes were hurled into the Blackshirt ranks.

The police were caught on the hop. It seems that only seven constables were on duty across the whole town centre, and they were soon overwhelmed as they tried to separate the two sides. Eventually the Inspector in charge ordered the BUF to halt their meeting and quit the town. Scurrying down the High Street, a group broke off to attack the counter demonstrators. Encircled, they fled through Green Dragon Yard and found themselves effectively kettled in Silver Street, a narrow lane linking the High Street to what was then Stockton's working quayside. Here, the fighting really got going and the first BUF casualties recorded, with twenty more to follow. Finally reinforced, the police ordered the BUF back to their waiting coaches, parked on the Thornaby side of the Victoria Bridge. To get back there, the Blackshirts had to run the gauntlet back down the High Street. No arrests were ever made.⁴

The Battle of Stockton Campaign aims to have physical memorials of the event placed around the town together with a yearly commemoration with performances, local bands and speakers. It kicks off this year on 9 September 2018 when the Mayor of Stockton-on-Tees will be unveiling a plaque in the High Street. But the campaign is a social history project as well as a memorial campaign. An educational outreach programme is also planned, partly to disseminate knowledge of the battle to pupils and parents.

We are also using the battle of Stockton as an exercise in unravelling historical reliability. This rose out of an examination of the newspaper reports of the event in 1933 which often display examples of bias and unthinking re-use of the initial report published in the *North East Daily Gazette* on Monday 11 September, with its dramatic tabloid style headline. The Campaign is pulling together a simple narrative using all of the historical sources, to be used as part of a 'compare and contrast' teaching resource. It is likely to be the first in a series of tools emerging from our research.

A series of cultural events has also been organised. For example, the

Young Uns did an evening based on their response to the life of local International Brigader John Longstaff and a fundraising evening held at the Georgian Theatre in Green Dragon Yard included live music and an auction of original artworks. For more information go to:

www.facebook.com/thebattleofstocktoncampaign



Battle of Stockton Campaign logo. Design by Katie Weston.

Notes

- ¹ ©2015 Sean Cooney. Used by kind permission of Sean Cooney and SGO Music Publishing Ltd.
- ² Paraphrase of comments made by Mosley in a speech at the Britain First Rally in the Exhibition Hall, Earls Court, 16 July 1939; <https://www.oswaldmosley.com/britain-first-rally-1939/>. Accessed 10 January 2018.
- ³ John Warburton, *A Blackshirt looks back: inside the B.U.F. 1932-1940*, Unpublished manuscript, University of Sheffield Library, Special Collections and Archives: Special Collection/ British Union Collection/5/16.
- ⁴ The narrative above is based on information obtained from the following sources: David Walsh, Republic of Teesside Blog, 26 October 2011; <http://republic-of-teesside.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/battle-of-stockton-some-links-of.html> Accessed 5 September 2017.

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north east history

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north east history

North East Germans during World War One: From Friend to Foe

Rosie Serdiville

This article arises out of ‘Hunting the Hun’, a community heritage project initiated by Northern Cultural Projects and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF). The project looked at the lives of people from German communities and their relations to the indigenous population in the North East of England before, during and after the First World War. The aim was to contribute to a more complex history of WWI, including the diverse cultural memories of the period. Although the project finished officially in April 2017, the website at <http://ww1germanexperience.uk/> remains live and research and information is still being added to it, including some of the individual stories included in this article.

This piece is a joint effort by volunteers working on the project, and looks at the impact of the war on the immigrant German communities which had established themselves in the North of England in the latter part of the nineteenth century.¹

Outbreak of War

In the period leading up to the First World War, the German community in Britain had grown rapidly. The 1911 Census recorded 53,324 of them, with 2,224 living in Durham, Northumberland and Middlesbrough.² This does not take into account children born in Britain who, as adults, would not show up in the census records as being of German origin. Many of their parents had never taken up the naturalisation option as it was a

costly and complicated process that required a British-born referee. Why bother? They were useful members of British society.

That was changing even before the war but once hostilities began paranoia about Germans living here became extreme. These were the months that saw the daschund renamed the sausage dog and the royal family change their name from Saxe Coburg Gotha to Windsor. 'Lock 'em up' was the motto, particularly for those men who were of an age to do military service. Naturalisation did not count with public opinion. Indeed, in some ways suspicion of those who had gone down that path was even greater than of those who had retained their nationality. It was argued that they were more likely to pose a threat, since they tended to be wealthier, therefore presumably more influential, and because they could hide their identities as British citizens. They were the enemy in the midst.

The German community in North East of England was substantial, largely the result of chain migration; that is, once Germans had established themselves within a trade, they drew in other relatives and friends. Many of those who settled here were pork butchers, often from the Hohenlohe region in Württemberg, an area that is less than thirty miles in length.

Irene Buckle, granddaughter of South Shields butcher John George Fisher, had fond memories of his shop: 'I remember the queues outside during the war and little girls crying because they had spilt some of the jug of hot pease pudding down their coats. There was always coffee brewing in the kitchen - there was hard work involved in making the pork pies - and sometimes I was allowed to work the pie press. There was also the lovely smell of sweet mince tarts.'³

However, they did not fully assimilate, making them easy targets and fueling suspicion because of their distinctive communities. German migrants maintained their culture, often marrying within their group and maintaining their own religious groups. Pastors arrived from Berlin to help set up Lutheran churches and Sunday schools. Seamen's Missions provided spiritual and physical care for German sailors visiting the area.

In the years before 1914 public and government perception of Germans

had been heavily influenced by spy fever - a stock villain in popular literature. William Le Queux's novel *The German Spy – a Present-Day Story* (1914) sold over 40,000 copies in one week alone. With the onset of war, this ready made image came to the fore.

The Aliens Restriction Act was passed with little parliamentary discussion on 5 August 1914. It laid down that all foreign nationals had to register at their local police station and give details of nationality, occupation, appearance, residence and 'service of any foreign government'. All male enemy aliens of military age were to be interned: women, children and men over military age were to be repatriated to their country of origin. Enemy aliens were banned from owning firearms, signaling equipment, homing pigeons, cameras and naval or military maps. Failure to register on time could result in a £100 fine (about £600 in modern terms) or six months in prison.

By 1915 the entire East coast had been designated a prohibited area. Enemy aliens had to obtain special permission to remain in their homes. Travel restrictions meant more than just an inconvenience for many. Families could no longer see each other without seeking prior permission, and businesses struggled to visit clients.

By November 1915, 32,440 male enemy aliens had been interned, and between May 1915 and June 1916 around 10,000 others had been repatriated.⁴ The wives and families of the interned have been called the 'forgotten victims'. They stayed behind, exposed to the hostilities of their neighbours, threatened by government policies, whilst trying to make ends meet.

Carol Hunt told the story of her great-grandmother Annie Fiedler after the internment of her husband Theodor Gotthilf (Theo):

Back in Shadforth, the family's land was confiscated by the government, in case they signalled to the enemy, and their landlord evicted them. An Irish family took them in initially, but because they were ostracised and verbally abused, Annie

decided to take her three younger children back to her family in Newcastle. Her parents owned the *Robin Adair*, a pub made famous by the song Blaydon Races, and our grandmother had an aversion to pubs, probably as having lived in one as a teenager.

Annie and the girls, having never worked in their lives, did a variety of jobs to make ends meet. Caroline and our grandmother Frieda, knitted baby clothes to sell to Fenwicks. All three did cleaning jobs and Carrie eventually went into service. Annie took a job at Armstrong's factory; it was one of her colleagues there who reported her to the authorities for writing to Theo via a friend in Switzerland. She was spying on Annie and had spotted the letter ready to post in Annie's bag.

The letter was intercepted and Annie was arrested and charged with 'communicating with the enemy'. She appeared at court where, thankfully, an enlightened magistrate decided that the family had suffered enough and dismissed the case.

Theo Fiedler junior, who had tried to convince the authorities on the Isle of Man to release his father from internment, changed his surname to Fielder at the age of seventeen and volunteered for the British Army.

Carol Hunt says: 'Once in France the only job he was allowed to do was collecting the dead bodies from the battlefield, often under fire. He did survive the war but, not surprisingly, was severely traumatised and suffered from shell shock.'⁵



*The Younger Fiedlers, Caroline, Theo and Freda.
Reproduced with the kind permission of Carol Hunt.*

Until the end of 1915 enemy aliens had the right to continue their business. However, on 27 January 1916 Parliament passed the Trading with the Enemy Amendment Act, which deprived enemy aliens of the right to trade in Britain. Properties were confiscated and an advisory committee decided which companies should be issued with winding up orders.

Internment

Germans had been given until 10 August 1914 to leave the country. After that men of military age (17 – 42) were to be interned. Public outcry at the news from France pushed the numbers up each month. By mid-September almost 11,000 men were in custody, more than the accommodation available to house them. The War Office suspended arrests when the figures reached 14,000 on 23 September 1914. By that stage PoWs were among those counted.

Gruesome press coverage forced the authorities to restart arrests in early October, only to run out of space again within a few days. Chief

Constables were told to suspend arrests; they would be notified if any beds became available. Rather the opposite happened, with 3,000 men being released before the next wave of paranoia began in May 1915.

The early camps were quite crude. We have a description of one in Surrey. The space was 300 yards square surrounded by two barbed wire barriers with electric wires topping a 10-foot inner fence. Inside accommodation was mostly in tents with a few wooden sheds. Men sent to Stobs (near Hawick in the Scottish Borders) had a better time of it. Originally an army training camp, it was extended on the outbreak of war and would eventually have two hundred purpose-built barrack blocks.⁶ There were some who felt that internment would help to stem the tide of distress as British Germans were forced out of homes and jobs in the fury of that early stage of the war. Better, it was said, to have them all in one place where they could be fed and clothed and where they could be protected from outbreaks of active animosity.

The public outcry that followed the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915 prompted attacks all over the country on Germans and their property. Anyone who was suspected of being German was also at risk. In London, some businesses had to put signs up announcing 'We are Russian'. The *Daily Sketch* ran a headline 'Lock Them All Up'.⁷ They were not the only ones. A number of papers called for the internment of any non-naturalised Germans, sometimes suggesting it was for their own safety and for the preservation of public order. This seems to have been a classic case of the victim being held responsible for the crime.

Four days after the *Lusitania* went down a petition went before Parliament, signed, so the backer claimed, by 250,000 women.⁸ Asquith's government responded with alacrity. On 13 May the PM promised that all non-naturalised men of 'hostile origin' would be interned. Any over military age would be repatriated and, where possible, their women and children would be deported too. Repatriation would be automatic for women who had less than five years' residence. In the next six months the numbers interned went up, including men released earlier that year to free

up accommodation. More than 9,000 Germans had already left Britain: that number swelled by a further 10,000 in the next few months.⁹

The treatment of men in the internment camps varied, often being dependent on the character of the man in charge. We know of at least one facility where inmates complained of physical assault and poor conditions whilst other Commandants encouraged cultural and sporting activities to keep men fit and pass the time. Contact with families was desperately sought, particularly by men worried by what was happening in their area.

Fortnightly family visits were allowed, but this could prove near-impossible due to distance. Many internees from the North of England found themselves in Stobs camp. Opened in November 1914, it housed both military and civilian prisoners until the latter were transferred to Knockaloe on the Isle of Man in July 1916. The authorities kept the two groups separate by providing individual compounds for each of them: in April 1916, for instance, compounds A and B held 1,102 and 1,098 civilians respectively while C and D contained 1,081 and 1,209 military and naval internees.¹⁰

The accommodation consisted of huts which were 120 feet by 20, each holding thirty-three men. The prisoners elected committees which controlled various aspects of camp life such as the canteen, the kitchen and various social activities. The transfer to the Isle of Man made family visits difficult, especially with travel restrictions.

Even worse was the situation if ill-health led to the death of a loved one. Those men who died at Stobs were buried at the site, rather than returned home. Stobs graveyard was cleared by the Ministry of Defence in 1962, and the bodies moved to Cannock Chase, a military cemetery in Staffordshire.

Mental health inevitably suffered in conditions of such stress and loneliness, regardless of how hard the authorities may have tried to alleviate the situation (and we know there were many who did try). A letter to the President of the Swiss Legation in London described the condition of men in the Islington camp. 'Mental depression bordering on desperation'

was the description and they went on to talk about the pressure on their British-born wives and families: spouses had suffered breakdowns, 'mental derangement and attempts at suicide'.¹¹

Once in the camps men were, in the main, treated humanely and reasonably well-fed although the quality of their diet deteriorated markedly in the last eighteen months of the war. While some prisoners were able to obtain better food and accommodation by virtue of their wealth or social standing few could escape the pervasive problems of boredom, frustration and apathy. Many also had to reconcile themselves to the fact that their families were not only suffering from the severe social pressures of being enemy aliens in a hostile community but were also living in destitution.

The regime in the camps varied. At some, visitors were not allowed to take in food which resulted in families smuggling it in on visits. One person has described how as a child she would take packets of chocolate and oranges in, hidden in voluminous bloomers. Many provided activities such as woodworking and gardening in an attempt to help men pass the time and contribute to the running of the institution. Some of the items made by internees, such as decorated boxes, could be sold to raise a little income. They can often be found in museums today, rather like the bone carvings done by Napoleonic PoWs.¹²

Food is of intense interest to prisoners, particularly if it is in short supply. In most camps, internees prepared the meals. At Knockaloe, there were ten German cooks to each compound kitchen. They dished up the official ration but also (in the early part of the war) ran canteens selling snacks. The Isle of Man government controlled the canteens at Knockaloe and gave a percentage of the profits to the internees. Throughout the war, internees received three meals per day but only that at midday provided sufficient nourishment. One internee could not manage his first meal in the camp: 'The man sitting next to me saw that and asked if he could have my food; without waiting for an answer he snatched my plate and ate greedily'. The U-Boat blockade changed everything, bringing with it food shortages and rationing. After 1917 internees could only receive food

packages from relatives outside England, while the range of items on sale in canteens decreased.¹³

Furthermore, internees had to endure constant reductions in their rations. The daily bread allowance had been 1 lb. 8 oz. in March 1915, but by December 1917 this had fallen to 5 oz. Substitutes came in: broken hard tack in the bread, meat replacements like salted herrings, 'Chinese bacon' (mashed soy beans) and horse. By March 1919 internment camps in Britain served horse meat five days a week.

Internees sought alternatives. Some of them ate cats and dogs, while sea-gull pie caught on at Knockaloe. There were 'thousands of these birds constantly hovering about the camp ready to swoop down on food and these enterprising caterers were catching them by the dozen with long string tied to the bait'.¹⁴ To be fair, the whole population was suffering in the same way, and food shortages would eventually result in the introduction of rationing for all by 1918.

Most but not all internees had retained their German citizenship but there were some naturalised prisoners as well. It was also possible for German-born women to find themselves interned even though legally they had become British on marriage. This was relatively rare and tended to occur only in cases where the woman was held to be a risk to the safety of the realm. Although the Home Office never interned women *en masse*, it did place a small number in one of the blocks of the Inebriate Reformatory in Aylesbury.

In February 1918 only five women of German nationality were interned there. There were however, a number of British women either married to Germans or accused of sympathising with the enemy. Louise Gilbert, a 55-year old curate's wife from Darlington was convicted of 'German sympathies'. She admitted at her trial that she was willing to pass information to the enemy but had not been in a position to do so. She was essentially convicted of not being patriotic enough; a police superintendent at her trial noted that she had no photographs of Britain's war leaders in her home, not even a print of any of the famous recent engagements.¹⁵

Alongside them were women imprisoned for criminal activity, and, after 1916, a significant number of Irish women, interned for their role in the Easter rising. It was inevitable that there would be conflict amongst internees. Under pressure, the irritations of everyday life take on an amplified effect.

At Aylesbury the main complaint from all the women was about the brawling that happened on a regular basis with the 'most filthy language in use'. Following one fight in which fists and tongues were used freely, one combatant attempted suicide. Cramped cells and strict conditions cannot have helped. Each cell was equipped with a bed and table but there were not enough lavatories and poor organisation meant their wing was dirty and uncomfortable. Women complained about other detainees, and that they were expected to do the cooking and cleaning.¹⁶

Censorship and control of the women was particularly intense with a wardress present at all meetings with outsiders, regardless of relationship 'so that the most delicate and private matters have to be discussed in the presence of a third party'. Discussions of prison matters, including your own or other people's health was banned in either visits or letters. No visit was allowed by anyone deemed to be sympathetic to the views expressed by the women. They retaliated by making life a misery for the governor. He complained that, despite making the grounds of the prison open to the interned women for most of the day, they continuously petitioned for more rights. More disturbing still, he claimed, were notes and signs found under cabbage leaves. He added: 'Dumb language was used which was not understood by the officers'.¹⁷

Alien Wives and Families

Dependants of interned men were often left destitute. A British woman marrying a man from a different country automatically assumed his nationality, although any children born to the couple on British soil were British subjects. So British-born wives of Germans, Austrians or Hungarians were treated as enemy aliens, often losing homes, income and husband in one swoop.

Local newspapers are a rich source of reports on the consequences of non-compliance. For example, in September 1914 a German woman, Maria Klomfass, was charged with travelling more than five miles from her registered place of residence, in South Shields. The defence stated that Maria, a housekeeper for a Dane, clearly did not have an 'improper motive' as she had quite openly accompanied her sister, whose husband had been charged under the Aliens Restriction Act, to the Newcastle police court! Nevertheless, she was fined a hefty 40 shillings and told that unless someone stood surety for her she risked being sent to jail for two months. The chair of the magistrates remarked that if the same offence had been committed in Germany, she would have been treated much more severely and immediately imprisoned.¹⁸

A correspondent, 'A British-German Girl', responding to demands that all enemy aliens be interned, asked whether her parents should also be arrested. Her father was German but had lived in Britain for 46 years, married for 40 years to an English woman who had never been out of the country. All ten of their children were born here. 'Have not my parents enough to suffer in their old age through this accursed war without being harassed by such a suggestion?'¹⁹

Germans in the British Army

Numerous men from a German background served in the British Army in World War One.

Adolph Freudenberg came from Bremen and his wife Anna Coan came from Hanover. They had five sons who served in the British Army, all born in North Shields. The first three seem to have volunteered together, since they had consecutive army numbers. The final son, Harry appears to have been conscripted as his mother appealed to the local tribunal against him being called up, on the grounds she already had four sons serving.

Many internees found themselves worrying about their sons who served in the British Army. Ten common German names contributed at least 1000 recruits to the war effort and there were others who enlisted

under anglicised names. The legislation which turned English women into German wives did not apply to their children. A child born in Britain was a British subject unless they chose to renounce it, so there was no formal bar to them joining up. The Army consequently decided that British born German men would not be called up until they were twenty-one, at which age the law allowed them to renounce citizenship. If they decided to remain British subjects, they would serve in the Middlesex regiment, 'The Kaiser's Own'. Two labour battalions numbered 30th and 31st (Works) Battalions were established to take them.

Louis Seiber was killed in October 1916 while serving as a Second Lieutenant with the East Yorkshire Regiment on the Western Front, having returned from Gallipoli just four months before. He was the son of a naturalised German, Johan Sieber who had settled in South Shields as a pork butcher. Louis attended Armstrong College, and his name appears on their memorial.

Whilst he was fighting the Germans his parents, uncle, and aunt, were all hounded out of the region and forced to spend much of the war in Cumbria. The letter from the War Office announcing his death was sent to the wrong address, so that it took six months for his family to learn of his fate.

His cousin, Lily, had gone to Germany to stay with family in the summer of 1914, aged thirteen, and was stranded for the duration. Louis' sister, Amalie, then fifteen had gone too. Somehow she made it back, only to be forced to flee with the rest of the family. Although Lily was not interned in Germany, she was treated as an enemy alien, required to report twice daily to the local police, and denied rations and education.²⁰

Riot

'On 19 December 1914 in Sunderland, after the licensed hours closed at nine o'clock, a huge crowd gathered in the town centre, consisting of residents as well as visitors from the neighbouring pit districts. Armed with beer bottles and other missiles, they made a start with the windows of pork butcher Mr Hanselmann, followed by Mr Kaufmann in Bridge Street,

before they continued to make their way up High Street and Hylton Road up to Milfield, smashing the windows of every pork butcher's shop they came across.' The Sunderland Daily Echo described the rioters as 'good-humoured', consisting of 'all classes of the community, many of them being quite respectable people'. They were however joined by several thousand people in the vicinity, the bulk of them being there out of curiosity to see what was being done.²¹

After the sinking of the *Lusitania* in May 1915, hostilities against ordinary Germans reached a high point. Smaller-scale riots happened all over the North East. In Newcastle four shops were wrecked on 13 May. The crowds 'showed a thorough knowledge of tactics in the way of street fighting. Long before nine o'clock there was an ominous gathering of people at the corner of Newgate Street and Clayton Street.'²²

Gateshead had already seen its share of violence the night before, but the mob returned again the next day to attend to a shop they had missed. 'Each shop was visited in turn, and after doing the damage the crowd went away singing 'Tipperary', and shouting at the top of their voices, "We will not leave any homes for the Germans"... One old lady, a German aged 78 years, who occupied a small shop in Mount Pleasant, and who has done a lot of knitting for our soldiers, was not exempt from the attention of the crowd, her premises suffering a like fate.'²³

German civilians became victims of attacks regardless of their sex or their age. In North Shields 'one of the most disgraceful acts of the rioting took place shortly before 11 o'clock, when a band of hooligans visited a small general dealers shop in Stephenson Street, kept by an English wife of an interned German, and smashed the window.'²⁴ Her three young children were asleep when the attack happened. The woman had been left penniless and was trying to support her children through the little business she carried on in the shop.

The men involved tended to be either in their late teens or their forties. These were people unable to fight the Germans on the front line. The Gateshead riots show that it was not always just propaganda that drove

people to their actions. Personal grief, and individual experience of the war, made people believe that their actions were justified. Arthur Adams was charged with the drunken assault of the German butcher Charles Frederick Seitz. He revealed in court that he had received news that two of his mates had been killed at the Front.

The press estimated that the crowd in South Shields was between 7,000 and 10,000 strong.

Despite their numbers the rioters were certainly not representative of the whole British population. Fear of public disorder ran deep: 1913 had seen a fair amount of unrest with numerous bitter labour disputes leading some conservatives to fear Britain was on the verge of revolution. Papers like *The Times* did not want a recurrence: 'The public's antagonism towards enemy aliens should not be a reason for hooliganism' warned an editorial. 'If men are sufficiently able-bodied to attack Germans and to loot their shops, they should be in the trenches in Flanders with rifles in their hands.'²⁵

The Seitz family discovered they had a friend. 'Seitz himself received notice to leave' the area in October 1914 and had been 'away', presumably interned, since then, leaving his wife and five of his children living above the shop. As the rioters smashed not only the shop window but the windows of the upstairs living quarters, the family's domestic servant Matilda Carney, a twenty-year-old South Shields native, aided the family's escape through the back door, and sheltered them at her own house'.²⁶

Many British people who read about the riots in the local papers were outraged and wrote in.

Sir, - In vain have I searched your columns to see if any of your many readers had written protesting against the disgraceful mobbing of the several pork butcher shop in this city. Such violence will only recoil on the heads of those held prisoners by the Germans. The Germans torpedoed the *Lusitania* and rejoiced at it; our mob wantonly destroyed property and stole the contents of shops and houses. Both were wrongful acts, but 'two blacks do not make a white!

More especially do my sympathies go out to Mssrs Kaufmann. I have known the late Mr Kaufmann since I was a very little boy, and have seen their children and grandchildren grow up. A more loyal and sympathetic family I could not find.

In the late Mr Kaufmann and his widow the poor had one of their best friends, and their family emulate them. Times out of number have they given freely, and with an open heart, to the people who have so wantonly destroyed their property. (...) What a return for all the kindness extended. (...) Shame on those people to so abuse their benefactors! (...) ANOTHER ENGLISHMAN (AND A DISGUSTED ONE).

We have now come to the lowest depth, that not only are innocent men driven from employment which they have filled with credit for 20, 30 or 40 years, not only are unoffending tradesmen attacked and their property destroyed, but even women are being attacked. This making war on non-combatants is what we complain of the Germans doing. I am deeply ashamed of it. G.B.H. ²⁷

When the armistice was signed there were still 24,255 enemy aliens remaining in internment camps.²⁸ Although the German population in Britain did not return to its pre-war levels until decades later, many either remained here or returned to England from abroad, the country they felt was their home. Those who had experienced hardship, internment and atrocities usually kept their memories to themselves.

Fritz (also known as Fred) Lang probably sums it up best. Lang was the owner of a butcher's shop in Southwick, Sunderland when war broke out. He was interned on the Isle of Man in 1914 and remained there for the duration of the war. He was not treated badly, but the endless boredom etched itself on his mind. His wife tried to keep the shop going. She felt safe: born in England, she spoke the language without accent. The mob

did not care, and smashed everything to pieces. The family had fled to Bradford and then, after the war, were reunited in Germany. They would not return to Britain until after World War II.

Fred Lang's daughter, Erika and her husband ran a butcher's shop in Wallsend for many years. She said her parents did not hold a grudge, but Fred refused to visit the Isle of Man ever again: 'You'll never get me back there'.²⁹

Notes

- ¹ The authors of this article are group members: Silvie Fisch, Rosie Serdiville, Liz O'Donnell, Rob Horne, Patricia Dunscombe, Joseph Crane, Dennis Pollard, Cetta Cuell. For more information see the project website at <http://ww1germanexperience.uk/>
- ² Analysis of 1911 census data carried out by group member Denis Pollard. See <https://sites.google.com/view/germanww1/1911-census-database> for more details.
- ³ *Shields Gazette*, 1 July 2015, p. 11.
- ⁴ Richard Van Emden, *Meeting the Enemy: The Human Face of the Great War*, (London: Bloomsbury 2013), p. 60.
- ⁵ Information on the Fiedler family courtesy of Carol Hunt, great granddaughter of Annie Fiedler. Unpublished memoir, March 2016.
- ⁶ Information provided by Stobs Military Camp Project; Andy Jepson and Dianne Swift in particular. www.stobscamp.org. Accessed numerous times during April/May 2017.
- ⁷ *Daily Sketch*, 13 May 1915.
- ⁸ Van Emden, p. 100.
- ⁹ Van Emden, p. 101.
- ¹⁰ Van Emden, p.106.
- ¹¹ Van Emden, p.109.
- ¹² Panikos Panayi, *Enemy in Our Midst*, (New York: Berg, 1991), p. 12.
- ¹³ Panayi, p.14.
- ¹⁴ Panayi, p.16.
- ¹⁵ Tammy M. Proctor, *Female Intelligence: Women and Espionage in the First World War*, (New York: NYU Press 2003), p. 47.
- ¹⁶ Seán McConville, *Irish Political Prisoners, 1848-1922: Theatres of War*. (London: Routledge, 2005), p. 60.
- ¹⁷ (Aylesbury Newsletter March 2010). The hard time experienced by the governor at Aylesbury was outlined in an article produced by Aylesbury local authority in their newsletter of March 2010, *Inside Aylesbury*.
- ¹⁸ *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 16 September 1914, p. 4.
- ¹⁹ *Newcastle Evening Chronicle*, 8 September 1914, p. 2.
- ²⁰ Information on the Sieber family, courtesy of their great-grandsons, Simon Wood and

north east history

Sean Mattimore. Interviews held on 25 May 2016 and 7 June 2016.

²¹ *Sunderland Daily Echo*, 21 December 1914, p. 6.

²² *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 14 May 1915, p. 5-6.

²³ *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 13 May 1915, p. 5.

²⁴ *Shields Daily News*, 15 May 1915, p. 4.

²⁵ *The Times*, 12 May 1915, p. 2.

²⁶ Lauren Haikney, *Germans and Geordies: The Great War and the German Minority of Newcastle and South Shields*. [Undergraduate dissertation, Durham University, 2017] p. 31.

²⁷ Van Emden, p. 240.

²⁸ *Newcastle Daily Journal*, 17 May 1915, p. 7.

²⁹ Information on Fred Lang courtesy of his daughter, Erika Martin. Interview on 3 March 2016.

The Radical Road: Looking Backwards and Forwards

Damien Wootten



The Radical Road Exhibition, Woodhorn Museum 2017-18

The Radical Road: Looking Backwards and Forwards was a photographic project exhibited at Woodhorn Museum, Ashington, between October 2017 and January 2018. It consisted of three parts. The first was a series of black and white images of streets named after radical and socialist figures, predominantly in the North East. The second part was made up of colour photographs of relevant printed texts that had been annotated

by previous owners. The final pieces in the exhibition were books and pamphlets from my own collection, shown in two display cabinets in the centre of the gallery space. The project arose out of a need to make some kind of comment or contribution to the current political debate.



*Socialism-Utopian and Scientific,
Frederick Engels*

Conception

I was politically active in my youth and have regularly used photography to record political events.¹ Much of my current photographic work is social documentary based. For instance, I worked with the North of England Refugee Service recording the lives of refugees and asylum seekers in the north of England, producing a book titled *Northern Refuge*.² The Radical Road project was conceived during 2014 at a time when my political self was being re-ignited, not least by Treasury announcements that austerity was to continue with extended welfare cuts, reductions in local government funding and further sanctions on benefit claimants.³ How should I, and how could I, respond to this?

I began to think about a photographic response. I considered engaging with groups that were marginalised but such an approach raises some serious issues, especially the question of how the most vulnerable in society are depicted. Even with the best of intentions and within an appropriate context, there is still the danger of exploitation and fetishisation. There is also the potential problem of using individuals and their specific circumstances to represent a wider, more complex picture.

Two, perhaps unlikely, things led me to choose the approach I adopted: the recruitment of a football manager and a television programme. Both triggered an interest in street names. The appointment by Sunderland of

Paolo Di Canio, with his fascist associations, caused controversy and I became aware, ironically, that the road that approached the Stadium of Light was Keir Hardie Way. Suddenly, a street name associated with a socialist of the past seemed to have contemporary resonance within the context of a current issue. The second street name reference came with the fly-on-the-wall documentary series 'Benefit Street', first aired in January 2014 with a second series filmed later that year in Stockton. Here, a television company took it upon itself to rechristen an existing road with a name with strong political undertones. That's when I really started to consider street names.

Chopwell

Chopwell is the obvious starting point when it comes to socialist street names. Chopwell's housing estate with a Marx Terrace and Lenin Terrace is the stuff of legend, so in the autumn of 2014 I made my first pictures of those two streets. But my attention was also drawn to a Morel Terrace, named, I



*E D Morel Terrace, Chopwell,
January 2015*



*Lenin Terrace, Stanley, County Durham,
January 2015*

later discovered, after a Labour politician, anti-colonialist and vocal opponent of the First World War, activities which led to his imprisonment. Morel had actually used photography to highlight the brutality and exploitation of the Congolese on the rubber plantations of King Leopold of Belgium.

Morel, who defeated Winston Churchill in the 1922 general election in Dundee, now appears a totally forgotten figure. But there on a terrace of less than half-a-dozen houses is remembered the man whose anti-war stance and views on global exploitation and imperialism are still relevant today.

Further Discoveries

After Chopwell, I felt compelled to identify and photograph other streets named after radical and socialist figures. This would act as a way of informing myself and the viewer about these now overlooked individuals while, at the same time, using them to reflect upon the present and on possibilities for the future. South Stanley, for example, also boasted streets named after Marx, Lenin and Hardie, alongside an Engels Street. Further research revealed many other streets in the North East named after Hardie. Some referenced William Morris and A. J. Cook, and other thoroughfares in the

same vein included a Ruskin Place, Robert Owen Gardens, Attlee Terrace, Lansbury Street, Bevan Court, Bevin Close, Henderson Gardens, Smillie Road and Beveridge Way. All of them were in working class areas on pre- and post-war council estates in industrial towns and mining villages



*Attlee Terrace, Newbiggin-by-the-Sea,
December 2014*

across the region, places like Ashington, Sunderland, Blackhall Colliery, Horden, Boldon Colliery and Newbiggin-by-the-Sea. The prevailing political affiliation in those communities had traditionally been a socialist and Labour one, and when the occasion arose local authority members took the opportunity to commemorate those individuals who strove for change and social justice.

Visual Approach

In *Chopwell* I decided on a photographic aesthetic that remained the same throughout the project. It had to be something that communicated directly and clearly, with as much of the street as possible in the image and its name visible and readable, which meant that in most cases the composition was pre-determined. I did not want any visible artistry or sense of an individual 'auteur' creating these images as pieces of art. I wanted images that felt stark, direct and objective, which would also give a heightened sense of clarity. I photographed from late autumn through to the end of winter when foliage wouldn't block street signs and fewer people would be about. I photographed on dull days to avoid dark shadows or distracting highlights, and also because in most cases I could only photograph the street from one direction and didn't want to be shooting directly into the sun. Composition and detail were crucial and, to achieve this, I used a very heavy and cumbersome tripod and a large high quality digital camera.

The images were made with the intention of them being in black and white. This is a photographic aesthetic historically associated with social documentary practice, a method of realistic representation regarded as 'truthful'. It was hoped that the work would be both evidential and political. The methodology of production resulted in images that were similar in look and sat well together as a set. This was important for showing the work in an exhibition; an overall detached observation allowing what was shown to speak for itself. I did not want to impose any specific reading of the image, making it seemingly agenda free even though there was a more complex ideological narrative going on.

I wanted to communicate my ideas in a transparent way while, at the same time, leaving them open for interpretation. On a very basic level the project offered a photographic classification of different types of council housing and a typological and topographical documentation of streets named after radicals and socialists. However, all aspects of each photograph had been carefully placed and constructed, creating an aesthetically pleasing composition and also directing and guiding the viewer to 'see'

what the artist wants them to see (if not necessarily how to interpret). I'm interested in how a straight image of a street is not just about its content but can speak of things larger than itself, something political, something philosophical.

More and More

I photographed Silkin Way, fittingly, in Newton Aycliffe, County Durham. As Minister for Town and Country Planning in the Attlee government, Lewis Silkin introduced the New Towns' Act of 1946, an ambitious programme of house building to help eradicate slums and improve



Silkin Way, Newton Aycliffe, County Durham, March 2015

the living conditions of working people. Bondfield Gardens in Gateshead commemorated Margaret Bondfield who was the first female cabinet



Bondfield Gardens, Ellen Wilkinson Estate, Gateshead, February 2015

minister and in 1943 she was a member of the committee that published the report *Our Towns: a Close-up*, highlighting the extent of inner-city poverty. Few women were represented in the street names, although there is an Ellen Wilkinson Estate in Wardley; unfortunately, no sign has been erected, something

that perhaps needs to be addressed.

As the project developed I gathered more and more street names: Tawney Road in Middlesbrough, Jack Lawson Terrace in Wheatley Hill, Cobbett Crescent in South Shields, Webb Avenue in Murton and Bruce

Glasier Terrace in Shotton Colliery. The last of these was named after Bruce Glasier, a member of the Socialist League who succeeded Keir Hardie as chairman of the Independent Labour Party in 1900.

As I looked for more relevant street names in the North East, I came across duplicate sets of names in council estates across the country. I also discovered 'one off' names. In Staffordshire I photographed Wat Tyler Close and Harney Court, named after Chartist leader George Julian Harney who founded *The Red Republican*. My visit to photograph radical roads in Scotland came at a particularly pertinent time, coinciding, as it did with the parliamentary wipe out of Labour in the 2015 general election. In Port Glasgow, I photographed Thomas Muir Lane, commemorating the man known as the 'Father of Scottish democracy', who was charged with sedition in 1793 and deported to Australia. In Cowdenbeath, I photographed Gallacher Place.

Increasing Relevance

During the first year of the picture-taking process, I had begun to doubt the value of what I was doing. Was anyone going to be interested in what I was doing and showing? Were those street names just markers of irrelevant and forgotten bygone days with no contemporary significance? The result of the 2015 general election suggested that the Labour Party - a crude if imperfect proxy for radicalism and socialism - seemed to have lost its relevance to the communities where I was taking photographs. Then, with the party leadership election, it appeared that almost overnight came renewed and vigorous debate. And those names from the past like Hardie, Attlee, Beveridge and Bevan resurfaced in the political discourse. By the time it opened at Woodhorn the project and the exhibition seemed very timely. What kind of country are we and what kind of society do we want to be?

Literature

As the project developed I returned to my collection of socialist literature, pamphlets and books, and I also began to purchase texts that were related

to some of the names I had been photographing, such as Ruskin's *Unto This Last*, Engels' *The Condition of the Working Class in England*, Lansbury's *My England* and Beveridge's *The Pillars of Security*. Although they were initially acquired solely for reference, I wondered if they could be incorporated photographically in some way. There were pages in these books that had been annotated by previous owners and it struck me that the annotations formed an intriguing record of how those unknown individuals responded to the radical ideas within the texts, and, in a small way, how much ideas permeated into society. I searched out other relevant publications that had similarly been annotated and created a set of colour photographs. For the exhibition I also selected and displayed in cabinets actual books and pamphlets from my collection, chosen not only for their importance but also for their visually interesting front covers.

Conclusion

The Radical Road project invites us to consider the radical and socialist figures commemorated in street names. The street images hopefully encourage us to look beyond the utilitarian purpose of street naming, and instead to interpret them as reminders of Britain's radical history and, perhaps, as a warning against historical amnesia. My hope is that the exhibition of photographs and literature served as a reminder of the radical ideas and values of the past, but also encouraged thoughts about their relevance today and the role they might play in the future.

It is in the very locations of our radical roads that the crises in housing, health and welfare are most acute. The project, and the exhibition, suggests that in a time of fragmentation and marginalisation of working class communities, that maybe it's worth looking back before looking forward.

All photographs for this essay have been supplied by and are copyright of the author.

Notes

¹ During the 1980's I was a member of Tyneside Young Communist League, the youth wing of the Communist Party of Great Britain (Marxist Leninist) and the Chairperson of Tyneside Youth CND. I would photograph regular demonstrations in London - The People's March for Jobs, anti-American protests outside the US Embassy against the bombing of Libya, the huge CND marches and rallies in Hyde Park - and other peace protests in places such as Barrow-in-Furness, RAF Molesworth, and a mass 'die-in' at Glasgow.

² The book was printed but never distributed due to withdrawal of consent issues.

³ Another inspiration during 2014 had been observing the Scottish referendum campaign, particularly watching very passionate and articulate young adults presenting arguments from both sides.

North East Labour History Society



Reviews - Secretary's Report -
Constitution and Membership Form -
The Sid Chaplin Labour History Trophy

Reviews

Brian Ward, *Martin Luther King in Newcastle upon Tyne: The African American Freedom Struggle and Race Relations in the North East of England* (Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2017), 307pp. ISBN-13 : 9780993195655, £14.99, hbk, illus.

This book is a very significant addition to the history of the North East. Firstly, it provided the underpinning for the amazing 2017 Freedom Festival that engaged thousands of people. It did so by using the 50th anniversary of Martin Luther King's visit to Newcastle to rediscover and reaffirm local commitments to racial equality. The book set out the foundation for an astonishing outburst of energy, artistic creativity and mobilisation. And no one who was among the crowds on the Tyne Bridge for the final glittering event of the Festival will easily forget the immense feeling of unity shared on that night.

Brian Ward's book also accomplishes the most detailed historical account of race relations in the North East yet written. Not only does it relate something about the evolving identity of the region over 250 years, but it is a good detective story. Only careful 'cold case' enquiry could have reconstructed the evidence of Martin Luther King's 1967 visit and his degree awarding ceremony speech. The book conveys how the visit was arranged, and outlines its British and American context. It reminds us, too, of the enduring significance of King's time in Newcastle.

Through the 'core' of the book, we are reintroduced – or meet for the first time – the cavalcade of movements, incidents, individuals, petitioners, refugees, escaped slaves and 'new' communities that helped forge North East over two centuries. The roots of anti-racism were embedded deeply by alignment with the liberal minded peace movements, newspapers, reform

campaigns and labour organisations that structured the region's aspirations. It was not all sweetness and light, of course. Brian Ward rightly charts the hostility to people of colour, and the violence that could erupt from time to time in ports like South and North Shields, and in towns such as Middlesbrough. Powerful economic and political vested interests were always vocal.

For readers of a labour history journal, Brian Ward delivers insights into the world of work, especially at the time of Enoch Powell's inflammatory 'rivers of blood' speech in April 1968. Around '500 workers at the Dunlop factory in Gateshead walked off the job in support of Powell and raised a petition opposing any new Race Relations legislation'. They were not alone, and letters supportive of Powell poured into the local press. But this roused those who were against Powell, and who stood on a strong platform that had seen the Transport & General Workers' Union defeat demands for a colour bar in Newcastle bus depots in 1958.

The book makes the very important point that the North East could be lulled into inactive complacency by the apparent success of a liberal response to race. But there were always arguments over how best to advance the Cause, one of the earliest being when the Newcastle upon Tyne Society for Promoting the Gradual Abolition of Slavery Throughout the British Dominions (f.1823) resolved to drop the word 'Gradual' in 1830!

The argument is unabated. Brian Ward, moving into the present day, notes that Newcastle City Council has tried to foster positive community relations. The process has been often well meaning, often one of fits and starts. In describing the response to the Pergida march in Newcastle in 2015, the City Council is not included among those who rallied as opponents of the far Right. In fact, the Council was absent from public opposition to Pergida, so practical activity was left to the people of Newcastle from all ethnic backgrounds to take to the streets in their thousands. The City's dignity was only saved by the then Lord Mayor, Labour Councillor George Pattison, a rail union activist, who ignored 'protocol' and spoke to the rally from the heart with solidarity, exemplifying real civic leadership.

The same Council remains conflicted. A local authority racial equality structure generated in the 1980s under pressure from black and Asian groups was dismantled around the turn of the present century; a 'City of Sanctuary' was declared in 2014 as a basis for subsequent work to welcome refugees, yet the Council only ever employed approximately 3% of its workforce from BAME backgrounds when Newcastle's non-white population had risen to more than 14% by 2011. As local government faces its near eclipse due to Tory austerity, it is sad to reflect that when a Council could have made a real difference to equal opportunities in employment, it failed to do so.

But Brian Ward's book will point the way to doing better for many years to come.

Nigel Todd

Steve McGrail, Vicky Patterson, Jim Philips, ***Cowie Miners, Polmaise Colliery and the 1984-85 Miners' Strike*** (Scottish Labour History Publication, 2017), 146pp. ISSN 1472-6041.

This book is published by our sister Labour History Society in Scotland, in collaboration with Steve McGrail's widow, Sue Harley. In the foreword, Sue Harley provides a personal tribute to Steve McGrail, and states that she decided to republish his account of the Strike because in October 2016 the Government was against holding an enquiry into police brutality at the 1984 miner's picket at Orgreave.

In his introduction, the Society's journal co-editor, Jim Phillips, reflects on the origins of the Scottish Strike and provides a retrospective view thirty-three years after the event, and publishes two pamphlets by Steve McGrail and his (then) partner Vicky Patterson in the sequence they were originally published in 1985 and 1986.

There are inevitably broad similarities to other coal community based Strike literature but outside Scotland very little is known about the Polmaise

strike, which began in February against its colliery closure, not March as in the rest of the country.

The first pamphlet, *For as Long as it Takes!* (1985), is a good, if brief, presentation of the situation at the time, written immediately after the Strike. What was strange for me was the apparent lack of involvement of the women in the community. In the text we read that when it came to making arrangements to feed the strikers and their families at the Strike Centre, 'at first, they found it difficult to know the quantities of food to buy in - and having no women to guide them (the women were never asked to participate) - made some mistakes'. Later in a section headed *Women in the strike* it outlines some points but not why they were marginalised, or what was the situation elsewhere in Scotland.

The section on what we have come to know as 'The Battle of Orgreave' echoes the responses in mining communities across the country. On the other hand the place of Stirlingshire in the Scottish NUM is only briefly touched upon.

The second pamphlet, *One Year On - Sacked Polmaise Miners Speak Out* (1986), is the testimony of five of the eleven miners sacked and not reinstated, with an afterword by another not included at the time. Here we read of the discrimination and sufferings of these men who had 219 years of collective service in the Pit. They write about what they did with their time, and the effect on their self respect, their anger at the Coal Board, and even their anger at the NUM. By contrast, they were conciliatory towards certain members of the local management.

The afterword is about Jim O'Hare, a sacked miner, 33 years after the events. Having lost their appeal at an Industrial Tribunal on a technicality, the sacked miners won at the Court of Sessions in Edinburgh in 1989, but too late as the Pit had closed in 1987. The last man was reinstated in 2000, but the job only lasted a year. There are many unanswered questions but a pamphlet can only give a snapshot.

I'm glad to note from the Introduction that Jim Phillips is currently writing a book on Scottish Miners from 1920 to the 1980s, and this will

hopefully fill in some of the gaps. In the meantime, these accounts are excellent and this book is worth adding to the rest of the literature so that individual struggles are not forgotten.

Copies can be obtained for £6.00 + £1.50 postage, from Stewart MacLennan, SLHS, 0/1, 64 Terregles Avenue, Glasgow, G41 4LX or via scottishlabourhistory@gmail.com

John Creaby

Florence S. Boos (ed), *William Morris's Socialist Diary* (Five Leaves Publications, Nottingham, 2018), 180pp. ISBN 978-1-910170-49-6, £10.00 pbk

William Morris is most remembered today for his pattern designs which remain with us from National Trust shops to, apparently, the officers' quarters of Britain's nuclear submarines. However, Morris spent over a decade of his life as an active, campaigning socialist after joining the first socialist organisation (the Democratic Federation) as soon as it made its appearance. In true socialist fashion there were schisms and Morris, along with others, including Eleanor Marx, went off to form the Socialist League. Then as now, Morris's socialist activities were often overlooked or regarded as some sort of romantic 'aberration'.

Florence Boos (following E. P. Thompson's ground breaking Morris biography) has been one of those re-establishing Morris's socialism as she did in the first edition of this diary and now, in an exemplary second edition. With three lines of Morris followed by a page of footnote (to take one example) this may seem an over-scholarly work not for the general reader and not for the North East reader in particular. Neither is the case. The footnotes clarify the debates and arguments that Morris was engaged with in the early socialist movement and would hardly feature at length in the shorthand of a diary. Boo's notes show us a life of practical political

engagement without neglecting Morris's other roles: he was for example advising what became the V & A museum on their textile purchases at the same time. Boos also includes a series of pen pictures of other active socialists of this early period and it is of some interest how the international movement and the British one interacted.

Morris was not a great visitor to the North East but he came to speak on *Art and Labour* at the Tyne Theatre (packed with 3000 people it is said) and to support striking Northumberland miners. It is this latter visit which features in the diary. He marched from Blyth into Newcastle where, in the railway refreshment room, 'Joseph Cowen stumbled on us and we had a friendly talk together'. His diary then describes him travelling on to 'a place called Ryton Willows' where he spoke to striking miners in the face of the 'swings and merry-go-rounds' which might remind readers of the Durham Gala. He then took the miners' struggle back to London with him and helped arrange a rally in their support in Hyde Park.

Morris's accounts of marches, police harassment, court hearings, street corner meetings and, dare we say, boring meetings, has much to remind us of how things remain today for those actively involved in the socialist struggle. However, in spite of the sometimes pessimistic accounts that the diary records there is a lively style that underpins an optimism for the future. All in all Boos' edited diary provides a fascinating account of the early socialist movement in general and Morris's part in that. It is well worth its £10.00 selling price!

John Stirling

Stuart Anderson, *Refusing to Fight the "Good War"* (Tyne Bridge Publishing, 2017), 324pp. ISBN 13:9780993195679, £9.99, pbk

This book examines the status and treatment of Conscientious Objectors from the North East during World War II. World War I saw the introduction of conscientious objection in 1916, when objectors were harshly treated, but by 1939 the concept had been formally accepted in law as a right. This local study provides an insight into the workings of the tribunal system and the experience of those who came before it.

Conscientious objection, though legal, was rare and became rarer as the war progressed, reducing from 2.2% of male conscripts to 0.16% by the end of the war, as understanding of Nazi atrocities spread. The North East provided the lowest proportion of Objectors compared with other regions. Attitudes towards Objectors therefore varied in each locality and affected the treatment they received. Objectors from Newcastle and Darlington, where there was an established middle class, were treated with more sympathy than those from more working class areas. North east Quakers were granted CO status in 88% of cases, compared with 65% of Plymouth Brethren and only 19% of Jehovah's Witnesses. Objectors on political grounds were most likely to be imprisoned. Women Objectors were treated more humanely.

Through wide-ranging research, Anderson provides the reader with an appreciation of the difficulties of Objectors' lives, even after they had acquired Objector status. In 1940 the Co-op dismissed Conscientious Objectors 'as they are detrimental to the trade of the society'. Despite a shortage of teachers, North Yorkshire County Council sent C.O. teachers on 'leave of absence' for the duration of the war, while Durham City Education Authority 'did not retain' C.O. teachers. On the other hand, Newcastle City Council retained a C.O. bricklayer because he was a Seventh Day Adventist and could 'neither work nor fight on a Saturday', while South Shields, where one councillor had been imprisoned as a C.O. in World War I, kept all its Conscientious Objectors on the payroll.

Those Conscientious Objectors who did not remain in their original

occupations found unskilled work on the land, such as forestry at Cragside. Others agreed to be guinea pigs in medical experiments. So many volunteered for the Army Medical Corps that it was closed to all except those with special skills such as dispensers and radiographers. Others found their way to the Non-Combatant Corps but with 17,000 C.O.s nationally it was hard to find enough acceptable work for them all. Stuart Anderson calculates that for every Conscientious Objector there were two more 'latent' ones who did war service positively in areas such as bomb disposal, as did John Bridge, the Director of Education for Sunderland.

Thanks to his careful study of the regional press, Newcastle War Resisters and *Mass Observation*, the author provides a sharp local picture of Conscientious Objection which was previously unavailable because other records had not survived. This book provides an invaluable insight to students of local history and a very thorough investigation of the issues raised by Conscientious Objection.

Sue King

Pete Wood, ***Johnny Handle Life and Soul*** (Pete Wood, 2017), 154pp. ISBN 978-0-9576187-9-4, £12.50, pbk

Pete Wood has been a folk singer and instrumentalist in the North East for over forty years. More recently he has turned researcher and writer and lecturer on the subject of traditional music. This means that he can write of the north eastern folk scene from the inside. It doesn't necessarily mean that he can pin down a maverick character within it like Johnny Handle. Apart from the sheer diversity of Handle's interests, which means that the study deals with the different aspects of Handle's life rather than moving through it chronologically, much of the material seems to have been derived from talking to other participants in the north eastern folk scene or to the man himself which can be confusing.

The resurgence of interest in 'Geordie culture' fostered by Frank Graham's publications and the likes of Scott Dobson, Mike Neville and Alex Glasgow meant that in the region traditional music had both an industrial urban Tyneside aspect and a Northumbrian rural one, and Handle has a foot in both camps.

The grammar school educated musically gifted son of a Newcastle school master he was of a generation on whom evacuation to the country during World War II left an enduring mark but whose career prospects still lay in industry. The young John Alan Pandrich (Handle was derived from Panhandle, a nickname) trained and worked as a mining surveyor before switching to junior school teaching as the pits closed around him. At the same time he followed a second vocation as singer, instrumentalist, composer and general entertainer starting as a jazzman but moving on to an interest in the developing folk revival. The surviving culture of the playground and the immersion in the final days of colliery life provided plentiful inspiration. Material reproduced in the book shows that a number of tunes widely assumed to be 'traditional' were in fact Handle's own compositions perfectly recapturing the idiom. The 1980s brought opportunities to compose for radio and television as well as working with other local musicians in various lineups.

An interesting section in the middle of the book entitled 'Johnny the researcher' brings the story up to date and refers to Johnny's post official retirement association with what might be called the academisation of 'folk'.

From the outreach activities of the Folkworks team to the collection of material across the musical spectrum with the backing of Newcastle University, the Sage and Gateshead Council emerged a Northumbrian anthology and the first full degree in Folk Music in the country based at Newcastle University, in all of which Johnny played a central role. A spin off from this was the re-examination of the work of specific composers which last year led to a highly successful play about one of them, Ned Corvan.

So this is more than an affectionate portrait of an idiosyncratic musician and entertainer but not quite the examination of the north eastern folk

scene through his life, work and contacts that it might have been. Also for this reviewer it lacks the political dimension and focus that gives folk its edge as social commentary, but it's still a fascinating read.

Win Stokes

John Charlton, ***Making Middle England: the history of an English family*** (History and Social Action Publications, 2017), 304pp. ISBN 978-0-9927299-2-9, pbk

This volume, far from being a simple listing of personalities, as genealogical histories often are, is instead an excellent example of what family history should be, embodying a remarkable piece of historical detective work. It encompasses a riveting narrative which is integrated into a striking analysis of the social development of the English middle class during the global political and economic ascendancy of British power between the eighteenth and the twentieth centuries, as well as the aftermath following the First World War. The volume is magnificently illustrated with reproductions of paintings and photographs.

Not only does John tell the reader about the results of his research and investigations but also takes us behind the scenes and describes how he achieved it in diverse parts of the world. The impulse for the project, he notes, was a visit to the home in Scotland of the renowned Naomi Mitchison, grandmother of his wife, Sally Mitchison, where his eye was caught by a still-life painting inherited by Sally's grandfather Dick Mitchison, whose ancestors, Naomi assured him, when he asked about the painting, 'were only interested in making money'.

Further enquiries, stimulated by this conversation, revealed that the Mitchison family had North East roots and a certain John Mitchison, son of a Newcastle carpenter, later a business entrepreneur, migrated to London where he prospered through an economically advantageous marriage in

1813 which was the starting point for further acquisitions making him a wealthy man, his income partly derived from colonial slavery and rack-renting. As John puts it: 'The Mitchison family history could be understood as the triumph of estimable characteristics but this account would omit a streak of ruthlessness and opportunism'. Naomi's remark was not too far off the point. John was able to use the numerous archive collections existing in the London area to follow this genealogical trail.

What follows here must be a brief summary, for no short article can possibly do justice to the fullness of this text which covers not only the Mitchison connection but the families with whom they interacted and intermarried as they all ascended the social scale – among others the Russells, the Stovins, the Maws, the Haldanes – of whom Naomi was one. The various positions and responsibilities which the Mitchisons and their connections occupied are detailed; some of these included prominence among the Anglican clergy, running a Bradford ironworks, and in the Russell case, ruling New Zealand and oppressing the indigenous population.

Concluding chapters discuss the far-reaching changes consequent on the First World War and the succeeding economic and social crisis. John writes of, '... a dramatic change of direction in the twentieth century', and that many of the Mitchisons 'moved from dyed-in-wool conservatism ... to free-thinking, unconventionality and socialism'. Naomi married Dick Mitchison, who was to become a Labour parliamentarian with major social responsibilities.

My paragraphs here are merely a taster for an immensely informative and un-put-downable volume which provides an entirely new and exciting perspective on the genre of family history.

Willie Thompson

Les Turnbull, *The Early Railways of the Derwent Valley* (NEIMME in conjunction with Land of Oak and Iron, 2017), 80pp. ISBN 978-0-9931151-2-4, £10.00 pbk, illus.

Les Turnbull's book is the first publication from The Land of Oak and Iron project. Like its predecessor, the Limestone Landscape project 2008 to 2016, this is hosted by Groundwork NE and Cumbria and supported by the Heritage Lottery Fund and various local organisations. It aims to stimulate volunteer groups and individuals to become involved in the study of their environment and to engage these volunteers in much needed conservation activities.

The industrialisation of the Derwent Valley was already well under way by the end of the 17th century, as demonstrated in Wrightson and Levine's pioneering study *The Making of an Industrial Society: Whickham 1560-1765* (1991). During the late 17th and 18th centuries much of the coal shipped out of the Tyne and much of the profit made by the Hostmen of Newcastle came out of the Derwent valley. This was where the group of entrepreneurial landowners calling themselves the Grand Allies developed the wooden waggonways that were the precursors of the industrial railways of the first half of 19th century.

Les Turnbull's family came from Derwentside and he has already published a more general work on north-eastern waggonways (*Railways before George Stephenson*) based on the collections housed in the NEIMME (Mining Institute) library. He is clearly in a position to produce something that would introduce the participants in the Land of Oak and Iron project to their heritage of trackbeds and waggonways and has delivered a very attractive, lavishly illustrated account of the network as it developed in the period. He makes extensive use of maps and plans, from contemporary ones in 18th century viewbooks to mid 19th century Ordnance Surveys drafted when the lines of the old waggonways were still well marked.

It is difficult to assess what the potential readership for this book among our members would be although one potential area of interest at least for this reviewer is the revelation of the devious business practices and cut-

throat rivalry of those involved, in their determination to get into the lucrative Tyne coal trade.

In some ways the Land of Oak and Iron project is picking up on earlier attempts at conservation. Soon after the closure of the Derwent Valley Railway under the 1960s Beeching rationalization, a far sighted Labour controlled Durham County Council made the trackbed into the Derwent Walk which remains a well established public recreational amenity. Subsequent regional and governmental policies failed to build on these early beginnings until the recognition that tourism and the heritage industry, funded by a National Lottery and using largely volunteer labour, could be a means both to provide some long overdue conservation work and to evoke a community spirit lost in the de-industrialisation process.

The purpose of this book is to provide the background to some of these activities but it is also a genuine work of historical research that fleshes out the careers of those responsible for the development of the waggonways, which may make it equally interesting for the general reader. The organisers of the Land of Oak and Iron project are currently working on the creation of a state of the art learning hub on the site of the part of the old Ambrose Crowley Ironworks at Winlaton Mill. Hopefully they will find a chronicler as able as Les Turnbull to document that enterprise.

Win Stokes

North West Labour History Society, *North West Labour History*, no 42, 2017-18, £11.00 including postage, available from www.nwlh.org.uk

Although they are a sister society to ours, North West Labour History Society (NWLHS) publish a very different journal, at least in layout and appearance. Theirs is A4, printed on glossy paper, with full-colour pictures throughout. Overall, it looks much more like a magazine you might buy in the newsagents, than a learned journal.

In its editorial aims and its hoped-for mix of contributors, though, the resemblance is far closer. It aims to publish material relating to the history of the working class in North West England, and it seeks contributions from both academic and 'amateur' historians. Topics in this year's issue range chronologically from the 'Blanketeers' (protest marchers who set off from Manchester to take a petition to London in 1817, only to be stopped by the military when they had got no further than Leek), to Strawberry Studios, a small recording studio which opened in 1967 and closed in 1986. In terms of breadth, there are profiles of local activists Betty Tebbs and John Tocher (who held national office in the Communist Party for many years), and articles on the local dimension of national movements. These include the Women's Peace Crusade of the First World War, and the 'Cinderella clubs' providing food for hungry children, sponsored by the Clarion newspaper at the end of the nineteenth century. There is a reprinted piece by Benny Rothman (of Kinder Scout fame) about the Mosley Rally in 1933 in Belle Vue, and a brief report of a touring show by performers from NWLHS about the life and times of the Irish socialist James Connolly.

All the articles are interesting, though the quality is rather uneven, and several could have benefited from a heavier editorial hand (and, to give a hostage to fortune, more careful proof-reading).

One point that struck me forcibly, as a stranger to North West England's history, was that it was often hard to find out the essential facts of the topic under discussion. For example, only halfway through the article on the Blanketeers, noted above, was there an explanation of who they were and what their aims were. On the other hand, a six- line summary at the start of a piece by David Hargreaves about the 1935 Royal Commission on the Arms Trade made all the difference to the readability of the article. The same criticism can certainly be levied at our own journal; are we accidentally shutting out potential readers who do not already know our region?

Sue Ward

David J. Starkey, David Atkinson, Briony McDonagh, Sarah McKeon, and Elisabeth Salter (eds), ***Hull: Culture, History, Place*** (Liverpool University Press, 2017), 326pp. plus 2 x maps on inside cover. ISBN 978-1-78138-419-6, £14.95 pbk, illus.

This wonderful book may not include many references to our North East region (Hull being just too far south) but is highly recommended as a demonstration in how to write and produce an enthralling local history of a major east coast port. Furthermore, as an east coast port, Hull's social and economic history shares many characteristics with places like Newcastle, North and South Shields, and Sunderland, and anyone familiar with maritime history will be aware of the long standing connections between Hull and these various ports.

Hull is more than just an economic history, though that story is well presented through chapters on the town's growth between 1650 and 1914. By the time of the Civil War, Hull had already established itself as an independently minded community that famously denied access to Charles 1 in 1642, and later in 1688 Hull's leading citizens launched a coup to secure the town for the Protestant William of Orange. The latter event was celebrated annually as 'Town Taking Day' until the late eighteenth century and both events contribute to Hull's sense of identity today, even if, as Briony McDonagh points out, the majority of townsfolk at the time were probably less radical than these events suggest.

An important chapter in this book is Nicholas Evans' on migration, both inward and outward, that has shaped the linguistic and cultural identity of the city for over a millennium. Danish-speaking Vikings in the ninth century left their mark in local place names and French, Dutch, and German merchants later contributed to the town's commercial and cultural development. Hull's first black migrant is recorded as early as 1599; the servant of Bartholomew Burnett. As a staging post for transmigration to America, Hull, along with Grimsby, would later account for the migration of a majority of European converts to the Mormon Church.

There are ten chapters in all, ranging from Hull's medieval origins to its postwar decline and latter day regeneration. The book was compiled in response to Hull being chosen as the 2017 UK City of Culture, and culture in its broadest sense runs throughout, with specific chapters on sport as an example of popular culture and short vignettes on local cultural notables such as the celebrated nineteenth century dressmaker Emily McVitie (Madame Clapham) and the poet Philip Larkin who moved to Hull in 1955 to become librarian of University College.

My favourite chapter is that devoted to the steam trawlermen who risked their lives in the North Sea fishing grounds, as told through the notebooks of skipper William Oliver (1884-1959). Oliver's trawlers sailed as far as Murmansk and Norway, as well as the west of Scotland and the seas around Iceland. Twenty annual diaries from January 1920 to December 1939 contain daily entries that detail life at sea, in total about 77% of this almost twenty-year period. Extracts from the diaries are amongst the numerous photographs and images reproduced throughout the book, which along with extensive end-notes and source citations provide a rich seam of research material and an inspiration to anyone wishing to produce a similar guide to their local town or city.

Mike Greatbatch

Dave Harker, *The Gallowgate Lad – Joe Wilson's Life & Songs* (Wisecrack Publications, 2017), vi +180 pp. ISBN 978-0-9957418-0-5. £20 pbk

Another year, another important and meticulously researched Dave Harker biography of a Tyneside songwriter. Like its predecessor, *Cat Gut Jim the Fiddler*, it is a richly illustrated publication, as much about context and legacy as it is about its leading man. It notes Wilson's influence on other songwriters, including Tommy Armstrong and Rowland Harrison and demonstrates that the 'Tyneside Music Hall' is a misnomer: performers travelled widely across the burgeoning northern coalfield, tunes originated as far afield as America,

and standard English versions of lyrics emerged in London.

The book features family histories of an almost overwhelming rogues' gallery of performers, proprietors and publishers, including the Allan Brothers, with their knack for annexing copyright, supposedly to protect 'careless writers'! Harker ably captures the milieu of a developing North East music hall full of precarious short-term ventures in an environment where poverty, ill health and bankruptcy were perennial risks, and temperance viewed as a panacea. The contextual threads can be hard to pick up – occasionally it is necessary to read a paragraph twice to understand the relevance of a particular individual or story – but future researchers will be grateful for this scrupulous approach.

Harkers' years in archives, poring over slip songs, programmes and play bills have paid off, as he colourfully conveys a typical night's entertainment: comics, serious vocalists, 'darkie' acts, and songs about Siamese twins or champion rowers. There is no squeamishness that Wilson's songs reflected the mores of his time, with subservient women in need of male protection (*Be kind te me dowter*), and gross racial caricatures such as *Snook's Dinah*.

Like *Cat Gut Jim*, the use of illustrations lends immediacy to the story. Wilson's own publicity photographs, manuscripts, songbooks, even a whole pantomime script are reproduced, so that we can read unmediated original documents. This chimes with Harker's well-documented condemnation of those who would edit, 'beautify' and expurgate vernacular material. Harker notes that Wilson's songsheets in support of strikes or celebrating sporting victories were excluded from the Allan songbooks. And this was before the posthumous revisions undertaken by Stokoe, Crawhall and Catcheside-Warrington, and the patronising comments of reviewers who praised Wilson's work as something of quaint interest even if the dialect was 'a drawback'.

This consideration of Wilson's posthumous legacy differentiates this book from similar biographies. Whereas the wives and families of working class greats are often overlooked, here we learn the transatlantic story of Wilson's descendants. Harker also considers the development beyond Wilson's day of an increasingly modern, national, and 'respectable' music

hall, and goes on to consider continued dissemination and refraction of Wilson's work: via local media, the folk scene, and stage productions by Alex Glasgow and (now) Ed Waugh. This ongoing story emphasises that no individual exists in a vacuum, and that history's notables and their commemoration are part of social contexts which continue and mutate after the protagonists' deaths.

Jude Murphy

David Allsop, Carol Stephenson and David Wray, eds, **Justice Denied - Friends, Foes & the Miners' Strike** (Merlin Press, 2017), 200pp. ISBN 978-0-85036-730-0. £15.99.

More than thirty years after it ended, the miners' strike of 1984-85 is still seen as of crucial historic importance. This book is a complex but very rewarding study, much of it not directly related to the North East, but raising issues that remain relevant to all working class lives.

Part 1, 'The People' provides a series of individual testimonies about the Strike's personal, family and community consequences. It starts with the recollection of the then young apprentice, Ian Lavery, from a Labour activist family, now a Labour MP. Barbara Jackson's story is the first to my knowledge of a women 'striker' rather than 'supporter'. Sian James' experience of the strike took her from being 'a young mother and contented housewife' whose husband was employed by the NCB, to becoming a Labour MP. The issue of those sacked during the dispute is illustrated by the story of Peter Smith, not in fact a miner but employed at an NCB coke works. Despite all the problems he has faced as a result of his participation in the strike he declares that he 'would not change a thing'. The following chapter provides oral testimony from adults who were growing up as children during the Strike alongside their activist parents.

The second part of the book discusses the controversies surrounding the strike. Allsop and Wray, two of the three editors, consider the constitutional issues of the Union's rules and the ballot, and suggest that the notion fostered by the media that militants and Arthur Scargill orchestrated the strike by duping the miners, to be an insult to its participants.

David Warrington, using recently released Cabinet papers, contends that while it is clear that the Government was prepared for a strike which could be used to attack the trade union, the conspiracy theory is an oversimplified explanation. A following chapter, also by Warrington, gives an overview of the 'Battle of Orgreave', including the lead up to it and the events, police conduct and the biased and in part distorted media reporting. Finally in this section, a chapter by Allsop, Eric Eaton and Keith Stanley discusses the undermining of solidarity in the Nottinghamshire coalfield.

The concluding part considers issues that are still ongoing. In 'Orgreave, the Battle for Truth and Justice' Granville Williams looks at both press and television coverage of events like Orgreave and Hillsborough, the way that the truth about Orgreave only began to emerge in 2012, and the continuing calls for a public enquiry. John Stirling disputes the notion that the strike was the defining point in the decline of unionism, pointing to changes in employment and the law under both Thatcher and Blair. He suggests that the strike showed that the engagement of communities and other social movements 'rooted in shared values' could be a model for 'sustainable trades unionism'.

Finally, Wray and Stephenson look at the decline and subsequent revival of the Durham Miners' Gala. They conclude that its continuance is a 'highly visible celebration of a commitment to collectivism by working folk and their families, alongside a return to political confidence'. That this book ends in the North East on an optimistic note should commend it to all who are interested in reviving and perpetuating the shared values that characterised the communitarian spirit of the Miners' Strike.

Secretary's Report

The past year has been a productive one for the Society and by the time of our forthcoming Annual General Meeting it is estimated that the total attendance at our events will be around 580.

The highlight of our jubilee year was a major one-day conference on *Fifty Years of Activism* held at Northumbria University on 16 September in conjunction with the Histories of Activism group. This event attracted 100 people and John Charlton gave the opening address.

This was followed on 7 November by a talk from Professor David Saunders on the Tyneside roots of Rudolf Abel, the central figure in the film *Bridge of Spies*, an event which took place on the actual 100th anniversary of the Russian Revolution.

The Society would like to thank Brian Bennison, John Charlton, Peter Nicklin and John Stirling for their work in making all the jubilee events a big success.

The other talks during the year, usually held under our First Tuesday banner, were:

26 September – *Responses in the North East to the Russian Revolution*, Nigel Todd

3 October – *Joe Wilson, The Gallowgate Lad*, Dave Harker

9 January – *The Women's Conference in Ponteland in 1976*, Julie Scanlon

6 February – *Martin Luther King's Visit to Newcastle Fifty Years Ago*, Brian Ward

6 March – 'Hens that want to crow'. *Suffragists and Suffragettes in the North East of England, 1866-1918*, Liz O'Donnell

3 April – *Students in the North East of England and the Aftermath of the Great War*, Sarah Hellawell

1 May – *Ellen Wilkinson: her politics and religion*, Matt Perry

5 June – *The Radicalisation of Oxfam*, Peter Brabban

10 July – *A Funny Thing Happened on the Road to Utopia: North East History and the Art of the Political Playwright*, Ed Waugh

4 September – *The Battle of Stockton*, Rosie Serdiville.

A Christmas social was held in Newcastle on 5 December with entertainment provided by Kiddars Luck and a history quiz devised by Peter Brabban.

This issue of the *North East History* journal has again been produced by Brian Bennison, Mike Greatbatch, Win Stokes and Sue Ward and the Society wishes to record its appreciation of their work which continues to maintain long established high standards of production and content.

We are also grateful to Peter Nicklin for his continued development of the website where the first issue of the Society's bulletin published in October 1967 can now be viewed.

The Sid Chaplin Prize for 2016 was awarded to Leanne Smith, a student from Sunderland University, for her dissertation, '*To Be Born a Women has been to be Born, within an Allotted and Confined Space, into the Keeping of Men: The Struggle over Female Labour in the Durham Coalfield, 1914-1918*'. The presentation of the prize to Leanne was made by our Society President, Archie Potts.

We are pleased to report that Terry McDermott, one of the organisation's founding members, was elected as a Vice President at our Annual General Meeting last September.

David Connolly

Officers:

President:	Archie Potts
Vice President:	Maureen Callcott, Terry McDermott
Chair:	John Creaby
Vice Chair:	Kath Connolly
Treasurer:	Judith McSwaine
Secretary:	David Connolly
Journal Editors:	Brian Bennison, Mike Greatbatch, Win Stokes and Sue Ward

Committee Members:

Brian Bennison (Gosforth)

Peter Brabban (Newcastle)

Pat Candon (Tynemouth)

John Charlton (Newcastle)

Mike Greatbatch (Newcastle)

Steve Grinter (Wylam)

Lynda MacKenzie (Newcastle)

Peter Nicklin (Newcastle)

Liz O'Donnell (Morpeth)

Ben Sellers (Durham)

John Stirling (Morpeth)

Win Stokes (Tynemouth)

Rob Turnbull (Hexham)

Don Watson (North Shields)

How to contact the Society

Email: secretary@nelh.org

Write to: David Connolly, 1 Exeter Close, Great Lumley,
Chester-le-Street DH3 4L J

Constitution of The North East Labour History Society

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 at 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.

Dissolution

- a. If the members resolve to dissolve the Society the members of the Committee will remain in office as such and will be responsible for winding up the affairs of the Society.

- b. The Committee shall collect in all the assets of the Society and pay or provide for payment of all the liabilities of the Society.
- c. The Committee shall apply any remaining assets or money of the Society:
 - i. directly for the objects of the Society;
 - ii. by transfer to any other society having the same or similar to the objects of the Society;
- d. In no circumstances shall the net assets of the Society be paid to or distributed among the members of the Society.

Officers and committee:

The business of the Society shall be conducted by a Committee composed of 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.

Journal:

The Society shall publish an annual journal, *North East History*. The Committee shall appoint the Editor/s of the Journal. The Editor/s shall report to the Committee on matters affecting the production of the Journal.

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.

The Sid Chaplin Labour History Trophy



Past winners

1988	Kit Pearce	2006	Elsbeth Gould
1989	Elaine Knox	2007	Candice Brockwell
1990	Sylvia Clark	2008	Ruth Blower
1991	Martin Searles	2009	Rob Doherty
1992	David Ridley	2010	David Reed
1993	Pauline Lynn	2011	Deborah Smith
1994	Kathleen Smith	2012	James English
1996	Reg Brown	2013	Aidan Harper
1997	Angela Goldsmith	2014	Molly Courtice
2000	Robert Hope	2015	Adam Woolley
2004	Craig Turnbull	2016	Leanne Carr
2005	Craig Armstrong	2017	Leanne Smith

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

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

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

North East Labour History Society

Membership Form

Please complete all sections, ticking appropriately ✓.

1) Your details

Name

Address

.....

Post Code: Email:

2) Annual Subscription rate

Individual: £15 ☐ Students, unwaged: £7.50 ☐

Institution: £25 ☐

Please add £5 if international postage is required.

3) Payment method:

☐ Standing Order: I have completed a Standing Order Mandate which I have sent to my bank/enclose with this form.

☐ Cheque: I have written a cheque made payable to: North East Labour History Society and attach it securely to this form.

Send this form (**and cheque or Standing Order Mandate, or both**) to:

Judith McSwaine

Treasurer

12 Whitfield Road

Forest Hall

Newcastle upon Tyne

NE12 7LJ

North East Labour History Society

Standing Order Mandate

To the Manager

Bank
Address

I/we hereby authorise and request you to debit my/our

Account Name:

Sort Code:

Account Number

Amount £

Frequency Annually

beginning date: .../.../..... and, there after on .../....., each year until
you receive further notice from me in writing.

And Credit

Beneficiary	North East Labour History Society
Bank	Unity Trust Bank, plc
	Birmingham
Sort Code	60-83-01
Account No.	58254950

Signed Date

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North East History Volume 49

- **The Struggle over Female Labour at the Durham Coalfield, 1914-1918**
- **Fifty Years of Activism. The NELHS in its Jubilee Year**
- **Bevin Boys in the North East of England, 1944-48**
- **Phil Lenton (1946-2017), a personal appreciation**
- **John McNair: From Tyneside Boy Orator to a Life in Socialism**
- **Plashetts Revisited: Life and Labour in a Coal Mining Outpost**
- **North East Germans during World War One: from Friend to Foe**
- **The Radical Road: Looking Backwards and Forwards**

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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.net Supporters are welcome to contribute to discussions

Journal of the North East Labour History Society

<http://nelh.net/>