

NOVEMBER 2000

ISSUE 47



Banners Unfurled

**Exhibiting
Contemporary
Collecting
ASW 2000**

SHCCGNEWS

THE NEWSLETTER OF THE SOCIAL HISTORY CURATORS GROUP

NOVEMBER 2000

ISSUE 47



SHCG NEWS will encourage and publish a wide range of views from those connected with history and museums. The NEWS aims to act as a channel for the exchange of information and opinions about current practice and theory in museums.

The views expressed in the newsletter are wide ranging and do not necessarily express the views of the SHCG committee or SHCG, unless otherwise stated.

Articles for the NEWS should be between 500 to 2000 words. Please submit a typed copy of your article along with a copy on disk, saved as a PC word file or richtext format, or you can send it as an email. Illustrations for articles are always welcome. Original photographs can be returned.

Nicola is happy to discuss any ideas for articles and answer all queries.

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Cover photo:
'Follow the Banner'
Miners and their families arrive at the site of the Northumberland Picnic accompanied by their lodge banner. Courtesy of Woodhorn Colliery Museum.

Contents photo:
David Broom curator of 'Masks' with one of the exhibits.

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Working Lives

It was clear from this year's Annual Study Weekend, based on the theme of Working Life, that collecting and interpreting material related to people's experience of work is something that we all feel is important. However, it was also clear that this is not necessarily an easy task.

As society changes, how do you decide what industries or careers should be represented? Taking the opportunity to collect from a business that has recently closed down is surely worthwhile, but does this practice mean that the importance of the business within the community is over-emphasised merely because its material culture has now found its way into a museum? Curators who wish to represent the working practices of today are faced with the problem that many modern jobs generate little material culture or only that which is common to the whole country, for example, call centre work. How should this work be represented and what about the issue of those who are self-employed or who undertake several different jobs during their lifetime?

Some of these issues are explored further in this issue of SHCG News. Hazel Edwards highlights the opportunities and difficulties which banners present in representing the experience of mining, an industry which is almost extinct in many parts of the country. By contrast, the millennium collecting projects in Plymouth and Tyne and Wear have given these museums the chance to collect people's personal accounts of their experience of work whilst highlighting the fact that for many, their work is not the way in which they wish to be defined. A reminder that, although we spend much of our lives working in one capacity or another, it is not our only experience and the accounts of exhibitions at the Museum of St Albans and St John's House Museum show that there is more to life than work!

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SHCG COMMITTEE 2000-2001

Yorkshire Museums Council Launches Regional Museums and Galleries Portal

Yorkshire Museums Council (YMC) has announced the launch of its museum and gallery

specific portal, YorkshireMuseums.Net. The regional portal is a new venture for the sector. The YMC portal will offer a search engine, community building tools and free e-mail, domain names and web space. Regional content will be represented by news drawn from local sources and channels of specialised cultural interest. The site will replace the existing YMC site.

YMC has evolved its former web site into a 'premiere portal' for the museum sector. The launch of the site is designed to reflect YMC more strongly and appeal to the professional museum community and wider general public. Nick Gander, YMC's Information Officer, said: "The site will, of course, continue to be a source of information for museum professionals. However, the goal is to make it more of a place where the users, be they museum professionals or the general public, return and form an ongoing relationship with the sector".

The YMC portal will be more community-specific, according to Gander.

"The portal will allow people with common interests to find, communicate and interact with each other.

We'll also be seeking interaction from our members and visitors to the portal to help

shape its future. It's now more about community".

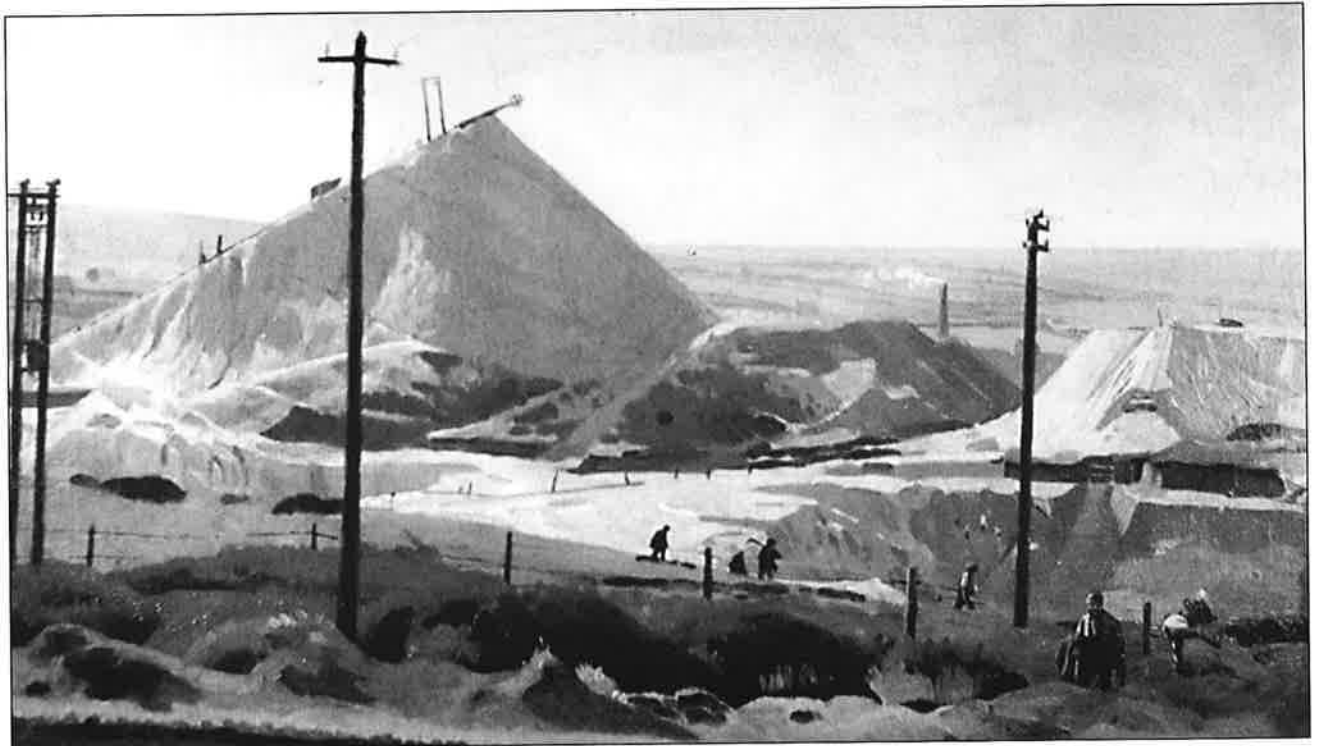
"Over time we plan to offer even more value-added services and hosted applications", says Gander. "We see this as a real opportunity to help our members and users find everything they need in one site and have a place for information exchange".

The YMC portal offers users access to information from more than 50 sources. With one click, users can access in-depth information on a variety of topics ranging from conservation and archaeology, to museums opening times and new gallery exhibitions. YMC's museum-specific search engine, Museums Alive! allows users to search for museums and galleries throughout the region. It provides information on collections, opening times, facilities and includes a map all available in downloadable form. Gander says that: "the site will sit comfortably alongside the national museums web sites like the 24 Hour Museum and Cornucopia".

YorkshireMuseums.Net was designed, developed and produced by YMC and On-Biz.Net, a Bradford based web design company.

The YMC portal can be reached at:

www.yorkshiremuseums.org.uk



A China Clay Pit - Leswidden
by Harold Harvey, 1920.
Royal Cornwall Museum, Truro

A rare accurate depiction of Cornish industrial history, the painting shows a typical china clay pit being worked in a traditional manner.

It illustrates the development of the waste pits and the influence they had on the surrounding Cornish landscape. It also focuses on the workers, their costume and their use of the footpaths which criss-cross the county.

Resource / V&A Purchase Grant Fund

Financial arrangements to March 2001

The Museums & Galleries Commission and Libraries Information Council were replaced on 1 April 2000 by a new body, Resource: the Council for Museums, Archives and Libraries.

Whilst the V&A continues to operate and fund the administration of the Purchase Grant Fund, the grant budget derives from Resource as the MGC's successor body. The Fund will now therefore be known as the Resource/V&A Purchase Grant Fund.

Resource will review the scheme during the year. Meanwhile, a total budget of £1,000,000 for 2000-2001 has been confirmed. The basic parameters of the Purchase Grant Fund will be unchanged:

Minimum purchase price:	£500
Maximum purchase price:	£300,000
Maximum grant:	50%

The maximum sum which may be sought will remain at £80,000, though this is subject to availability of funds and it is unlikely that the Fund will be able to offer support to this level in most instances. In line with existing policy, priority will be given to those applicants who have received little previous support.

Scope

The Purchase Grant Fund considers applications from museums and galleries, record offices and specialist libraries throughout England and Wales which are not funded from central government. It supports a wide range of acquisitions from social history to fine art, from archaeology to ethnography.

Recent grants include a horse slaughterer's advertising model for Rochdale Museum, 5 letters to David Roberts from or concerning Richard

Dadd for the Bethlem Royal Hospital Archives and Museum and a 17th century marble relief by Orazio Marinali for the Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Birmingham University.

Manuscripts Fund

No discrete sum will be set aside for smaller manuscript acquisitions. Applications will be considered on the main fund which means the minimum purchase price remains at £500 and the maximum grant (previously £12,000) will no longer apply. Major archival purchases costing over £60,000 are already considered on the main fund.

Local commitment

Local commitment to the purchase is fundamental. The level of grant is, therefore, calculated at the maximum rate of £2 for every £1 of locally-raised funding.

The grant allocation system

Grants are normally allocated on a weekly basis towards those cases which are considered to be of particular merit. Decisions are normally given within four weeks of receipt of all necessary information. Purchases costing over £60,000 are considered monthly.

Making a good case

Competition for our limited resources is always very strong and we are never able to assist all deserving cases. It is now even more important for applicants to complete the application form fully and argue the significance of the proposed purchase in the context of their permanent collections as strongly as possible.

For further information contact:

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SHCG MATTERS

SHCG Listings

compiling a new resource for history curators

Ever been in the position of having to mug up on a subject quickly for some exhibition or to help answer a public enquiry? Do you vaguely remember that a certain museum has a fantastic collection of something, but not sure what? Or what about the author of that seminal reference work whose name you can't quite recall! Thanks to a new SHCG research project help with all of these workday problems will soon be on hand.

SHCG Listings, will be a publication that should provide an overview of the most useful resources relating to a whole range of subjects dealt with by history curators. Arranged by SHIC, each section will list the best and most useful books, articles and websites for one or more subjects, along with details of significant collections of artefacts, sound recordings and photographs and contacts for relevant specialist groups.

Due to the changing nature of some of this information, *SHCG Listings* will be in loose leaf format, with all the key information for each subject contained on two sides of a page. Priority will be given to those publications currently available or published recently. Also, standard reference works which should be available in most university or central public libraries will also be included even if out of print. The usefulness of each publication cited will be indicated, especially referring to good illustrations, references and bibliographies. Important museum collections will also be listed and some indication of the date range of this material and of its nature and content will

be given. Finally, any relevant specialist groups and websites will be listed to ensure that users can get the very latest information.

The mammoth task of compiling this resource book will call upon the knowledge and skills of many members of SHCG and museum professionals elsewhere, and a small editorial committee has been established headed by Steph Mastoris of Leicestershire Museums. It is hoped that a first draft of the most basic subjects will be ready in time for the annual study weekend in 2001, with final publication planned for the following year. Thereafter updates and additions will be issued as the need arises, possibly through the SHCG website. In fact the website will have an important part to play in the initial compilation of the resource book, as it is hoped to post draft listings on the site for comment and contributions. In this way the project will embrace the whole community of museum professionals, collectors and academics.

Any initial offers of help would be most welcome, especially from members who may have a good range of references to a specific topic already compiled. Please contact Steph Mastoris (see below) as soon as possible. The information should start appearing on the website by the spring of 2001.

Steph Mastoris can be contacted at:

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ASW 2000: Working Lives

University College, London 13th-16th July

The recent Annual Study Weekend based in London was a brilliant opportunity for a soon-to-be graduate in Museum Studies to mix with those in the glamorous world of social history! The four day event provided a well-organised schedule of papers, discussion, museum visits and, of course, socialising.

Jenny Young

The theme of working lives was a relevant topic for museums facing the twenty-first century and highlighted the need for all curators to face the huge task of documenting the lives of 'workers' and interpreting it for museum visitors. Most kinds of museums were represented, from rural life to science and industry, which meant a mix of people were present with a broad experience of interests, projects and ideas.

The conference was enjoyable on many levels, not least intellectually and socially. London was a good base and I enjoyed the

opportunity to visit such culturally diverse places as the London Eye, the National Maritime Museum and the Holocaust exhibition at the Imperial War Museum. The evening visits to the Museum of London and the Freemasons' Hall and Museum were also well planned. The meal on the penultimate evening of the conference was held in a suitably historic building, namely the Old Fire Station near Waterloo.

Those based in Taviton Street, like myself, enjoyed the comfort and convenience of being centrally based to enjoy London to its limits. I especially enjoyed the opportunity to meet so many people who were enthusiastic about their jobs and willing to share their knowledge with me. The theme of the conference was relevant to my current research, and also challenged me to pursue new areas.

Altogether, the conference provided a welcome chance to meet new people, network, talk about our common interests and share ideas for the future.

THE ADVANTAGES OF THE MINIDISC OVER OTHER METHODS OF RECORDING MATERIAL:

- 1: It is relatively cheap to buy. It costs about £150 (not including VAT). Compare that to about £300 for a Sony Walkman Pro or a Marantz, about £500 for a good reel to reel machine or as much as £2000 for a DAT.
- 2: It uses recordable minidisks which retail (if you shop around) in the High Street for about £1.00 each and can give you 74 minutes of sound in stereo or double that if you record in mono.
- 3: The quality (if you use a proper microphone) is excellent. As the recording is digital, there is also no loss of quality when you copy it and none of the hiss that audiotapes can have in the background. As minidisks have not been around for very long, no one knows how long they will last - but there is no reason to think that they will deteriorate any faster than other recording media, if properly stored. Of course it is advisable to copy the MD onto cassette, reel to reel tape or onto CD, once it has been recorded.
- 4: You can put trackmarks onto parts of the interview which you want to pull out later, to use as quotations or soundbites. In this way a minidisk is just like your music CDs at home, rather than pool through the whole tape to find something, you can go straight to a particular track. You can also erase tracks, move them or reorder them (though this is not for the beginner!)
- 5 Minidisks are light and easy to carry. They run off mains or the cheapest AA batteries, as well as rechargeable batteries and there is up to 5 hours recording time before you need to change the battery.

Using Minidisks to record Oral History interviews

A summary of a workshop given at this year's Annual Study Weekend.

Kathy Flower

Amberley Museum,
West Sussex

Thanks to a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Amberley Museum, in common with a growing number of museums, has an ongoing programme of collecting oral history interviews with people whose lives intertwine with the exhibits we have here. Our exhibits show many of the local industries and crafts of the last century, and the interviews are with people whose working lives shed light on what it was like to be a printer, a road mender, a bus driver or a boatbuilder. We intend to use extracts from them in audio montages around the museum and displayed as written quotations; we are just completing a film loosely based on some of the interviews, to introduce people to the museum. Other possibilities include: putting 'soundbites' onto the museum website; making a CDROM; offering the material to local radio stations and newspapers and producing books and other publications.

Museums and archives have been collecting oral history interviews for decades now, but with a wider choice of



Above and Far Left: 'A well-organised schedule of papers, discussion, museum visits and socialising' ASW 2000 delegates make the most of the weekend.

recording media available than ever before, it's easy to feel confused about what equipment to use. Excluding filming, which presents a whole different set of questions, you have a choice of using: reel to reel tape recorders; audio cassettes; DATs (Digital Audio Tape) or minidisks. You also have a choice of microphones - some people use clip on ones, some built in microphones, some a table microphone mounted on a stand.

Reel to reel tape recorders produce excellent quality recordings as do good quality audio cassette recorders such as Marantz or Sony Walkman Pro. However whatever you use to record on, without a good microphone, the recording will not be worth listening to. It is even possible to record on Dictaphones, but you should ask the question, will anyone ever want to listen back to something of such poor quality, however fascinating the material and how many of the uses you would like to make of the material will be possible if it is such hard work listening to it?

As for the microphone - as a rule of thumb, the more you spend on it and the heavier it is, the better the quality is likely to be. A good one will cost from £50-£100. Clip microphones are popular with many

oral historians, but personally I prefer a table microphone with a stand. Whatever you use, make sure that the interviewer's question is audible as it throws light on the answer and makes listening back to the interview less of a strain.

Sony (the main makers of recordable minidisk players, though Sharp also make some) are constantly changing and updating their models but the basic principles stay the same, and last year's model can be a bargain. There are dozens of types of microphones. Ask to try the microphone in the shop to hear the quality for yourself. An omni-directional one will pick up the interviewer's questions as well as the interviewee's answers, a uni-directional one is good if you think there will be a lot of ambient noise in the places where you will do the interview (best to avoid that though).

If you need advice on what to buy, you could do worse than phone up your local radio station and ask what equipment their reporters are using (or, if they are very strapped for cash, what they would like to use in an ideal world) and while you're on the phone, you could see if the manager of the radio station would be interested in any of your material for their programmes. Good luck!

lives of people who were born, lived and died in the North East. The story they tell is of people moving to and from the area.

One of our donors for example, was born in the area but lived for several years in London. There she became interested in issues like ecology and alternative medicine. She has donated several menus from a vegetarian restaurant, a share certificate in a housing co-operative as well as campaign flyers and stickers from anti-nuclear and environmental organisations, all of which are based in London. However to reject these items because they fall outside of our collecting area would be to miss out on an important aspect of this person's life and identity, and so we accepted them into our collection. This raises wider questions about whether material collected under narrow geographically based criteria necessarily reflect the history of a region. We live in an age of increased mobility where it has become rarer and rarer for people to live in only one place all their life. Perhaps we need to focus more directly on the influence that emigration and trade with other parts of Britain and the world has had on the history of cities like Newcastle and Sunderland. We might also want to explore and reflect the quite strong diasporic identity which exists among those who have left the region and live elsewhere.

With *Making History* we have adopted a different approach to offers of duplicate material. While we try to avoid collecting items which we already have for our collection, this does not mean we reject the donation outright. Instead we ask the participant to tell us about this object, what it means to them and the role it played in their lives. This information is then added to the records of the object which already exists in our collection. As well as the obvious benefits of enriching the store of knowledge about the object in the collection and avoiding duplication of material, it also allows the participant to contribute to the project and raises awareness that donations to museums do not necessarily have to be physical things. We have encouraged many of our participants to do oral history interviews, indeed in some cases an oral history interview has been their only donation.

Many of our donors no longer have their first washing machine or tickets from a tram car, but they are able to tell us a lot about the ones we have in our collection. If this project has confirmed anything it is that there is a rich mine of information and stories out in the community about the objects in our stores. In the past, museums have often collected social history material without its social context, Perhaps now it is time to go and collect that context.

Making History's open collection policy has not just presented challenges to us as museums professionals. As well as the difficulty of thinking of things that represented their lives, many participants also felt intimidated by the idea of putting these objects in a museum. TWM has been to the forefront with issues like social inclusion and has successfully fostered a great deal of identification amongst the local population with their museums. However, despite this the old idea of a museum as a place where one goes to learn about the great and the good from the past sometimes persists, particularly among the older generation. Time and again after having fascinating conversations with individuals and groups they would tell us that really their lives were too ordinary to be of interest to us and we should speak to somebody else. They did not feel that they had anything old enough, or valuable enough, to be in a museum. These perceptions of what belongs in a museum were often difficult to dispel.

On one occasion I carried out an oral history interview with a woman who was born in 1926, and who worked all of her life, reaching quite a responsible position in a local organisation. While she went into great detail about her childhood, she was less inclined to talk about her later career. After the interview she told me that while her work was obviously important to her, she did not feel that it was something that a museum, or indeed other people, would be interested in. My attempts to assure her that her experience as a single women working as an engineering clerk in the post war period was of great interest fell on deaf ears.

Other participants were reluctant to choose their own objects, and would ask

us instead what it was we wanted. Throughout the project it is important for us to bear in mind the fact that for many people the idea of donating to a museum is an intimidating one. Despite reassurances from us people do not want to choose the 'wrong thing'. The task of representing one's life is not just difficult, it is also a very personal experience which has the potential to make people feel emotionally vulnerable and exposed. For us to reject or criticise the ways they choose to do this, either intentionally or otherwise, would also be to reject these people's lives.

Our awareness of the very personal nature of this project meant that from the very beginning sensitivity to our donor's feelings and needs has been our primary concern. Training in oral history techniques had prepared us for the fact that for many people the events which shape their lives are not necessarily happy or positive memories. Not surprisingly, taking part in *Making History* was often quite an emotional experience for participants. For one lady the story of the death of her young brother in a car accident in the 1950s still proved too painful for her to either write about or discuss in an oral history interview. Another young single mother found it hard to put into words the reason why the song 'Don't give up' by Peter Gabriel helped her overcome post-natal depression. One donor, who has survived breast cancer, said that she felt donating the cards and letters she received while she was ill was another step in coming to terms with that experience.

We also have to bear in mind the fact that a large section of our participants come from sections of the community who are underrepresented either as donors or visitors. These groups include people who are physically or mentally disabled, people with alternative sexualities, those from outlying areas of the region, ethnic minorities and younger people. For some of these people *Making History* could be the closest relationship they have ever



had with a museum. Many of these groups could also be classed as being socially excluded. While we did not find any suspicion of museums, relationships have been built slowly and carefully, our agenda is always subservient to the pace at which individuals wish to work. In many cases we have been able to work in partnership with local support groups and clubs and by doing so we have been able to play a role in boosting the self confidence of our participants. One of the great assets museums have in the realm of social inclusion is their ability to offer validation of peoples lives. The views and experiences of those who find themselves socially excluded are very often ignored by society as a whole. The fact that we, as representatives of the museum, show ourselves to be interested and willing to listen can have very beneficial effects on people's self image.

As I have shown, much of our work so far has been centred around creating a feeling within the project that the museum is interested in people's lives and giving them the confidence to represent themselves in their own way. Ultimately a great deal of the success or failure of *Making History* will be judged by the extent to which the participants have taken this on board. So far, with about two thirds of the donations collected, it has been gratifying to see the depth of thought and care people have put into their donations. Because of the highly individual and personal nature of the project it is difficult to make generalisations about the items donated, they range from a 'Beanie Baby' toy to the first and last bit of coal mined by a Sunderland miner. Some objects, like a Chinese Mah Jong set or a Sanskrit manuscript tell stories of relatively newly arrived cultures in the area. Others, like a miners lamp and a Newcastle United jersey reflect a more traditional view of the region. Not surprisingly certain types of material are particularly popular. *Making History* certainly bears out the old cliché that the first thing people would save if their house was burning down would be photos of friends and family. In less than 150 years it would seem that we have become a society which remembers its history through photography. Paper ephemera is also popular, as is music.

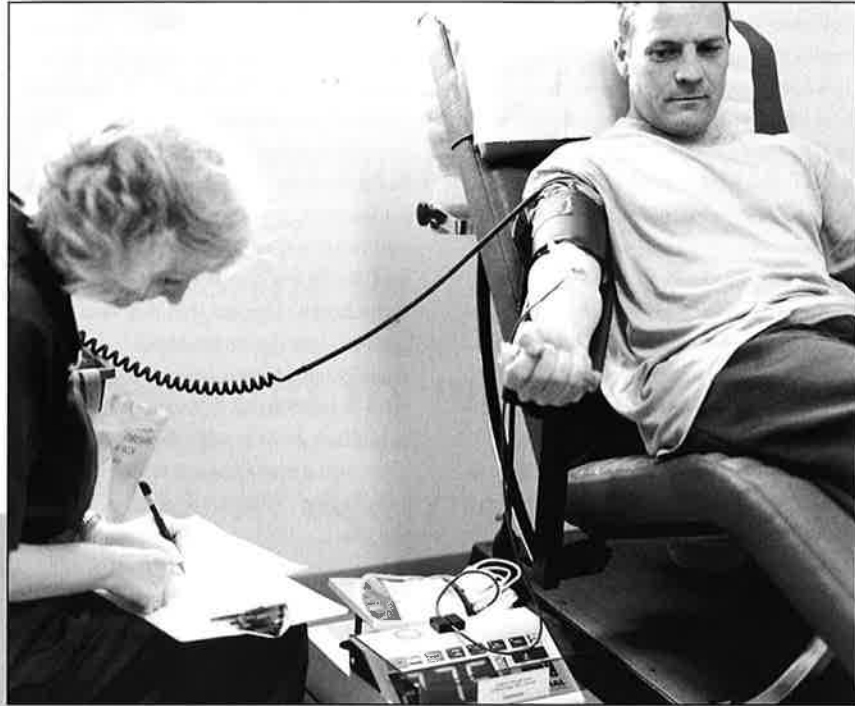
We are also getting stories and donations which, in the normal course of events, we would not have access to. We have had difficulty in the past in attracting donations from younger people, despite the fact that many of our visitors are children and teenagers. One young teenager, who I contacted via a group for children in care, gave a maths exercise book because "you need an education to get anywhere in life." He also gave a CD case, an aftershave bottle as "you need to smell nice. People won't respect you if you smell of B.O.", a "JD Sports" carrier bag (he likes to buy designer labels) and finally, chopsticks because they symbolise China and Feng Shui and he is "making [his] bedroom Feng Shui compatible".

Several of our participants have learning disabilities or suffer from mental illness. For many of them art has been a powerful means of self expression and they have donated some of their artworks to the project. None of the donations we have received so far would be collected on artistic grounds, and it is not an area which we have approached from a social history perspective either. However two pieces in particular tell a very interesting story about attitudes and treatment of mental disorders in the 20th century. The first piece was made by a man with a learning disability who lived for many years in an institution. The picture was created in the 1970s and was formed by sticking three specially cut pieces of wood on a background to form what is very obviously a boat. It was clearly made to a set pattern and displays little which is individual to him. It is however, very 'normal' - the type of thing which could be sold at a bazaar or sale of work. The second piece was painted quite recently by a man in South Tyneside who suffers from mental illness. It is highly abstract, consisting of a medley of shapes painted in very vivid colours. Unlike the previous example it is very personal and individual, indeed it is quite difficult to interpret it as an outsider. Seen together these two pieces show quite a profound and positive shift in the way that mental illness and learning disabilities are now seen by society. What also struck me was the fact that this particular man was someone

who generally found it difficult to express himself, yet it was clear that this was a picture full of emotion and feeling. It shows the importance of not just giving a voice to those who are marginalised in society, but also allowing them to choose that voice.

The story told by this project is not a simple one. It presents an image of Tyne and Wear which is not based on statistics and demographics, there are no 'typical' people involved. Their stories are unique and it is this individuality which we have tried to foster and encourage throughout the project. It has also been a learning experience for us as museum professionals. Traditionally it has been us who have decided what our museums collect. In this project we have given this role over to the people we serve and have attempted to break down some of the barriers to make museums not simply places where communities see their history interpreted by others, but also spaces in which they can express their own identity. The challenge which now faces us is to sustain the relationships forged by the project, perhaps through a designated donor scheme. Even at this early stage we have been able to use contacts made through *Making History* on other projects. There are also wider implications for the way in which we collect material for our social history collections.

We hope that by displaying this material in museums across the region members of the public will realise that museums are not simply interested in items from house clearances, that we are just as likely to be interested in contemporary material as we are in objects from 100 years ago. Perhaps *Making History* also shows that museums need to be more pro-active in soliciting donations from groups who are underrepresented in our collections. The reason that we have had so little material in our collections from ethnic minorities or the gay and lesbian community may be because these communities do not feel their local museum is interested in them. While a project on the scale of *Making History* is a one off, lottery funded event, we hope that its collection, and the lessons it has taught, will live on well into the future.



'Living': donating blood at Derriford Hospital, Plymouth 1999. Reproduced by kind permission of Chloe Howley

Are you Local?

'People's Plymouth: Tales from the City'

'People's Plymouth: Tales from the City'. Yet another millennium project with more contemporary collecting? The challenge for the staff of Plymouth City Museum & Art Gallery was to escape from celebrating the commemorative and redefine what local history could be about. A fusion between outreach and collections succeeded in reclaiming the everyday past which everyone could relate to, even people from 'up the line'!

Fiona Pitt,
Keeper of Human History
Jo Loosemore,
Community Outreach Officer

Plymouth City Museum
& Art Gallery

Once upon a time...

Once upon a time in the far Southwest in a place populated by pilgrims and pirates - that's Plymouth NOT Portsmouth - a white council van sped by bearing the legend, 'Local Services for Local People'.

So, the word 'local', what does it mean to you when you're not being a museum professional? Narrow-minded and parochial? Does an image of Tubbs from 'The League of Gentlemen' spring into your mind asking, 'Are you local?' Does it conjure up the suburbs and people washing their cars on a Sunday? Or local radio stations populated by disappointed Alan Partridge style DJs who never made it to the big time? Local historians obsessed with the minutiae of local trains and drains? Let's face it the word 'local' has connotations of comedy and a ring of, dare we say, exclusivity. It's the dilemma of our age that political correctness dictates and funds inclusion but the buzz words 'local' and 'community' inevitably exclude too. 'Local services for local people' may actually leave many out in the cold.

Telling tales

Local history in Plymouth has resolutely concentrated on the big events, the great and the self-appointed good: Drake and his historically unlikely drum, not to mention that improbable game of bowls; the accidental departure of the Pilgrim Fathers on the Mayflower; World War II and the pristine blitz spirit; the Naval Dockyard; the 20th century political figureheads of Michael Foot and our very own 'Evita', Lady Astor.

The myths and legends surrounding these subjects are safe and accepted. They provide the official tourist history to Plymouth and add the veneer to civic life. The aim of *People's Plymouth: Tales from the City* was to look beneath the surface of this received wisdom of city history and to reveal everyday 20th century life in Plymouth. This meant broadening the perception of what local history could be about and what 'local' really means. We needed to collect and to present the evidence in a way which would redefine 'local'.

However, in the course of promoting and producing the exhibition there was a significant degree of scepticism from both local historians and local people. Some local historians were bemused by a project which looked at ten different themes everyone could relate to: growing and learning; shopping and working; housing and moving; playing and loving; living and dying. This was straying from the established perception of what Plymouth history was all about. Local people were also surprised and, in some cases, cynical. What was so interesting about their everyday lives? Shouldn't the museum be concentrating on the real past not the recent past? Was this just a way for the museum to get more millennium money?

Talking shop

People's Plymouth: Tales from the City did end up being funded by the Millennium Commission. Initial brainstorming for the exhibition occurred towards the end of 1998 by staff still occupied with their fulltime jobs. More in depth planning occurred in summer 1999. Everyone who works in museums knows that exhibitions are often subject to ridiculous timetables, unforeseen complications, and staff who end up working hours which Victorian factory owners would find reprehensible. *People's Plymouth: Tales from the City* was no exception.

In July 2000 the exhibition was opened. Public participation had been generated through local radio, newspapers and projects with local groups as well as open days at the museum. Leafleting proved to be phenomenally unsuccessful. The emphasis was placed on encouraging and enabling local people of different ages and abilities to contribute to the project in whatever ways they felt they could; by donating or loaning objects, having their photographs taken or providing oral testimony about their experiences of life in Plymouth.

By the time the exhibition opened, over 1000 local people had been involved in reminiscence sessions, family workshops and more through radio phone-ins. 46 hours of oral history interviews had been recorded. 1300 photographs of contemporary Plymouth had been taken.

Around 800 objects had been loaned or donated. 370 collection items had been conserved and 150 object labels had been written by local people. A gallery had been stripped out, rewired, re-lit, fitted out with filled cases, audio areas, interactives, graphics and a welcome area and reflection area, painted and polished and totally transformed from its previous incarnation. The fact that this was possible was due to immense commitment from a team of nine people, who in most cases, had to juggle exhibition work in with their 'normal jobs', and a management who were there for support, but trusted us to get on with the job.

Chasing tales

The challenge was about redefining local history. It had to be relevant to local people living in different areas of the city and it needed to ensure that their voices were resonant in that redefinition of local history. Yet convincing people that their experiences are living local history, is not always easy. Why should people remember shops before self-selection, cinema commissionnaires and space hoppers? Scepticism is part of the local scene. However, it's amazing what an outreach officer armed with a Sindy doll, a crystal set radio and a Reckitts Blue can do to create a stir in the local libraries, community centres and social clubs.

Exploring the exhibition themes in outreach sessions challenged local assumptions. 'Working' now included women in 50s factory assembly lines and redundancy, as well as men in naval uniform. 'Growing' featured children being abandoned on doorsteps not just those dressing up dolls. 'Living' exposed contemporary champions of cancer care, as well as memories of isolation in TB sanatoriums. In 'Housing' too, real lives emerged both from today's homeless as well as from the rack-rented rooms of the recent but nearly forgotten past. 'Loving' explored issues beyond love and marriage looking at divorce, prostitution and being gay in Plymouth. This was not a sanitised nor an exclusive local history. It was the past and the present at its most personal. It meant dealing with real issues and their impact. Being entrusted with personal information entailed

recording reality with responsibility. Yet it also ensured that more of the past was revealed and believable.

You show us yours, we'll show you ours

In terms of objects, quite simply, *People's Plymouth* would not exist without the generosity of Plymouth people. While the existing social history collections contained a variety of 20th century items, they would not have done justice to the 10 themes. Thankfully the huge amount of outreach work and publicity brought the objects rolling in.

Originally, the idea was to display items donated or loaned by Plymouth people along with their written or recorded memories concerning those objects. However, it soon became clear that on its own, this approach would not bring home the bacon. The purpose of the exhibition was not to have an object-by-object focus, but to thematically explore Plymouth life. This meant accepting objects from people who did not have any particular personal recollections regarding them. The reality of 20th century object ownership is that we often have items that mean little or nothing to us. They perform their function, end of story. To try and elicit a reaction to an object where one never existed is to fabricate the past. Of course, it can be argued that once someone has owned and used an object, this personal history makes it unique. All very well in theory, but to what extent do we really believe in this personal sanctity of the object? The fetishism attached to owning John Lennon's tea cosy is one thing. But in an identity parade of 20 Morphy Richards toasters, all the same model and having had a similar pattern of use, could you identify yours with any certainty? Mass production means that for most people owning unique items is the exception not the rule, and while an object may have little or no meaning to its owner, it can promote a genuine response in another person.

In order to personalise the objects of 20th century Plymouth, open days were held where the public were invited to 'write a label' for the objects which were going to be displayed. Some labels directly related

to the objects. A City of Plymouth toilet roll prompted the label, "Could never fathom the logic of this Izal toilet paper. Designed to repel water and whatever". Other objects prompted memories beyond their obvious function. A 1930s dressbox from a local department store received the label, "I wanted to be a dress designer, because I had a very plain sister. I wanted to dress her, so that she could have boyfriends. I said I wanted to be a woman's dress designer. That was greeted with horror by my family. I became a furnaceman". The labels add another dimension to the object history of items both already in the collections and those donated in response to the project.

In terms of contemporary collecting, *People's Plymouth* differed from the Tyne and Wear and Museum of London projects featured in the last issue of SHCG News in that the request for objects was not directed at specific groups or individuals but at the entire population of Plymouth. This might seem over-ambitious, or quite simply misguided, but the reality is that only so many people are ever going to be interested in donating their items to a museum and a proportion of these are going to be mistaken (deluded?) as to the desirability of their items. Like it or not, having an overview and taking the responsibility to make the decision to tactfully refuse items is always going to be part of the deal. Most museum keepers have to live with the legacy of past idiosyncratic collecting that has bequeathed us items which may individually have their own interest but are almost impossible to use beyond their immediate context. We also live with the subsequent drain on limited resources.

Many items have been accepted on a loan basis. This isn't always because we don't want them beyond the lifetime of the exhibition. Often it's because people do have very personal memories regarding items. Sometimes they regard their items as rare or special. We would very much have like to have accepted a pair of disposable 1970's knickers, in their original packaging, as a permanent acquisition. Unfortunately, the woman who has loaned them wants them returned so she can pass them on to her daughter as a family heirloom!

"This was not a sanitised nor an exclusive local history. It was the past and the present at its most personal. It meant dealing with real issues and their impact."

The purpose of the objects displayed is to jog people's memories of everyday life through the 20th century. A school milk bottle has memories for people of a certain age. Older people might immediately recognise a bull's head can opener. A 'Girls World' head is something which always seems to get a response from younger women. This is a deliberate departure from previous social history exhibitions at Plymouth which have tended to focus on commemorative occasions.

Show and tell

Despite initial reservations about the project, since opening, the exhibition has proved to be very popular and there is a significant increase in visitor numbers on the same time for last year.

It has also been encouraging to receive positive comments regarding our integrated approach to the exhibition design which we hoped would optimise visitor access. These practical measures include: the welcome area where visitors can orientate themselves within the exhibition; the themed layout which has bright colour coding and integrated interactives; very large font sizes on the graphic panels which, apart from introduction panels, are entirely in the words of Plymouth people; integrated audio areas where visitors can sit on

themed seats and be surrounded by the voices of Plymouth people telling their tales from the city; and the vertical displays of 2D material which enable the visitor to examine these items more closely. The reflection area at the end of the exhibition is particularly popular, the comfort of the sofa often being commented on!

Equally encouraging has been the comments regarding the exhibition as a whole. One of the most outspokenly critical local historians has called to say how great he thinks the exhibition is. However, our favourite comment so far is, "There really should be a government health warning advising that the exhibition is addictive. Will be back as Arnie is wont to say!"

The exhibition is due to run for at least 3 years. Circumventing the commemorative was not only desirable but essential; the Millennium is already yesterday's news. Sustaining interest in the exhibition for the next three years will probably be a challenge. However, there is a full programme of ongoing workshops and outreach. Beyond that the project has bequeathed a living local resource and given local history a pulse. We also hope it has provided a genuinely 'local service for local people' which can also be appreciated by those 'up the line'.

'Masks - Mystery, Masquerade and Mischief'

David Broom

Assistant Keeper Social History,
Museum of St Albans

I was surprised to read the opening paragraph in the local paper. It had been written by the arts reporter who I had shown round our exhibition of masks a couple of days before.

David Broom got the pair of leather bondage masks from a dodgy sex shop in the East End of London. The Museum of St Albans' Assistant Keeper of Social History thought they were a bargain for £90. 'The boss was quite keen to have something like this in the exhibition,' he says. 'But it was muggins here who had to go and buy them.' Shortly afterwards Mr Broom found himself at a market stall in Leeds, snapping up a full face black balaclava - the sort favoured by airline hijackers and bank robbers. He wasn't asked any questions and he admits to trying it on - the balaclava that is - before it too, took its place in the museum's new exhibition. 'Horrible' he says with a shiver. 'Very intimidating'...

It seemed a somewhat 'no holds barred' approach to reporting, none the less it did the trick - attendance figures went up by 100% the following day and I have spotted a lot of people who have come in just to look at these particular masks. The article was not strictly accurate however, they were 'fetish masks' and one was made of rubber, but I did purchase them in said 'dodgy shop' (where you had to ring a bell to be let in) through the help of a 'contact' - it is amazing who can prove useful to you as a museum curator! The experience was quite fascinating, the staff were very helpful, and it has to be said that the rubber and leather items seemed extremely well made.

Masks - Mystery, Masquerade and Mischief ran at the Museum of St Albans from 27th May to 5th November. By taking a thematic approach I sought to look at

masks and their wide variety of uses from protection to intimidation, from festivity to discretion. These objects, the bulk of which were ethnographic items borrowed from Leeds City Museum and the Horniman, derive from a series of diverse cultures. The impression I wanted to avoid giving was that of a Victorian freak show where the visitor would be able to conclude: 'Look, how strange! What funny things they do in other parts of the world!' My intention was to challenge this: 'No look again, it's happening here too!'

Masks are a world wide phenomenon. The uses

I considered can be found in many cultures. To this end we have also worked with a local masked theatre company, Trestle, who loaned objects for the exhibition and ran a series of workshops for children and families. As I researched the subject I became increasingly interested in the way in which masks as a transitional medium are often linked to times of transition. In many ceremonies and times of celebration they stand in a metaphorical relationship to the turn of the seasons and to life changes in human beings, from the initiation rites of the spirit cults in Papua New Guinea to the 'Obby Oss' at Padstow in Cornwall.

The mask stands in the betwixt and the between, a symbol of exchange. The betwixt and between is the contradictory category between two worlds, when things are not what they were nor what they will become. Ceremonies held at this time, often marked by fearful ritual activity, are designed to ensure that the process of transition between two stages happens correctly.

Do you know for example the origin of the masked trick or treaters at Halloween? Halloween falls at the time

of the Celtic new year when the festival of Beltane divides summer from winter. A time of harvest and the movement into the dark, cold days of the coming season. Halloween is like a pivot to the turning cycles of the year. At this time the world of the dead and the living were believed to come very close. It is far better for cosmic harmony for the dead to remain

in their own world. Therefore the ancestors must be revered and honoured to persuade them to stay there. The dead were also believed to be able to intercede with the gods of harvest since they were under the ground. Because children were believed to be closer to the ancestors they would dress in frightening masks which represented the dead. They

would then go from door to door collecting money. Money given to children appeased the ancestors, guaranteed the dead remained in their own world and ensured that the following years crops would succeed.

Masks has been a fascinating experience. Personally and as an exhibition it has been a journey which has opened the door to many other worlds - and not least that of a 'dodgy sex shop' in the East End of London...

"The basic power of a mask is a mechanism for transforming the world."

POPPI IN MACK, J.
'MASKS THE ART OF EXPRESSION'

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I Wear What I Want To Wear

Warwickshire Museum's 'I wear what I want to wear' project was a partnership between the museum's curators, education staff and a group of local sixth-formers. It involved young people in the active development of the museum's costume collection and the creation of an exhibition.

Gilly Vose

Community Education Worker,
Heritage Education & St John's House
Museum, Warwickshire County Council

"I can see myself looking back and thinking 'Why did I wear such ridiculous trousers?', but at the moment that's kind of fashionable."...

Warwickshire Museum has a large collection of costume dating from the 1600s but fashions from the last two decades of the 20th century, particularly young people's clothes, are under-represented. We wanted to take steps towards bringing the collection up-to-date, appealing to young adults to help us seemed an ideal way to go about it. Our project plan was to capture the latest styles on camera and record accompanying interviews. This information would form the basis for an exhibition, but also create an archive documenting what young people wear and their attitudes towards fashion at the end of the 20th century. We did not directly set out to ask for items to add to the collection, although we hoped this might be one result. Since the project began several students have donated pieces of costume - in one case 23 items! We have also been able to make purchases with the students' advice.

"If there's a uniform everyone looks the same, they don't have an identity almost."...

Approaching young people through school seemed the best way to get the project off the ground. We narrowed this down to sixth-formers studying art and photography at a local school where all pupils wear their own clothes, rather than uniform. Their teachers' support for the project was invaluable and most of

the interviews took place in art lesson time. In return, the museum has been able to highlight the resources it holds which can inspire and support art, textiles and photography projects. It has also been good to see how, since the project began, students have felt comfortable about contacting us and making independent visits to the museum. They have been free to make closer studies of the collections for their A-Level projects.

"When you're younger you always stick with the people who wear the same kind of clothes as you because you feel safe with them."...

The first stage of the project involved two visits to the school, in June 1999, to talk to assembled groups of students. Taking along items from the costume collection sparked-off some lively debate about fashions past and present - 'How could anyone have worn those turquoise velour hot-pants?' - and the various styles that can be seen around school at the moment; Skaters, Hippies, Rude Boys, Goths... From these initial meetings the names of sixteen individuals who were happy to be interviewed and photographed were gathered.

Recording the interviews proved to be good fun. The students were very communicative, on a subject they could be authoritative about. A few interviews took place with pairs of friends who were good at sparking each other off. An equal number of boys and girls were interviewed, both had much to say on the subjects of fashion and image.

Apart from taking 'snaps' on the museum's digital camera, we were keen to have professional photographs of the students - not the kind that might be taken for a school or family portrait, but where the students would be involved in the creative process and in control of their own image. We were lucky to obtain the enthusiastic support of photographer Richard Sadler. The students came to us at the museum this time (after an initial meeting with Richard at school) and over two days of autumn half-term our activity room was transformed into a photographic studio.

The students were assisted with lighting, but each composed their own portrait. They wore what they wanted to wear and brought along cherished belongings to add to the picture - among them a skateboard, record sleeves, provisional driving licence, sketch books, and family albums.

"I think some of the people who wear different clothes from me have presuppositions about what I'm like."...

The results were stunning and engaging. The portraits formed the main part of the exhibition, along with selected quotes from the interviews and items donated, bought or loaned for the month it ran (April 2000). All these things made the display, and the whole museum, fresh and colourful, reflecting 'youth culture' in a positive and optimistic light.

We really enjoyed working with these young people and have learnt a great deal from them. We think they enjoyed themselves too! Reactions from the students and their families at a preview evening held for the exhibition were certainly favourable. However, it was a letter from the head of the school's art department that confirmed the project had been a positive experience for them too:

"It has offered so many learning opportunities to our students and it was very clear that all involved felt special. Having their views and opinions - their culture - accepted, respected and finally represented in such a professional and serious way... [It has] helped to extend these students art education and develop their self-esteem in ways which otherwise would not have been possible..."

This was not a revolutionary project, nor did it involve a cast of thousands. However, it proved for us that the active collection of contemporary material can be highly successful. We are looking forward to a continuing relationship with the secondary school and developing links with others.

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The Pegswood banner celebrates Vesting Day, 1 January 1947, when the coal industry was nationalized. Courtesy of Woodhorn Colliery Museum

Follow the Banner

Researching miners' banners in Northumberland

This paper was given at the 'Banners Unfurled' conference at the National Museum of Labour History, Manchester on Monday 3 April 2000.

Hazel Edwards

Keeper of History (job-share),
Tyne and Wear Museums

Like many of the people who attended the *Banners Unfurled* conference at the National Museum of Labour History earlier this year, I have spent numerous hours laboriously wrapping and rolling banners in sheaves of tissue paper and piloting their safe passage through crowded stores and galleries! They are undoubtedly amongst the most difficult social history objects to collect, conserve, store and display, however, the rewards are great. They offer a fascinating meeting point for decorative and fine art and social history. Their brilliant colours, improbable size, fine illustrations and stirring slogans inspire awe and affection amongst people inside and outside the labour movement.

This paper will provide some insights into researching a small but very fine collection of banners - the twenty three surviving banners of the

Northumberland coalfield. It once boasted 200 pits but has now dwindled to just one, Ellington, the future of which, at the time of writing, is very uncertain. A few of the banners are on display in local schools or community centres but most of the banners are held at Woodhorn Colliery Museum, a small local authority run museum housed in a former colliery in Ashington, Northumberland. Displays at this museum, where I worked for six years, include a large exhibition which looks at the history of the Northumberland miners' union and features five miners' banners. It was the research for this exhibition and a subsequent book about the banner collection called *Follow the Banner* which really fired my interest in banners.

This paper falls into two parts: firstly, it charts the history of the banner tradition in the coal industry and, in particular, in the Northumberland coalfield; secondly, it explores the ritual and ceremony surrounding the purchasing and parading of a lodge banner.

The emergence of the banner tradition

Throughout the history of union banners the miners are generally believed to be the chief banner bearers. They are

unique in having a special day every year, known as the gala day, at which the banners are flown. This tradition is particularly strong in the North East coalfield with the Durham Gala and the Northumberland Picnic, both of which go back 150 years. Moreover, the dangerous nature of miners' work and the cruel injustices dealt out by callous coal owners has meant that their struggle for improved wages, safety and welfare has been particularly bitter. Their struggle has not been confined to the workplace; entire communities have been caught up in pit disasters, demonstrations, evictions and strikes. And perhaps because of this involvement, miners' banners have become important rallying points and expressions of community identity and solidarity.

The banner tradition in the North East can be traced back 170 years. According to Richard Fynes' account of the Northumberland and Durham miners, first published in 1873, banners were carried by the North East pitmen as early as 1831. This is how he described one of their gatherings at Bolden Fell, between Gateshead and Sunderland:

"The roads in the vicinity of the meeting place presented an unusual bustle, the men walking in procession from the different collieries bearing flags and banners and accompanied by bands of music. The banners were numerous and of the gayest description nearly all being embellished with a painted design and with a motto more or less connected with the recent struggle between the miners and their employers."

At this time the miners of Northumberland and Durham joined other working men in the agitation for the reform of political and industrial inequities. In 1830 the North East miners' leader, Thomas Hepburn, formed the first Northumberland and Durham miners' union. Although the union founded in 1832 at the end of a six-month long strike the tradition of flying banners had been established amongst the miners of the North East. Fynes, in his description of the later strike of 1844, counted 72 banners present at a meeting on Newcastle Town Moor. These early banners, as Fynes observes, were

probably hastily prepared by a union member or local sign writer. They carried demands for immediate action unlike the later more familiar silk banners which bore dignified statements of solidarity, industrial pride and mutual aid.

By the 1850s, however, the first New Model unions for the skilled industrial workers began to emerge and the Victorian entrepreneur, George Tutill, had established a flourishing business making silk banners. Indeed, over three-quarters of all trade union banners made at this time were products of the Tutill empire and the parading of union banners had become an accepted feature of public life. In c.1862 the Northumberland miners formed their own countywide union and in the following year they expressed their solidarity at a mass meeting at Blyth. This meeting soon became an annual event known as the 'Miners' Picnic' and parading banners became an integral part of the day's proceedings. The more famous Durham Gala first took place in 1871. Both events continue today although in much reduced forms and their futures are very much in doubt with only one deep mine left in the North East at Ellington, employing only 300 people.

The parading of banners, however, was really at its height in the last decade of the 19th century. Thousands were commissioned by lodges of the new and very powerful general unions which represented whole industries such as the Miners' Federation of Great Britain, founded in 1889. In the 1920s a new militancy, inspired by the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the terrible experiences of the First World War, led to the commissioning of another wave of trade union banners with radical demands for change. The failure, however, of the General Strike of 1926 dealt a severe blow to this confidence and trade union orders of banners dwindled.

Although the making and parading of banners is essentially a late Victorian phenomenon, the post-war election of 1945, when the first majority Labour government was elected, gave rise to a new generation of banners which celebrated Labour's triumph. The miners participated in this banner resurgence

with particular enthusiasm commissioning new banners to proclaim the nationalization of their industry in 1947, indeed, eighteen of the twenty three surviving Northumberland miners' banners are from this period. The defeat of the Labour government in 1951, however, led to a slowdown in the commissioning of new banners by union branches. Their memberships declined in the following decades due to the erosion of heavy industry, anti-union legislation, unemployment and the increase in casual and part-time non-union labour. This decline, as John Gorman writes in his seminal book on banners, *Banner Bright*, can be charted in the order books of the George Tutill banner-making company. In 1967 the company, for the first time in its history, received no orders from trade unions. The deep mine coal industry reached its peak in 1954, but like other heavy industries, after this date began its slow decline. In the Northumberland coalfield the Annual Picnic sustained the tradition but the number of banners dwindled as pit after pit was closed during the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s as alternatives to coal were exploited such as the oilfields in the Middle East, North Sea natural gas and nuclear power. The 1984-5 miner's strike and the Campaign Against Pit Closures of 1992 gave rise to brief revivals which encouraged the restoration of old banners and the commissioning of new ones, but the rallies at which they were flown were never the vast spectacles of a century earlier.

Purchasing and parading the lodge banner

Within the coal industry, the tradition of purchasing and parading a banner is strongest at the branch or lodge level. Fascinating rituals surround the commissioning, unfurling and carrying of a colliery banner and they are often recorded in meticulous details in the branch minute book, a source which is generally under-used by banner researchers who tend to focus on their design and imagery. (A notable exception is the meticulously researched book, *Banners of the Durham Coalfield* by Norman Emery.)

Considerable competition existed amongst lodges and the acquisition of a

banner, particularly a Tutill banner, signaled the 'coming of age' of a branch. A banner represented a considerable financial investment and the decision to purchase one was not taken lightly by the committee men, who often consulted the whole membership at the Annual General Meeting (AGM). According to the Tutill catalogue of 1895, a basic painted silk banner cost 23 guineas.



A cartoon of the Northumberland and Durham miner's union of 1832. The pitmen march behind their leader, Thomas Hepburn (in black), carrying flags with slogans supporting their cause. Courtesy of Tyne and Wear Archives Service.

By the 1930s prices had only increased to about 70 pounds and in 1949 Sleekburn 'A' lodge, in Bedlington, was quoted £110-10-0 for a Tutill banner. By the early 1980s, however, costs had risen sharply and in 1982 Ellington branch probably paid the banner-makers Toye, Kenning and Spencer Limited in the region of £3,000 for a copy of the original 1950s' silk banner. Few branches had enough surplus money to cover such sums, so they usually established a 'banner fund' and set about raising money in a variety of ways including dances, Christmas draws and levies on lodge members. If a branch was short of funds, it would often adopt a banner from a neighbouring pit which had been closed and the old branch name would be overpainted. Once funds had been secured, the branch committee had to select the design. Often it was merely a matter of choosing an appropriate combination of emblems and mottoes from the Tutill catalogue. Occasionally a banner design was the result of a competition, or a local artist was asked to come up with some sketches. Sometimes, due to a lack of funds, a branch would commission a repeat of the old banner.

A framed certificate hangs in the NUM office at Ellington Colliery; it records the

dedication and blessing of the aforementioned lodge banner by the Industrial Chaplain of the North East coalfield during the 1982 Annual Miners' Picnic. Elaborate ceremonies such as this often accompanied the official unfurling of a new banner a few days before the Annual Miners' Picnic. They took place in the Welfare Institute or Social Club and were attended by local and regional union officials and the colliery manager, especially after Nationalisation. After the banner had been formally unfurled it was often carried through the streets, led by the colliery band, so that the wider public could view it, thus reinforcing its role as an expression of community pride and identity. Branch minute books reveal that other occasions when banners were paraded were quite numerous. Some events were of a political nature such as May Day demonstrations, Labour Party rallies, or the 1926 General Strike meeting addressed by A. J. Cook in Ashington and attended by the Ashington Federation banner. Other gatherings had a family or community flavour, such as the Hospital Sunday procession which the Ashington Federation banner joined in February 1927, or Lynemouth's Children's Gala of 1951 at which the Ellington banner was present. Occasionally the lodge banner, draped in black crepe, would fly at the funeral of a union luminary or the victim of a pit accident. But the big occasion at which all the Northumberland miners' banners would be flying was, of course, the Annual Miners' Picnic.

Miners' Picnic

The Picnic is a unique combination of protest and celebration: it is both a political meeting and a family day out. The day has a well-established format of which the banners are an integral part. In the early morning the banner and colliery band assembles and parade through the streets of the pit village before travelling to the site of the Picnic. Throughout the day the banner is the responsibility of six 'banner men'. (Norman Emery found instances of women carrying the banner at the Durham gala but in Northumberland it appeared to be the preserve of the men!) They are usually elected at the branch AGM and are paid the equivalent of a shift's earnings. At midday the Picnic procession moves off, headed by union leaders and Labour

politicians. Each colliery is represented by its banner and brass band and the miners and their families fall in behind. At the Picnic field the assembled throng listens to speeches by the Labour leaders; they sit amongst cornets and trombones abandoned by the bandsmen. The banners provide the backdrop; attached to fence-posts they mark the boundary of the Picnic field. With the speeches over the procession reassembles to march back into town. This is the end of the formal part of the day - the fairground and social club beckon - and the banner is returned to its box or wrapped around the poles.

Banners are fragile. Although silk is surprisingly robust, a standard banner, buffeted by the wind, soaked by rain and tainted by mildew, is unlikely to survive unscathed. In fact, many branch minute books record how banners were returned to their makers for repairs. Arguably, they are not designed to last. They are ephemeral; their portraits and slogans become dated and new banners are commissioned whilst the old ones are destroyed or left to lie, forgotten and rotting, in the loft of a branch secretary's house or under the stage of a social club. Proof of this neglect is the survival of just twenty three banners from over 200 pits in the Northumberland coalfield. Of course not every colliery had a banner but old photographs of the Annual Northumberland Miners' Picnic offer tantalising glimpses of lost banners.

Over the past decade miners' banners, instead of proclaiming a confident pride in their union and industry, have been silent witnesses at the key events in the rapid erosion of the coal industry. It was the lodge banners which led the miners' poignant return to work in 1985 at the end of their year-long strike. The frenzy of rallies and demonstrations against the pit closures announcement of October 1992 saw banners once again being carried through the streets of London. Yet the miners, chief among the banner bearers, are not the force they used to be and a general decline in union membership means few new banners are being commissioned and opportunities to fly them are rare.

So what of the future? Despite the casual approach to preserving union history a

huge number of 'homeless' banners are now emerging as the Heritage Lottery funded National Banner Survey revealed. Rather late in the day historians, museum curators and trade unionists are recognising the enormity of their task in protecting these banners from decay and oblivion. Banners will never be paraded through the streets of Britain in the vast numbers of their hey day in the 1880s and 1890s. However with imagination and perseverance homes can be found for them in museums and other local institutions such as churches, town halls, libraries, schools and welfare institutes. The future of banners such as those in the Northumberland collection must be assured because they are unique testaments to the struggles and achievements of the communities which once so proudly marched behind them.

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