

BLACK COUNTRY ECHOES: PEOPLE | LANDSCAPE | INDUSTRY | ART

A souvenir of the Black Country Echoes Festival 2014



BCE
BLACK COUNTRY ECHOES
FESTIVAL



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Workers at Unigate Dairies, Wolverhampton, 1976-8. © Nick Hedges
 British Glass Biennale/ International Festival of Glass, Stourbridge, 2012 © John Plant
 Chance Brothers Glass Works, circa 1958-63, part of the Jubilee Arts Archive

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Picket line, Supreme Quiltings and Raindi Textiles, Smethwick, 1982. © Jubilee Arts Archive

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British Glass Biennale/ International Festival of Glass, Stourbridge, 2012 © John Plant
 Black Country photograph by Peter Donnelly. © Simon Donnelly
 Friar Park, Wednesbury, 1977/8. © Jubilee Arts Archive
 British Glass Biennale/ International Festival of Glass, Stourbridge, 2012 © John Plant

Bottom row

A Black Country brickworks. Photograph by Peter Donnelly. © Simon Donnelly
Derelict Factories, Willenhall (detail). Watercolour by Arthur Lockwood. © Arthur Lockwood
 Steelworker at Malthouse Engineering. © Edward Moss

FOREWORD

The 'region of cinders and coal dust', referred to by Charles Dickens in 1854, has changed over the years to present a greener aspect. A site for the birth of the industrial revolution, the Black Country was remarkably successful in adopting and adapting to new technologies as they emerged. It is this history of constant reinvention that lies at the heart of Black Country Echoes which celebrates the Black Country, its past as pathways to its future, its culture and the real lived experience of those who settled here.

It has taken two years to develop the Black Country Echoes programme, working with the museums and galleries of the sub region as well as a number of community groups who share their stories. Such an ambitious programme would not have been possible without considerable support. We are extremely grateful to our funders, Arts Council England and the local authorities of the Black Country, and our media partner the Express & Star. We also extend our thanks to the contributors who have provided articles and images for this publication; the groups who have recorded their stories and the artists, photographers, owners, galleries and museums who have lent work for the exhibitions.

Corinne Miller
Head of Culture, Arts & Heritage,
Wolverhampton City Council

ARCHIVE IMAGES

We are extremely grateful to have been given access to several important collections of Black Country photographs and paintings. We have taken the opportunity to use these wherever possible within this publication.

JUBILEE ARTS ARCHIVE

Jubilee Arts based in West Bromwich was renowned for street theatre, play schemes, community festivals, murals and Theatre-in-Education projects. Over 20,000 negatives and colour transparencies chronicle artist activists and the diverse communities they worked with in the Black Country between 1974 and 1994, creating a repository of archival material from this significant historical period. Laundry has secured Heritage Lottery and Arts Council funding to preserve and showcase the archive.

JOHN BULMER

This collection by the photojournalist John Bulmer is from his early work for *About Town Magazine* and creates an atmospheric impression of life in the Black Country in 1961. John went on to become the British pioneer of colour photography working for *The Sunday Times Magazine* from its inception until making a move into filming and directing documentaries shown on the BBC, National Geographic and the Discovery Channel.

NICK HEDGES

Nick Hedges has created an unprecedented photographic record of the everyday working lives of people in the Black Country. Taken in the 1960s and 70s, his images were intended to be an interpretation of modern industrial labour – they became an historical record sooner than could have been expected. His photographs are respectful and attentive; they capture the power and hostility of the industrial surroundings as well as the intimacy and humour of people at work.

PETER DONNELLY

Peter Donnelly's beautiful, evocative photos were taken in the early 1960s at a time when much of the 'old' Black Country was still visible – steelworks, steam trains, and pit heads. Sadly, Peter is no longer with us but the legacy of his images leaves us feeling that he was all too aware that the landscape was changing. We are grateful to his son Simon for allowing us to use them.

ARTHUR LOCKWOOD

Arthur Lockwood occupies a unique position among the painters of the post-war landscape of the Black Country. Intriguingly, his work shuns the pastoral and picturesque subjects used by other watercolourists. Instead, he focusses on industrial subjects – working factories as well as the disused and derelict. Arthur has been widely acknowledged for the quality of his paintings; he has exhibited in Birmingham and Dudley and is a member of the Royal Society of British Artists.



NEW CHAPTERS IN A CENTURIES-OLD STORY

Paul Quigley, Curator of Black Country Echoes gives a brief overview of manufacturing in the region since 1945

Ever since I moved to the Black Country in the 1990s I've been fascinated by the story of the place. What caught my imagination most was the idea that an apparently ordinary landscape of post-industrial towns and suburban housing estates could have played a key role in a much bigger history. That somehow, this place, sometimes called isolated and inward-looking, could have played a part in a global story still resonating today.

The Black Country was there at the dawn of the industrial revolution. As recent local deliberations about the site of the first Newcomen engine have illustrated, in the Black Country we don't question whether or not 300 years ago the area hosted the world's first steam engine no less, only whether it was erected in Dudley or, alternatively, down the road a bit in Wolverhampton.

The industrial revolution is celebrated for its great technical advances, but it seems to me the more important change was to our society – the way newly available technologies made possible new patterns of

work, leisure, and family relationships. It meant the lives of subsequent generations would never be the same again.

We know that along with industrialisation comes urbanisation, the widespread movement of people to the cities. As the World Health Organisation put it, this means a shift 'from an agriculture-based economy to mass industry, technology, and service'. So, the proportion of a population who live in towns and cities is, in one sense, a measure of its level of industrialisation.

With this in mind, we might consider a recent global event. In 2010 the human family reached an historic watershed when it was recorded that, across the planet, more people lived in cities than in rural areas. This was the result of a long trend of industrialisation. But it puts the position of England in its international context when we realise that this same watershed had already been reached here by 1851 – more than a century and a

half before the rest of humanity. Of course, at least in one way the world was a lot smaller then – there were five times fewer of us than there are now, but Britain had become the world's first industrial nation. And by then, the Black Country had already made its mark on industrialisation in Britain.

In 1851 the Black Country was at the forefront of technological and social change. The census of that year recorded that the Black Country was (with the much larger area of South Wales) the major source of iron ore – a vital raw material of the new industrial nation. It was also a major contributor to the country's coal output and, most importantly, with Birmingham and Sheffield, the home of metal manufacturing in England.

Aware of this history, in Black Country Echoes we are interested in the legacy that this heritage has left for the future and, in particular, we are interested in the most recent chapters of the story.

With such a long tradition of industry, we'd be forgiven for spending our time reflecting on past glories. But it's worth considering the position of Black Country manufacturing in the 21st century.

Even today, no other part of England's conurbations has a greater proportion of its population working in manufacturing. In 2011 nearly 70,000 residents of the Black Country declared this as their occupation. That's more than Birmingham and Coventry combined. With more than six per cent of its million residents working in manufacturing, the factories and workshops of the Black Country provide a greater proportion of its population with work than any of the English Metropolitan County areas.

Of course Britain's position in global industrial production is very different now from the pattern which existed when 'The Black Country' as a name was first committed to paper. In 1841 for example, when we might justifiably have used the term 'workshop of the

world', more than a third of all workers in England and Wales were occupied in industrial production. The equivalent figure today is fourfold fewer.

Nevertheless, in the 21st century, the Black Country is still England's manufacturing heartland. So what about the recent past, the industrial work of living memory? The 70 years since 1945 have seen some disorienting change but also surprising continuity.

The 1940s saw a period of demobilisation – a move to recover from the point when nearly all factories had been converted to produce war materiel. We know also that women had played an important part in the wartime manufacturing workforce – although the Black Country may have been unusual in having had a long tradition of women metalworkers before that. This continued after the war: in 1948 it was reported that as many as two in every five workers in the substantial local fastener and brass industries were women.

In the post-austerity economic expansion, the shortage of labour in Black Country foundries also led to the recruitment of workers from the 'New Commonwealth' – South Asia and the Caribbean in particular. The establishment and success of the communities that came and stayed has shaped the area's social landscape and led, for example, to the growth of the largest British Sikh population outside London.

The late 20th century also saw the disappearance of some iconic parts of the local industrial landscape. The characteristic domestic workshops of the 19th century Black Country, made notorious nationally by the chainmakers' strike for a living wage in 1910, had in any case been in a long decline but were essentially extinct by 1960.

The end of the Black Country iron-making industry arrived with the closure of the steelworks at Bilston (1980), Patent Shaft in Wednesbury (1980), and Round Oak in Brierley Hill (1982). Iron smelting had taken place

in hundreds of blast furnaces in the area since the mid 1700s but the last one, at Bilston, was demolished at the end of the 1970s. The heir to 200 years of iron making has now disappeared under a Poundland depot. Indeed, we might say that while Leicester found a king buried under a car park, we have Elisabeth, last queen of the Black Country blast furnaces, interred under a discount superstore.

The long decade of the 1980s saw other fallen giants, with the closure of large employers such as FH Lloyd in Wednesbury, and Chance's glassworks and the Birmid foundries in Smethwick. These firms – and others like them – influenced the shape of the communities which hosted them. Their closure also gave impetus to a pre-existing trend: the rise of the industrial estates.

The land previously occupied by the big manufacturers has been put to other uses: shops (the IKEA store in Wednesbury replaced the premises of FH Lloyd); offices (the Waterfront in Brierley Hill is on the site of Round Oak steelworks); and housing. But the replacement of former single-employer sites with a collection of (sometimes managed) smaller industrial units hosting a network of workshops, depots and warehouses has left the core of the Black Country with processions of corrugated steel-clad sheds. There are more than 40 industrial estates in Wolverhampton alone.

While the manufacturing continuing in these units (often supplying the motor industry) is just as much part of our story as the 19th century domestic forges and sprawling factories of the mid 20th century, the experience of working in them is yet to receive serious scrutiny.

The geography of the modern Black Country aerospace industry reflects this pattern. Some of the largest employers such as Moog and UTC are now on its edge, overlooking rural Staffordshire and the M54, whereas the industrial estates in the old core of the Black Country host a network of smaller suppliers.

In all this change, perhaps it is worth finishing on what turns out to be a continuing thread in the story of Black Country industry. As mentioned, the local manufacturing tradition is based substantially on metalworking. During the 18th and 19th centuries, industries common in the area would have included iron smelters as well as a whole raft of secondary metalworking industries including the production of chains, traps, anchors, locks, safes, lorinery, nails and fasteners.

We might have expected this tradition to have little relevance today, but census data collected in 2011 shows the pattern continues. The data allows us to look at the spread of a group of industries including metal products, machinery, electrical and electronic equipment, vehicles and so forth. More than a third of manufacturing employment in the Black Country is currently in these categories. With the exception of the metalworking areas of South Yorkshire, this is the highest proportion of any comparable area in England.

So, despite all the change, manufacturing in the area has kept some of the regional identity it developed several centuries ago. And we can say with justification that the role the Black Country played in the industrial revolution has clear echoes in the life of the area today.



Peter Donnelly © Simon Donnelly



© Jubilee Arts Archive

A WORLD THAT SOMEONE ELSE OWNS...

Artist Brendan Jackson traces the history and legacy of migrant workers in the Black Country

The Black Country has always drawn migrants to it, from its very beginnings: former agricultural workers from the shire counties on all sides, displaced by mechanisation and drawn to the new kinds of work offered by the factories of the Industrial Revolution; French Huguenot refugees, escaping religious persecution, who brought their enamelling enterprise here; Irish labourers who came to dig the canals and later work the railways; glass workers from the Low Counties, whose industry had collapsed in the European revolutions of 1830 and whose skills were in demand by English entrepreneurs. Later, in the post-war world of 1945, there is the more

contemporary migration story of people from the Commonwealth countries of the British Empire, whose labour was required – and duly solicited – to rebuild the country.

I was born in the Black Country. I know it well enough. My forebears travelled from North Wales and Ireland to work here, in the mining industry (on my father's side) and in nursing (on my mother's side). It so happens I entered the world on the same maternity ward at Hallam Hospital as Robert Plant, though some years later. I can still pick out the bit of tarmac purportedly laid down by

the future rock god on West Bromwich high street, when he worked for a time as a labourer for the corporation, well before he found the stairway to heaven. This shrine was once solemnly pointed out to me by an old fellow from the works department of the council. There are no known photographs that record this historical moment, merely a memory, an anecdote, a story, passed on from one person to another. While, compared with our past output, we may not create much 'stuff' in the Black Country anymore, we have stories aplenty; a rich vein to be mined by artists, writers and performers. This inside view of the area has received little attention and the views of the outsider have traditionally been pejorative. It's a place most people drive past on the motorway. When the area has received national media attention, it has been overwhelmingly negative – a trend that may have started when Queen Victoria visited Wolverhampton one dismal November day in 1866. Following the death of her husband and a period of mourning, it was her first appearance in public for five years. She purportedly asked for the blinds of her railway carriage to be drawn to hide the view of the hideous industrial landscape, this dreadful black country her couriers had brought her to. Arriving at the station she was greeted by a 40ft arch made of coal, through which her carriage passed. This may have compounded her poor impression of this particular part of her kingdom. Balmoral it was not.

These unfavourable views persisted and persisted. In the 1930s, JB Priestley wrote: 'Industry has ravaged it, drunken storm troopers have passed this way; there are signs of atrocities everywhere, the earth has been left gaping and bleeding; and what were once bright fields have been rummaged and raped into these dreadful patches of waste ground.' This was the environment where new migrants arrived in the middle of the 20th century – as post-war settlements helped create a world that was increasingly interconnected, where economic migration was to become the norm, a movement of both people and capital. To the Black Country came the Poles dispossessed of their homelands by the fall

of the Iron Curtain across Europe, the workers from the West Indies encouraged to pack their suitcase and help fill labour shortages in the 'Mother Country', Pakistanis and Indians to work in the steel and textile industries. Until the Commonwealth Immigrants Act of 1962, all citizens of the Commonwealth could enter and stay in the UK without restriction. By 1960, nearly 40 per cent of all junior doctors in the NHS were recruited from the Indian subcontinent – in 1963 alone some 18,000 were recruited, in a campaign led enthusiastically by none other than the Wolverhampton MP Enoch Powell.

As an artist motivated to engage with the lessons of history, I am happy to be spending time investigating an archive of unique photographic material that documents the people and places of this much-maligned area. The Jubilee Arts Archive in Sandwell contains more than 20,000 images from the years 1974–94, documentation of community projects undertaken by those artist activists. Here we find a portrait that reflects not just the Black Country but also the changing demographics of British society. Here we find evidence of the growing diversity of the formerly colourless Black Country.

In 1984, in a Britain preoccupied by a 12-month long national miners' strike, the *Sunday Times* sent a journalist to Sandwell to write a piece called 'Black Country Blues – Ghetto Britain'. The journalist described his experience of Sandwell as 'probably the most depressing story I have ever worked on in my career.' At the time, Jubilee were working with a group of young break dancers to create a performance, a kind of break-dance ballet representing a day in their life. They called themselves the Smethwick Spades, AKA The Crazy Spades. They were predominantly African-Caribbean, with a smattering of White and Asian members. They looked at this article, with the words and images from the outside that portrayed their town and life as a place of poverty and helplessness, and they didn't see things in quite the same way. Though this was no longer the same centre of industrial production, they saw it as a place enriched by the experience of people from all

over the world, which their parents, brothers and sisters had contributed to. Their discussion was animated and they mused on the origins of the naming of this place, as have so many others. Their rationale was: 'Well, it's just called that now because of all the black people who have lived here.'

They were fascinated to find out about a local factory notable for producing the glazing for both the Houses of Parliament and the famous 1851 Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of all Nations at Crystal Palace. Once a hotbed of innovation, Chance Brothers ceased producing flat glass in 1976 and the remainder of the works closed in 1981. Their buildings were in a ruinous state – some still can be seen standing by the canal side today, at Spon Lane junction, along the Wolverhampton to Birmingham railway line. (Sandwell was soon to be noted for having the second highest proportion of derelict land in the country, a legacy of this industrial past.) The young break-dancers spoke to a Jamaican man who used to work at Chance's in the 60s; he told them how it was a good place for black people to work. Old Mr Chance looked after his workers, he told them.

There were other places with a word-of-mouth reputation for welcoming the new migrants and their skills and enthusiasm. In Bilston, Beverley Harvey recalls her first job after leaving school, at Bradleys – a factory originally founded in 1882, which finally shut up shop in 2005.

'I didn't have any experience, leaving school at 16 in the 1970s, and they put me on the hand press straightaway. I was at the first aid every day until I worked out how to avoid the pieces that sprang back. Bradleys made ladders, wheelbarrows, ironing-boards. They even had a black foreman back then. The first generation of black people who worked there encouraged us to look ahead, to better our circumstances, not to stay on the factory floor. I remember it as a big happy family. We used to warm up our coco bread and fish on the furnaces. People would want to try it and see what Caribbean food tasted like. There was a white woman, Gladys – she was Irish actually – who told us all about strikes and our rights.'

Black and Asian workers were prone to exploitation and poor working conditions and discrimination. American civil rights activist Malcom X visited Smethwick in 1965, where white householders were lobbying the council to buy up houses to prevent black or Asian families moving in. Avtar Singh Johal, an activist with the Indian Workers' Association, went for a drink with him in a local pub – one of a few which did not operate a colour bar. It was the concentration of foundries locally that attracted the migrant workers; Johal first came in 1958, to work as a moulder's mate at Shotton Brothers in Oldbury. He soon found out he had half the pay of the exclusively white moulders. It was tough work – this was a time when the average life expectancy of a man in the moulding plant was 34. Later he worked at Midland Motor Cylinders in Smethwick, where he successfully challenged the rule of separate lavatories for Asians and Europeans. It was these migrant workers who were often at the forefront of campaigns: in 1982 Sikh women organised strikes over low pay and for union recognition

at Supreme Quiltings and Raindi Textiles in Smethwick and were visited on the picket line by the then Labour leader, Michael Foot. It was the migrants, both men and women, who filled the Victorian age factories, as the white working class increasingly took up the expanded educational opportunities offered in the 1960s.

These materials and stories live on in the archives, forming part of the fabric of the Black Country. Jubilee Arts was a group that championed the need for communities to have control of their representation, challenging negative stereotypes, sharing aspects of their life experiences and common values. These images will outlast our own memory of them, and will be found again and seen differently in another 100 years. The projects of the past can be windows to the future; through the involvement and engagement of local people we can continue to be proud of our diversity, to tell the unknown stories and celebrate our achievements. But let us not over-romanticise those good old days. With the fragmentation of work and increasing use of zero hours contracts, a greater separateness and lack of control, it seems we are in transition to a third world economy (as the term was formerly understood). We are more introspective, less sure of ourselves. Now, to all intents and purposes it is a world that someone else owns. But what we retain is our imagination and that surely allows for hope.

Brendan Jackson and Beverley Harvey are artists currently working with the Jubilee Arts Archive 1974-94, in cooperation with Sandwell Community History and Archives Service. The project is supported by Heritage Lottery Fund and Arts Council England.

Further information:
www.jubileeartsarchive.net or
www.brendanjackson.co.uk

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© Jubilee Arts Archive



INNOVATION FOR SURVIVAL IN A SHIFTING LANDSCAPE: THE STORY OF RUBERY OWEN

David Owen OBE, Chairman of Rubery Owen from 1969 to 2011, tells how this family-owned company has adapted to changing needs and continues to innovate 130 years on

Rubery Owen began in 1884 in Darlaston, which is now part of Walsall. Mr AE Owen became a partner in the company in 1893 and quickly developed it into structural steel work. One of the very first major assignments was to build and erect the footbridge from Bridgnorth Railway Station to Bridgnorth High Town, which spanned a wide valley of roads and buildings below. Another development was the design and manufacture of steel chassis frames for cars and commercial vehicles. The very first was for Daimler in Coventry in 1898, which was at a price of three shillings and fourpence. Coventry was the birthplace of the motorcar as we know it today.

It was natural therefore throughout the early 1900s and into the 20s and 30s for Rubery Owen to continue to develop components for the motor industry such as wheels, petrol tanks, nuts and bolts and chassis frames.

The key to all this was a workforce which developed skills in all types of design and manufacturing such as cold and hot pressings, welding and riveting etc.

Change was automatic in developing our products – for instance in the manufacture of chassis frames. Our first sidemember power press bought in the 1920s had an 1,800-ton pressing capacity (incidentally this press now proudly stands at the entry to the Black Country Living Museum); the capability increased in the 1930s to 2,000 tons, in the 1950s to 3,000 tons and in the 1970s to 4,000 tons. The driving force was to press stronger steel so that heavier loads could be carried on our roads. Another example was car wheels. The first Mini steel wheel was designed to be as light as possible. On test it fractured on cornering but we were able to improve the design by thickening the steel slightly and everyone

who went to see this wonderful little car at motor races marvelled at its speed and stability on cornering.

Despite the ups and downs of the recession in the early 1930s and then the Second World War, Rubery Owen continued to expand and acquire more land, and continued to build more factory space, which eventually became a full 84 acres. Additional products developed were the ‘three point’ agricultural plough with Massey Ferguson, which revolutionised ploughing in smaller areas, and ‘deep drawn’ pressings for gas bottles and kitchen sink units. We also built a new department to manufacture water pumps for vehicles.

One of the keys to developing the individual skills of our staff and workforce was our apprenticeship scheme, which was renowned in the area as a sure route to getting a job. Many apprentices naturally went on to work in Rubery Owen itself and some became future managers of departments.

The company had well and truly developed its own strapline, ‘You name it we made it’, which is celebrated in our book *Memories of Rubery Owen* published in 2005.

After the Second World War, staff and workers organised their own sports day, drama groups, children’s Christmas parties and sporting activities, including football, cricket, hockey, rugby football and bowls teams with inter-departmental competitions. Rubery Owen also had a good mix of men and women working for the company on both the factory floor and in the offices. We can claim that many romances and marriages took place because of an inherent close community spirit.

As people well know, the 1960s saw a strong growth in car and truck production in the UK, and Rubery Owen grew with this. Sadly in the following decade we saw a steep decline in this trend with the eventual collapse of British Leyland. During that time BL as we

knew it had taken over Guy Motors, Daimler, Jaguar-Rover, Land Rover, Triumph and other major British car manufacturers. Because of our proximity, British Leyland had taken 70 per cent of our production at our Darlaston factory. There was no hope for us to supply at a stroke the fast growing vehicle production in France and Germany, so sadly our main factory at Darlaston had to close. With the help of Trade Unions and staff we closed the site and no customers were let down. The family however were determined to keep Rubery Owen going. We still had our head office at Darlaston and other Group companies elsewhere and overseas, so by the mid 1980s we were growing again.

One of the key departments of the old factory that we kept going was our original Research & Development department, which continues to serve many industries in the UK. We renamed it Rotech Laboratories Ltd and it provides a high-tech material testing service in mechanical and product finish, corrosion and non-destructive testing, as well as chemical analysis and metallography. We also do weld testing and fastener testing. We have expanded Rotech through taking over two companies in the same field of work. Looking to the future, we have eight apprentices out of a workforce of 40 and we see a great future in supporting manufacturing, which is now growing again in the West Midlands.

The other exciting company for the future is Rozone Ltd, which works from new premises that we have built here at Darlaston. Rozone have developed and continue to develop a comprehensive range of environment-friendly industrial and general cleaning solutions and servicing equipment. Another important product is battery-testing equipment so that batteries can be used effectively and developed in all sorts of new ways as a power unit for the future.

Another strong feature of the Black Country has been its ever-changing landscape. I read and re-read the wonderful prose and description of Elihu Burritt’s book

The Black Country and its Green Borderland published in 1868. In the development of our factory at Darlston we brought into use in the first half of the 20th century 'barren brown waste land', which had been riddled with mine shafts.

Over the course of the company's history we have also seen how modes of travel have changed. In the 1960s when the bell rang to finish work, people swarmed up Booth Street; these houses had been built in the early part of the century and in one of them five generations of a family had worked for us. Other employees who lived a few miles away got on their bikes. We did not even have a works car park except for use by managers and senior staff. Through the middle of our 84-acre factory a canal crossed the whole site from east to west, with just one bridge for rail and vehicles. I often used to cross this and periodically in the 1960s I would see a horse-drawn barge taking a full load up the canal.

After the closure of our main factory in the early 1980s we pursued ideas with the Black Country Development Corporation as to how to use our now empty factory and derelict land. When the new Black Country Route was built parallel to the canal, half of one side of the route went to a very attractive housing estate and the other half nearer to Willenhall went to new units which were mainly for wholesale and retail distribution, having the advantage of being close to the M6.

As a company we have never liked to see land derelict and wasted so, although it took a few years, we have managed to develop all our land. With a very useful grant from Europe we have built three new units: one rented out and two for Rozzone for their continual development into new products.

The final area to be utilised was our head office: a fine Edwardian Building built by my grandfather. We rented part of it out to a former employee who had started his own company but we only used a small proportion of it ourselves. We came to an arrangement with a housing

association, which renovated the offices for new business ventures, whilst we retained our boardroom and offices on a tenancy basis.

Staying in the Black Country has been very important to all the family and we have been pleased to be involved with the starting up of the Black Country Living Museum in the 1970s and The New Art Gallery Walsall in the 1990s. Also, through the charity Old Hall People's Partnership Trust, we have seen an asset transfer from Walsall Council of our old Sports & Social Club and playing fields at Bentley and it is wonderful to see these facilities being used again by the community.

The fourth generation of the Owen family are now taking over the running of the business and developing Rotech Laboratories Ltd and Rozzone Ltd in the heart of the Black Country. In May 2014 we were very pleased to be chosen by a campaign run by the Stock Exchange and supported by the Daily Telegraph as being one of 1,000 British companies that 'inspire'. We understand the criteria included: profitability in your particular market sector; investment in the development of your company; and developing new products that are environmentally friendly.

We look forward to the future with great confidence in developing and expanding our businesses in the Black Country, with the help of all our staff and employees.



© Rubery Owen Holdings Limited



© John Bulmer

Goodnight Irene

Goodnight Irene, I say to you, goodnight,
as we follow the car to the cemetery, past the boarded
steelworks, the temple with its glittering dome,
the pubs no more than someone's front room
where faces sit like Toby Jugs in the bar lights;

over the canal bridge, the Baptist chapel
still brave on the cut, baptising the Sunday believers
in boat bilge, past the marlpit, the warehouses,
the Indian shop, the streets left to squatters,
their pebble-dashed terraces emptied by time.

We slow by the dog track, the red-iron gates
of the Jubilee Park, where metal horses run
to the railway and canter feral past city-bound trains.
Above us, your tower block sways in the wind
and the motorways loop like Cradely chain.

When you were a girl, these streets shone
like the coal, traipsing home with your dad from the pit's
black skeleton, your hand in his pocket, close as a kiss.
Now their names are music, a requiem:
Darkly Lane, Snow Hill, Roseville, Wren's Nest.

Liz Berry

Wulfrun Hotel

Evenin's the best time fer waiting at the winder
fer someone yer love
as dusk is tossed like a magician's hanky
over the city's rooftops,
coverin secretaries beltin their macs as they nip
fer buses, men slippin
pink-eyed as rabbits from the black hat of the werks.

Then night, that owd conjuror,
gads in wi' 'is starry cape and fancy pigeons,
mekkin magic of the wenches
out chappin it on the cobbles, the lads touchin their lips
to the foam of the fust pint.

Liz Berry

Extracts from Liz Berry's
acclaimed debut collection
of poems *Black Country*,
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www.lizberrypoetry.co.uk

WOMEN AT WORK: THOMAS TREVIS SMITH LTD COOPERAGE, CRADLEY HEATH



Writer and performer Heather Wastie shares memories of her family's Black Country business from the point of view of the womenfolk

My mother trained as a nurse but ended up being sucked into the office of our family cooperage when she married my dad. When Dad was born, in 1932, Grandad (Ernie) and his brother Bert were running the factory between them, living next door to each other on the premises at 37 and 38 Holly Bush Street, Cradley Heath. The company's main output was barrels (casks) and all of the employees were men.

Fast-forward to the 1970s. The demand for casks had diminished so the company was producing a range of other products and had bought up more factory space in the immediate vicinity. Women were now being employed. They lived very close to the factory and did shift work, particularly evenings. They'd make dinner for their husbands, put the children to bed, then go off to work from 5.00 until 9.00 pm.

One of their jobs was assembling seed trays. It was tiring, repetitive and potentially dangerous work. They worked in pairs on a row of nailing machines, enjoying each other's company. Being on piecework, they got on

with the job extremely quickly and still managed to have a laugh.

There was no heating, so in the winter it got very cold. Here is the first of several extracts from an oral history project I did in 2004:

'I can remember the cold. We used to go in old coats and keep them on. The wood used to come in soaked because they'd leave it out. We'd have to get hammers to knock the ice off before we could start making the seed trays. And the woodlice! We had to shake them off. But that was in the winter. It was lovely in the summer when we'd got the gates open and the sun was shining.'

Because of the way the factory had grown, men and women worked in separate buildings. Mom tells me that the workforce was like an extension of the family; everyone looked out for everyone else. I felt it too, growing up in 37 Holly Bush Street right alongside the factory. Dad and his brother had taken over the two

houses built in the 1890s by my great grandfather, though no.38 became the office when my uncle and family moved out.

'We had a power cut once or twice. I'd got a great big teapot and I used to go and make them [the workmen] tea. I used to warm up their dinners! I'd take it over to the house and put it in the stove.'

'Our mom had got a big leafy tree outside her house on the footpath, and what happened was, Smith's lorry was backing – crash! and broke the tree. You know, they took that tree and they sawed it all up for logs for my mother so they got a load of logs – and that's what they was like.'

One of the women tells how as a teenager she used to go over to Bert's house and watch his television when they first came out because her family couldn't afford one. When I was a child we were the only people in our street to have a phone, so when there was an emergency, people used to ask if we wouldn't mind phoning the emergency services for them. Mom describes it as an integrated community. Hearts were broken, she says, when the street was demolished in the late 70s and the factory moved to Portersfield Industrial Estate. Some of the 'family feel' was lost in the new premises, away from houses, removed from the place where the company grew up. But everyone appreciated it when central heating was put in!

The women were adaptable and fitted in where jobs needed to be done. They assembled bird boxes and hanging baskets, helped with packing tubs and garden furniture, worked on the planing machine, hammered six-inch nails into large crates

In the Portersfield factory, the women started making Christmas tree tubs, cheaper versions of those made by the skilled coopers and only manufactured for 13 weeks a year. The component parts were prepared by the men; the women assembled them, dipped them and packed them. A team of four could make

450 in a day. When Do-It-Yourself Shrub Tubbs were introduced, women packed these into boxes. Trevis Smith diversified even further into snooker tables, and the women made the cushions. Over time, the women did more shifts until eventually they were full time and there was no evening work, just Saturday mornings for a while.

'At lunchtimes you sat more or less where you worked. We'd got four benches, like garden seats, and a table. Some used to sit outside if it was nice.'

When safety regulations were introduced, ear defenders, goggles and masks were issued where there had been no protection before. Extractor fans helped clear the atmosphere of sawdust.

'This chap Tony, he was on the saw and he had part of his finger off. I went up and I looked for this finger. Anyway, I found it and I run down the office with it and this is me – I'm crazy! – took it down but of course it was too messed up.'

'I only gave work up because the doctor said I'd got to because I got arthritis. My son said, "Mom that's where all that's come from, messing with wet wood." I was using an air gun with the window boxes and the doctor said, "Too much repetition and this is what's doing it." I do miss it because you're with people aren't you? It was a very happy atmosphere there. I enjoyed every minute.'

By the 1990s, my two brothers (who later continued the family tradition by living next door to each other) were running the company when it was forced into receivership.

'I missed it when the family stopped being involved. When the others started to come in you was there to do a job and that was it.'

Mom says she doesn't think the work would appeal to women today, and I agree!



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BIRMINGHAM AND THE BLACK COUNTRY

Dr Chris Upton, Reader in Public History at Newman University
Birmingham considers the relationship between close neighbours that have more in common than they may think

On 3 June 1911 the Greater Birmingham Act received royal assent. At a stroke the legislation allowed the Midland city to expand beyond its central core to incorporate suburbs that had formerly been in Staffordshire and Worcestershire. Overnight the people of Handsworth and Yardley, Kings Norton and Northfield (none of whom were prone to sleep-walking), went to bed in one county and woke up in another.

In recent years the term 'Greater Birmingham' has been revived; there is already a Greater Birmingham & Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership. More widely (and controversially) the phrase has been put forward to embrace the wider West Midlands, not as a single political unit, but as an area of common interest and joint enterprise.

The phrase 'Greater Birmingham' has been applauded by both political and business leaders; certainly the title has done no harm to the reputation of Greater Manchester. In an era of increasingly international commerce and global trade, a phrase such as 'The Birmingham and Black Country Region' does not travel well. While the city of Birmingham is a recognisable brand, the subtle differences in its hinterland are not.

It is in the Black Country that 'Greater Birmingham' hits the proverbial rocks. The people of the Black Country are well used to politicians tampering with their borders, and, indeed, so complicated are the boundaries within the four boroughs that not everyone notices when they do. But the word 'Birmingham' is meant to stop somewhere on the Wolverhampton Road; that much is clear. The differences between geographies of the ground and geographies of the mind are here laid bare.

It has always been said that the easiest way to start a fight in a Black Country pub is to ask for a definition of the term. One takes it as the area encompassed by the famous '30-foot' coal seam; another that it is a wider region, stretching from Wolverhampton to the border of Smethwick; another that it is the four boroughs of Wolverhampton, Walsall, Sandwell and Dudley. Perhaps

for this reason, the Ordnance Survey have been reluctant to spell it out on a map.

The phrase developed in the early 19th century to define and describe that area of intense coal and iron production in the West Midlands. The first use of the words in print would appear to be by Rev. William Gresley in his children's story, 'Colton Green: A Tale of the Black Country' in 1846. Gresley's book begins:

'On the borders of the agricultural part of Staffordshire and just before you enter that dismal region of mines and forges, commonly called the "Black Country", stands the pretty village of Oakthorpe, encompassed by gardens and green fields...'

Although the village of Oakthorpe is invented, the Black Country was not. For Gresley the term 'Black Country' was in common usage, at least locally, and thus he adds it to the English dictionary. Two decades later Elihu Burritt, the United States consul in Birmingham, set off from his home in Harborne to explore the area in 'Walks in the Black Country and its Green Borderland' (1868). And thus the salient characteristics of the Black Country – 'black by day, red by night' – were defined for a century and more.

And so that distinction between Birmingham and the Black Country rose up. One place was characterised by its bewildering multiplicity of products – 'city of a thousand trades', 'toy shop of the world'; the other by its role as a primary producer of iron, steel and coal. One was a place of near constant migration; the other was not used to seeing strangers. One place was a highly centralised manufactory of finished goods; the other was a straggling collection of villages, turning out chains and nails. Birmingham was a town of skilled and well-paid metal workers; the Black Country was a place of cottage industries, clinging to a meagre existence.

As William Hutton was saying of the nail trade even in the 1780s: 'Our nailers are chiefly masters and rather opulent. The trade employs boys and girls from the

age of seven and many women, and pay is poor in consequence: three shillings a week for a twelve-hour day.'

Is it any wonder that the price of a pint of beer has always been much lower in the Black Country?

But these differences have never been as real as has often been claimed. For one thing, Birmingham also had its villages of poor nailers at Harborne, Bartley Green and Northfield. For another, the Black Country also had (and has) its centres of highly skilled industry and craftsmanship. Stourbridge, Amblecote and Wordsley remain centres of high-end glass making, a trade whose origins lie four centuries ago. And the aerospace industry of Wolverhampton, concentrated particularly in the north of the city, continues to flourish. The M54 corridor nearby, developed jointly by Staffordshire County Council and Wolverhampton City Council, will take the Black Country tradition of skilled engineering well into the 21st Century.

It is equally the case that the Black Country staples of chain and steel have evolved into highly developed industries, no longer simply supplying to a local market. Somers Forge in Halesowen, established in 1866, manufactures a vast range of components from carbon steels to high integrity nickel alloys. William Hackett Chains, founded in 1892, continues to produce Cradley chains, today for the oil and gas industries, and the construction and utility sectors, as well as harrows for the agricultural industry.

John Leland might well have commented in the 1540s that Birmingham was a town whose raw ingredients – iron and coal – came out of Staffordshire; that distinction has long since collapsed. It is likewise true that the differences between Birmingham and Black Country trades were never as watertight as is sometimes imagined. Halesowen had its button-making quarter as much as Birmingham did; Wolverhampton, Bilston and Birmingham were all centres of japanning, and some

specialist crafts – Jew's harp making, for example – flitted between the two centres.

Taken together, the Black Country and Birmingham remains the most highly concentrated centre for manufacturing in the UK. The A4123 – Birmingham New Road to some, Wolverhampton Road to others – may no longer thread its way between glowing furnaces and forges; industry is an altogether quieter and less spectacular affair than when Gresley and Burritt were about. Yet it remains very much alive, and makes no distinction between those two places. Arguably the most successful company in the Midlands – Jaguar Land Rover – has a foot in each, one in the M54 corridor, and another at Castle Bromwich.

We are prone, of course, to define ourselves by what we are not, and that is usually what makes us different from our neighbours. And so those two close neighbours – Birmingham and the Black Country – eye each other warily across the River Tame. But as I sink a pint of Black Country ale in a Birmingham pub, or drive from my Birmingham home to see a match at the Molyneux, I'm inclined to see more similarities than differences.



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IN THE SHADOW OF ELISABETH

Community historian and researcher Greig Campbell explores the migrant experience at Bilston Steelworks

Throughout the 19th and early 20th centuries large numbers of domestic migrants flocked to Bilston, hoping to find gainful employment in the town's iron and steel industry. Early arrivals hailed from the north of England, soon followed by experienced steelmen from across the Scottish border. As the metal industry continued to expand rapidly throughout the 20th century so too did the numbers of newcomers settling in the area. However, between the end of the Second World War and the recession of mid-1970s Bilston experienced unprecedented demographic change – with thousands of migrants arriving from far-flung regions of the globe to drive Britain's post-war economic boom.

The first group to arrive were European Voluntary Workers (EVW's) from POW and refugee camps located throughout a continent still reeling from harsh realities of military conflict. They were soon followed by even larger

numbers of 'New Commonwealth' migrants arriving from the West Indies and later the Indian sub-continent. The social and economic upheavals caused by years of conflict were quickly followed by a long post-war economic boom. Bilston Works itself, then under the ownership of Stewarts & Lloyds, prospered throughout the post-war period – undertaking a £16 million redevelopment scheme that would make it one of the most modern integrated works of its kind in the country. In 1954 'Elisabeth,' a giant new blast furnace was lit with much fanfare. 'Big Lizzy' alone could produce 275,000 tons of steel per year and in her entire lifetime would produce more than 5.5 million tons of pig iron. However, as the regional economy grew faster than at any time since the peak of the Victorian period, acute labour shortages handicapped production in a number of key industries – particularly metal manufacture. This severe manpower situation could only be partially met by the

native population. If post-war reconstruction was to continue unabated, both Britain and Bilston would have to end years of splendid isolation and turn to a non-traditional labour market.

Initially, in the immediate aftermath of the war, Europe provided fertile recruiting land for new workers, as state-sponsored recruitment schemes encouraged Polish ex-servicemen and EVWs to make a new life in Britain. Other groups of workers included a relatively small number of Italian and German POWs, followed by a sizeable wave of Ukrainian refugees.

Archival material from August 1948 confirms the large number Eastern European migrants employed at the Works, with over eighty employees spread across the mills department, the boilers and in the furnaces. The names of Wojtulewicz, Nowicki and Mylek appeared on staff lists and the unique sound of the Polish language could be heard spoken in a bustling Works canteen.

A number of the EVWs lived onsite – housed in what was officially designated ‘the Hostel for Polish Workers’, commonly referred to by native workers as the ‘Polish Camp’ – located on an embankment that overlooked the Works football pitches. Furthermore, an internal memo between the Works pay officer, and the official Stewarts & Lloyds Polish Liaison Officer, a Mr J Ignasewski, reveals that over thirty migrant workers lived at the camp. The EVWs would be charged 13 shillings per week for the pleasure of living there.

Perhaps one of Bilston Steelworks’ most famous Polish EVWs was Josef Stawinoga, who after reportedly quitting his job at the Works, would later find fame as Wolverhampton’s ring road tramp. Another well known Polish son was Jozef ‘Jo’ Chudzik who was employed as Bilston’s stationery buyer for 18 years, before retiring in 1975. At the outbreak of hostilities Jo was arrested in Poland and interrogated by the Russians before being sentenced to 25 years in a Gulag in Siberia. After Hitler broke the Nazi-Soviet Non-Aggression Pact in 1941 he

was allowed to join the Free Polish Army, leaving Poland through what was then Persia to fight in North Africa and Italy – where he was awarded the Polish Cross of Valour at Monte Cassino. Whilst being employed at the Works Jo was ever conscious of his Polish roots – giving Polish language lessons at St Edmunds School and acting as the Wolverhampton correspondent for the London based Polish daily newspaper Dziennik Polski.

However, the continued expansion of the British economy throughout the 1950s and 60s created further shortages of labour. To tackle the manpower issue Britain now turned to its former colonial outposts. Large numbers of migrants from the West Indies were quickly followed by those from the Indian sub-continent, with the partition of India in 1947 acting as a crucially important catalyst for mass immigration from India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Many ‘New Commonwealth’ residents had a long tradition of migration, taking advantage of employment opportunities overseas as an avenue for greater social mobility. They came to Britain in search of a higher standard of living and better prospects for their children, establishing migration chains with earlier migrants sponsoring friends and relatives.

New Commonwealth workers were initially encouraged to come by the authorities – receiving preferential treatment; their entry to the country was not restricted at any point. These ‘subjects of the Crown’ differed from traditional ‘guest workers’ due to their former colonial status and had the same political and legal rights as the native population.

As migration flows steadily expanded, the New Commonwealth workers began to concentrate in the major urban conurbations of the Black Country, where the best employment opportunities could be found. Soon the newcomers were attracted to Bilston’s traditional local industrial bases. Fast-paced demographic change would transform the face of the town irreversibly. By 1971 almost nine per cent of the population was Commonwealth-born. Asian

residents from India made up a significant majority of this group but there was a substantial minority of West Indian residents. As the demographic profile of Bilston changed rapidly, so too did that of the labour force. A 1978 report identified the nationalities of the workforce as being ‘African, Dutch, German, Hungarian, Indian, Irish, Kenyan, Lithuanian, Pakistani, West Indian, Yugoslavian and British’. Of the 2,326 employed at the time, 1,888 were ‘British’ and an astonishing 438 were classified as ‘Other’.



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Outside the confines of the Works, a once cordial welcome soon began to dissipate as an increasing number of migrants arrived throughout the 1960s and 70s. Soon the New Commonwealth migrants were openly discriminated against in sectors such as housing, leisure, education and in employment.

The obvious physical, cultural and linguistic differences between Bilston’s native population and the newcomers led to social tensions and issues concerning community cohesion. Widespread hostility and outright racial prejudice began to emerge as ‘coloured immigrants’ became synonymous with crime, social disorder and violence – leading to increased public anxiety. An obvious disjuncture between the competing communities was exacerbated by members of the political elite, who exploited resentment and fear for short-term political gain. Popular hostility to New Commonwealth migrants manifested itself in a host of local reactionary political campaigns. Enoch Powell was known to have made frequent visits to the Works throughout the period to castigate management for the continued employment of migrant steelmen. Despite such a tense situation outside, inside Bilston Works the New Commonwealth migrants quickly adjusted to their new surroundings, and proved themselves to be worthy steelmen.

Steelwork was dangerous and physically demanding, requiring advanced levels of skill and expertise. Through sheer hard work and determination the migrant steelmen of Bilston earned the trust and mutual respect of their native co-workers. In late 1975 the Works newspaper ran a story entitled ‘Bar Peelers Praised’, extolling the performance of a group of finishing-bar peeler operators for turning a record 1,225 tonnes in the last week of October that year. The seven-man team consisted of Nanu Bhal Patel, Sukhdev Singh, Narinder Laroya, Mohinder Panesar, Dattani Vinodrai, Naranjan Singh, and Des Jakhu.

Other migrant steelmen earned recognition for their sporting prowess: Rajinder Kumar, an electrical apprentice, won the hearts of his co-workers by undertaking a 200-mile sponsored bike ride in aid of Bradley Special School for the Mentally Handicapped.

Trade unionism was a natural means of organisation for New Commonwealth migrants, with many having been activists against British colonial rule in their homelands. Indeed, this strong tradition of militant struggle would prove useful during Bilston Steelworks' darkest hour.

By the mid-1970s a fully nationalised steel industry was in a state of absolute decline. Despite being one of the few profit-making plants in a state-owned business that was losing £500 million annually, the British Steel Corporation (BSC) had discussed the closure of Bilston Works as early as 1973 – whilst continuously denying allegations of such from Bilston's steelmen. When closure was becoming more of a reality the steelmen recognised the need to organise – as native shop stewards adopted an inclusive attitude to successfully engage with migrant workers and establish broader co-ordinated action. The local branch secretary of the National Union of Blastfurnacemen, Malkit Singh, was elected to the Joint Action Works Action Committee and helped oversee a spirited five-year battle against closure.

The steelmen of Bilston stood in solidarity, organising an engaging defence of their plant, recruiting the support of prominent industry officials and members of the political class. In 1978 the leading steel union saw their annual conference abandoned in chaos after BSC's bungled attempts to hasten the closure of Bilston without prior consultation were leaked to shocked delegates. This was followed by threats from the TUC of a first national steel strike in 50 years over the treatment of Bilston. The battle for Bilston not only caught the imagination of industry insiders and union officials, but the Works Action Committee cleverly recruited the support of members of a now cohesive and integrated

multi-ethnic local community – organising a march on London that featured hundreds of Bilstonians of all backgrounds. Indeed, the battle for Bilston has been described by labour historian Martin Upham as the 'high point of resistance to closures.'

As permanent closure was becoming more of a reality, the Works Action Committee commissioned a report entitled 'The Future of Bilston Steelworks'. Designed to persuade the necessary powers that Bilston should be saved, the report contained a poignant passage proudly celebrating the diversity of the workforce:

'Traditionally, employees were recruited from the immediate environment, but of more recent years the catchment area has been widened considerably ... recruitment has also included a number of immigrants from Eastern Europe, West Indies, Central African States and the sub-continent of India. A great deal of thought was given to the employment policies to be followed before recruitment of immigrants began, and over the years the immigrant labour force has, in general, been fully integrated into the working and social life of the works. Good relations have been established across the Works with a very mixed labour force, and also with local representatives of the various racial and ethnic minorities.'

In 1979 Bilston Works finally succumbed to BSC's much feared rationalisation plan. By October 1980, Elisabeth, the large blast furnace that had dominated the skyline of post-war Bilston was unceremoniously torn down in front of an angry and dejected crowd of steelmen and fellow Bilstonians. The closure of the Works signified the end of over two centuries of iron and steel production in the town.

Despite such a heart-breaking conclusion, the story of Bilston Steelworks lives on in the hearts and minds of those migrant workers who stood side-by-side with Bilston's native steelmen – in the shadow of Elisabeth.

LEARNING THE GAME



Dr Brian Dakin, Aka Billy Spake Mon, considers his relationship with his native Black Country dialect, from his boyhood in 1950s Oldbury to the present day

For the past 20 years I have travelled on a journey, both academic and creative, to try and understand the role my 'Mutha Tung' has played in forming not only an identity but a set of codes and practices of how I see the world. I use my own experiences and those of others to offer suggestions about how we place our voices in a wider social context. The words we speak and the way they are spoken produce judgements: social, economic and educational. We may change our voice in order to be part of a wider social network, tempering our 'owned' voice for one that is more acceptable. Alternatively we retain the voice absorbed at birth, distancing ourselves from the norm.

Historically the Black Country dialect has been viewed as a variety of English spoken and shared by a group

of simple folk who work with their hands and are in the main poor. This always makes me chuckle as the dialect has an impressive history, stemming from Low Germanic tribes as early as the 5th century. Also, it is widely known that words used in Chaucer's poems and Shakespeare's plays have their origins in the dialect of the region. Not bad for a bunch of boonyeds!

Life experiences determine how judgements affect us, and my studies and my work as a creative writer and dialect performer have given me the opportunity to journey back and examine my experiences and those of others. These experiences confirm to me the importance of voice and the role it plays throughout our life in shaping identities.

My own story can be roughly divided into three phases, each representing a different stage in the development of my relationship with my native dialect.

Up to the age of 11 I lived in a tight-knit community. The people spoke the variety of Black Country of the town where I have always lived: Oldbury. This micro-world consisted of Eel Street, Little Eel Street, Portway and Churchbridge. All my aunts, uncles, cousins and friends lived there. Those of my relatives who were working were employed in the large mills such as Accles & Pollock. I was surrounded by Oldbury Black Country English, which was very different from the socially accepted variety of Received Pronunciation. Connections to social networks that might have influenced the way I spoke were few and far between. Because of the culture of 'speak when spoken to' I had very little dialogue with individuals who spoke differently to me. These people – the doctor, the dentist etc. – were outside my comfort zone both culturally and linguistically and were dismissed from forming any kind of influential linguistic relationship. In schools, the role of teachers had changed little since the 1930s; importance was placed on the way you wrote and not the way you spoke.

My immersion in the local dialect was a natural, organic, unconscious process. I imagined everyone who was important in my life spoke as I did. There were no judgemental experiences that made me question how my 'spake' marked me socially. The RP speakers – or those not from the Black Country – were different, not me.

My family moved when Oldbury started its regeneration programme in the late 50s. I'd be about five. It seemed as if my community from Oldbury had moved en masse to a new council estate called Cakemore. All my relatives bar one lived somewhere on the estate and the other two were a spit away. Other than the landscape of a new estate being a bit daunting, linguistically I was still under the same blanket. Most of the children on

the estate joined Causeway Green School when I did. I was aware that my best mate, Michael O'Leary and his folks spoke as my mom would say 'posh'. I must have changed a bit when I was with him because now I remember many times Mom saying, 'spake proper when you spake t' Michael's folk.' I may have done, though I don't remember because I was made to feel comfortable and I suppose Michael didn't count because he was a mate and friendships break barriers. I was extremely lucky to form a lifelong bond with his dad Kevin and this may have had something to do with not being aware that my variety of dialect was a marker. We would laugh and joke about the way each of us spoke but at no time was there any ridicule or directives from Kevin to say 'That's incorrect!'. If my first experience had been harsher I may have had more problems with what my voice stood for in relation to a social identity. His mom and dad were white collar and his mom put fried bananas with gammon, which really tickled my mom, but linguistic difference was never an issue.

My first experience of a 'knowing' really came from my dad who was a steelworker at Accles & Pollock, a factory that employed over 5,000 people from Oldbury town. I passed the 11 Plus and was given a place at Oldbury Grammar. I remember to this day my dad saying, 'Do spake cor or bay or nowt llike that t' the talchers there son.' I felt puzzled, firstly by what he meant and secondly by what I would meet. The idea of a place where 'cor' and 'bay' was taboo was strange and unsettling to me. Although some of my teachers at Causeway had been from 'off the region', I went to grammar school with a cloud over me, and a fear that my utterances would become a problem. One comforting thought was that my elder brother and cousins were there and they hadn't seemed to change at all. I do remember that summer turning over in my head what might happen, and sitting behind the coalplace trying to sound my 'h's like Michael's dad did. Oldbury Grammar was where I began to learn the game – to become an actor who took on a character

that would mould into certain situations. I explained at length to my dad that the problem was not so much with the teachers; the main stigmatisation, for want of a better word, was from other pupils, who came from more affluent areas such as Edgbaston or Warley. They labelled us from Cakemore as 'council kids'. It was as much about the stigmatisation of place as it was about how we spoke. Often there'd be 'ruks' in the quadrangle and I'd end up in detention. Looking back, I am conscious I would level out the broader spake that I used on the estate or with family, especially when in class or around teachers. In retrospect, I was not trying to dismiss my identity, but becoming cleverer in where and how I used it.

By the time I was in my 40s I had worked at many different levels in the public sector and continued to almost subconsciously vary the character I played, depending on each situation. Different social networks determined the character I showed the world. I suppose, if I'm honest, the world I lived in was far from that protected world I grew up in. The actor became more prominent than the real me, the self that was inside. The owned, natural, or native self came to the stage at home or when in the company of family. After the death of my dad I became more and more aware that what really mattered to me was who I was, not who I acted out on a daily basis. I began to examine what was important and how I could somehow make a journey to discover that importance. As I had come from a creative background where writing, storytelling and performing were a part of my everyday experiences, I was aware this was the method I could use to understand how I saw the world and how I made decisions or placed codes of practice into my life. Also this fed a desire to collect stories through recording oral histories and understanding the lives that shaped my own. I moved away from writing in Standard English to writing in dialect, when formal necessity didn't feature. Singing and speaking songs or stories developed as part of the journey as I unearthed the real me. It became less important to conform linguistically in order to fit

in. This doesn't mean I went around speaking in the broad dialect of my childhood, as did some of the interviewees I recorded. Theirs had been a different world with less outside pressure, or opportunity to form threads with other speakers who used different varieties of English. I began to embrace my variety of English in a creative way, using words from my childhood and making less effort to change. I felt more at home with myself and who I was and how I was made up of all the experiences that moulded my identity. There are many academic terms used to describe these levels of awareness but to me it was simply that my sense of belonging had become stronger again. I, the speaker, reclaimed by choice what had been hidden under the surface.

Our dialect voice, the one that we hold from birth and use without question is our owned voice. The voices or varieties we use to blend into situations throughout our lives are constructed in order to hide the 'owned'. In some cases we play a clever game, knowing that what lies in the wings is the real self. I don't speak my Performance Speak all the time but it is there inside me. Now, unlike the barren years when I denied its importance, my spake stays on the surface in some form, always. It is the most important part of who I am and how the world sees me. Rather than converge now for acceptance, I diverge and remain true to the five-year-old boy who sat mesmerized in Nana Poll's back room listening to stories and songs about the world that surrounded me.

Brian Dakin has written hundreds of dialect poems and numerous short stories. As Billy Spake Mon, his lively and popular stage show sets his dialect verse to a musical background, where anything from a Gregorian chant to an Eminem rap track is used to accentuate the rhythm of the Black Country dialect.



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YEAR ZERO: BLACK COUNTRY

Award winning Black Country-born artist and film-maker Billy Dosanjh describes how he uses cross-cultural experiences and the art documentary form to foster change in societal outlooks

My film *Year Zero: Black Country* (2014), shown as part of the Black Country Echoes Festival, began with an idea that grows in popularity by the day; that the experiences of one generation can 'scar' DNA for the next. What can be more challenging than travelling 8,000 miles to then try and recreate your old life in a new corner of the world? I wondered how unusual levels of fear, stress and cultural protectionism when faced with unfamiliar people or new customs might relay into future generations; like a scrapbook of 'scars' that grows indefinitely. For the film I collected testimonies from 40 local residents in Smethwick and Oldbury and wove them around scores of archive, be it newsreel or documentary footage, home video Super 8 or press clippings – anything I could lay my hands on. The great motivation? My hunger to see the point of origin.

In the post-war period, newcomers to the Black Country often arrived with no networks and a rose-tinted view of what the place might be. The thousands of South Asians who made this journey over the past 50 years are the basis of my practice as an artist and filmmaker. Largely illiterate and unskilled, and amid great personal upheaval, they forged bonds and communities that changed the face of the region, no less Britain. My father was one of them, arriving in 1964, age 14 and alone. Their stories remain largely untold.

I wanted my film to focus on the emotional realities of the outsider's home of the 1960s and 70s. Not unlike the epic narratives of American migration, many men were explorers in a visibly structured and developed new world. Some lived out a second adolescence, beginning

a long process of shifting identity. Later, when wives came to join them and their stability grew, all was good – on the surface at least. Yet behind this perception lay deep internal struggles for many; they saw themselves as second-class citizens in realities that sometimes outstripped their comprehension.

I found myself examining how such an alien culture evolved in a society with customs formed through centuries of attrition between the people and power. I searched for real stories about real people, lost to the vagaries of time. I learned how Birmid Foundry in Smethwick actively promoted moving to the Black Country from farms in the Punjab, with what can only be described as positive spin, and how the British built the Mangla Dam in Kashmir, displacing a largely impoverished community and offering them passports to Britain in return. So little thought was given by these industrialists to the future. One article in *The Times* remarked how ‘in practice, immigrants will remain at a substantial disadvantage because as a group they have less qualifications and less knowledge.’¹ A Pakistani psychiatrist Dr Farukh Hashmi wrote in the *Birmingham Post*, ‘Their adjustment is a partial one and their general attitude is that as long as they stay out of trouble and not do anything to jeopardize their jobs they will be left alone to mind their own business.’² He said the children of immigrants – the new ‘British’ – will have to tackle increasingly difficult problems of emotional adjustment and search for identity, faced with situations where their cultural and family loyalties will be challenged and taxed by their life in this community. I found his thoughts riveting in relation to the realities I incorporated into *Year Zero: Black Country*, as I resurrected some of these ‘situations’ for the screen.

From an airport many saw a plane for the first time and boarded it, to witness a nation where water ran from taps, streetlights kept the night alive and electricity was wired right into homes. It was a new world full of promise. I learned, as I might have expected, not all had the same reasons for making the journey. While most men came looking for a better life, some were running

away from problems. The men took backbreaking jobs in industrial foundries, some for the rest of their lives. Pubs became the new courtyard as everyday stories and information was shared. It was a second adolescence, full of bravado, where local heroes became the stuff of legend. As many were finding work, getting housing and creating a path, others were trying to exist outside the system, in some unfixed point between a settled migrant and opportunist maverick. It is these stories that are emphasised in my film.

By the early 70s many men like my father felt the pull of home and returned to their villages, full of triumph, to find a bride. Once in England the women took to the home, as was expected of them. My mother is a prime example: she came to the West as a teenage bride, dealing simultaneously with being foreign and being a wife. My voyages into this cultural archaeology led to thoughts on how a consciousness becomes marginalised by living such out-of-context lives. Time and again it’s a consciousness freer in a psychological webbing of India. My mother’s reports from the continent, whenever she visits, are free of physical problems. She often comments that there’s a joy in her step – she feels at home, a deep sense of belonging, the place before ‘here’. It’s what we all battle for isn’t it, a sense of belonging. And then, within weeks of her return, the same ailments appear, the same daily imprisonment masquerading as a life of total freedom.

Many women like my mother turned to God or anti-depressants to seek refuge while their husbands kept up their end of the bargain by providing for the home, at least financially. The poor adaptation to Britain was spotted as early as 1968 when Terence Blockside wrote in the *Birmingham Post*, ‘increasing numbers of girls suffer emotional disorders. An Indian immigrant I came into contact with refused to let his wife attend lessons to improve her English because he associated the language with “the immoralities of the country”.’³ Their own children were adapting to England more readily than they ever could, creating further dislocation, especially for the mothers.

In *The Times* it was written that ‘every day the circumstances of their home life and education are stunting the development of a great number of children’ and part of this stemmed from the situations of assimilation in the living room. In our neighborhood in West Bromwich, I had friends who originated from Baluchistan, Kashmir, Gujarat, Sylhet, the Punjab, Sri Lanka, and that’s just the South Asian diaspora. And within this are different castes and with differing perspectives of each other. The micro-politics of these aggregated communities was the daily norm, creating a certain cultural shorthand that people outside the Black Country find near impossible to interpret. In the output we witness through our media, these realities are largely invisible.

My friends and I existed between two worlds: the living room – an offshoot of rural Indian ways – and the outside world, which represented freedom from obligation. It’s not lost on me, or others I grew up with, that our TVs would play Indian programmes; that once in the living room, it’s a connection with the languages and behaviours of the home continent that win the ratings balance, the probing finger pushing the same three digit numbers on the remote control, somewhere near the 1000 mark. As was written in the *Birmingham Planet*, ‘They only go from school where they integrate into a home and a community which eats, behaves, and speaks as if it were still in its native land.’⁴ Many immigrant offspring felt intense pressure to be two things: loyal to the old world and fluent in the new, a pressure that occasionally burst at the seams, or led to a form of spiritual suicide. In an article in *The Telegraph* in March 1971 titled ‘Coloured Youth the Key to The Problem’, a journalist noted ‘coloured youth travel a distance that can only be measured by light years.’ Efforts to tear away from that influence are a constant assessment and reassessment. That statement may chime with some people who are reading this now!

The stories of the first South Asian arrivals to the Black Country are at the nub of the British immigrant experience. Yet they are somehow only kept

within families, not part of any meaningful national conversation. The first arrived are often poor at preserving their histories. They are pasts that are buried, often too full of complexity for partakers to rationalise. That’s all of us, by the way. Sometimes it’s easier to forget. Our futures are a long tunnel of antagonism – frowns and smiles that co-exist unreconciled. The present is full of stories that have a deliberately double-faced aspect. They will forever be the setting for my films.

Billy Dosanjh is a keen explorer of stories about second and first generation immigrant family life. He is from the Black Country and trained at the National Film and Television School. He won the Satyajit Ray award and was nominated for the Grierson Best Newcomer for his film *A Miracle in West Brom* (2010). Billy was selected for yearlong placement in the BBC’s Wonderland department. In 2014 he made the film *Year Zero: Black Country*, which excited the interest of BBC4.

Endnotes

- 1 ‘Race Myths Keep the Colour Issue Smouldering’, *The Times*, 16.4.68
- 2 ‘Immigrants do not want to Integrate’, *Birmingham Post*, 21.8.68
- 3 ‘Case of a Poor Little Rich Man’, *Birmingham Post*, 1968
- 4 ‘Where the Natives Are Outnumbered’, *Birmingham Planet*, 12.12.68



In His Element

Arise Mephistopheles, I command
Take form in here as I have bid
and though there's nair a rush in me
please get a move on, do it quick
So's I get um in time fer tea,
Turn base metal into treasure

And as I float this molten world
Will o' the wisp's a'dancing
I divine there in the swirl below:
three score draws this Saturday,
a pint or two tonight
domino boons a'rattlin
an arrers straight in flight

an thass
wat I've sowd my seven-t'fower fower
these last 25 years.

Dave Reeves

Sowd = sold
Fower = both four and for
Seven-t'fower = 7a.m. – 4p.m. shift

Dave Reeves is
a performer poet,
freereed player and
historian.

www.textician.co.uk



THE ENDURING SUCCESS OF STOURBRIDGE GLASS

Natasha George talks to four people with a connection to the Stourbridge Glass Quarter about this unique and historic area

FROM BOY TO MAN

Ian Dury has worked with glass all his adult life, starting as an apprentice glasscutter aged 15 at Stuart Crystal, Aberbargoed. He moved to Stourbridge in 1985 as Director of Stuart Crystal Retail and in 1990 founded Stourbridge Glass Engravers, now based at the Ruskin Glass Centre, where he is also Glass Heritage Officer at the Webb Corbett Visitor Centre.

NG: What changes have you noticed in the glass industry since you started working in glass?

ID: Obviously the reduction of the number of traditional glass manufacturing companies throughout the UK has been noticeable, since its peak in the mid 1980s, where in excess of 2,000 craftsmen and women worked in glass in Stourbridge alone.

The volume of imported glass coming into the country is

often blamed for the reduction of national glassmaking, which is true, but the main factor has to be that our tastes in glass purchases have changed, particularly with regard to the younger market; and the way crystal in particular was made did not lend itself to high volume production. Also, ever increasing cost of production has meant that we could not compete alongside imported glass, mainly from Europe.

NG: What do you think accounts for the continuing tradition of glassmaking in the area?

ID: Without doubt the heritage that has been established over 400 years of glassmaking in Stourbridge has meant that the area is still regarded as a centre of excellence for glassmaking worldwide.

This legacy has been handed down over many generations with many applied skills being passed

on, from window glass manufacturing, bottle making, lens production and cameo making to hand-cut lead crystal manufacturing and many other aspects of the glass trade. Also there is a local pride and tradition from within the community that is still enthusiastic to see its heritage of glassmaking continued.

NG: What should any visitor to the Stourbridge Glass Quarter make sure they see?

ID: There are so many places for visitors to learn about the glassmaking trade, past and present in Stourbridge.

The Ruskin Glass Centre, Glasshouse College and Webb Corbett Visitor Centre, all located in the former Webb Corbett factory. The site has a known history of glassmaking dating back over 300 years and currently two archaeological digs are under way that have exposed the foundations of two furnaces built in the 1600s and of two cones built in the 1800s. The Centre now has an organic café and 18 craft workshops. (www.ruskinglasscentre.co.uk)

The Red House Glass Cone is rich with glassmaking history, again dating back centuries and is associated with famous names in glassmaking such as Philip Pargeter, Daniel Hancox and Frederick Stuart. This is now the only intact glass cone left in the area where once there were many. (www.redhouseglasscone.co.uk)

Broadfield House Glass Museum (Kingswinford) has possibly the largest collection of glassware in the UK and displays the complete history of Stourbridge glass. There are also daily demonstrations. (www.glassmuseum.org.uk)

A VIEW FROM ABROAD

Marshall Hyde is an artist, curator and glassmaker from Corning New York. He has travelled from the US to attend four out of the past five Glass Festivals (and has volunteered at several).

NG: Corning has a great glassmaking tradition; how does Stourbridge compare?

MH: Glassmaking in Stourbridge dates to 1612, whereas glassmaking in Corning only began in 1868, but the reasons for its prospering in both places are similar: nearby coal, clay, and canals. Through the 19th century, Corning's glass industry and reputation grew, in large part due to skilled immigrant glassmakers from Ireland and England, with many of those coming from Stourbridge. At the turn of the century Stourbridge was especially well known for its cut cameo glass, and Corning was known as the 'Crystal City' for the brilliant-cut clear glass it produced.

NG: ... and are there any historical links?

MH: In 1903, Stourbridge's greatest contribution to glass in Corning came in the person of Frederick Carder. Carder had worked as a designer with several glass firms in Stourbridge until, at age 40, he emigrated to Corning and established the Steuben Glass Works, which became renowned for its unique glass colours and designs, rivalling Tiffany in acclaim. Carder lived to be just over 100, and worked until his last days designing, experimenting, and always pushing the possibilities of artistic glass.

Both of these great glass centres have lost the manufacturing that once established their reputations, but new generations of glassmakers are creating new recognition for both Stourbridge and Corning.

NG: As a visitor to the area, what strikes you about the Stourbridge Glass Quarter?

MH: My first visit to Stourbridge was in 2003, when I came to the UK to work with local glass artist Jacqueline Cooley on a large public glass commission in Wolverhampton. I saw the Ruskin Glass Centre, the Red House Cone, the International Glass Centre, and the Broadfield House Glass Museum for the first time,

and met many wonderful glassmakers. I could feel the long history of glassmaking here, linked to area names: Amblecote, Kingswinford, Brierley Hill. But I could also see the loss of that history in the great factories and glass training schools gone, and the skilled craftsmen retired or dying off.

Even with the losses, I am hopeful. The IGC has closed down, but part of its former glass programme has been absorbed by Dudley College. The nearby University of Wolverhampton is struggling to maintain enrolment, but continues to turn out talented glass artists as it has done for many years. Plowden & Thompson have sold their company, but under new owners continue to make a wide range of specialty glasses in their 18th century Dial Glassworks cone. The Broadfield House Glass Museum was threatened with closure in the economic downturn of the past several years, but following strong local and even international outcry, its important collections remain on view. The incubator studios at the Ruskin Centre are helping area glass artists establish their practices. Local artists and educators continue to organise glass exhibitions and events to promote the region's history and contemporary glassmakers.

Foremost among these is the International Festival of Glass. With the accompanying master classes, lectures, exhibits, and demonstrations, many visitors are made newly aware of the area's history, and its vital, living glass tradition. I have travelled from the US to attend four of the past five Festivals, and even worked as a volunteer; it is that good, and that important.

And the British Glass Biennale, which is an essential part of the IFG's activities, is a remarkable record of current developments in artistic glass in Great Britain.

NG: What's your favourite thing about Stourbridge glass?

MH: If I had to choose, it would be the people who love it, who study it, who continue to promote and teach and

make it, the artists who have welcomed and accepted me as their friend, who keep Stourbridge glass a vital, living, evolving thing that keeps me coming back and hoping for its next 400 years.

THE AUCTIONEER'S PERSPECTIVE

Will Farmer has been an auctioneer for 17 years and is a Director of Fieldings Auctioneers in Stourbridge, which he founded with Nick Davies in 2001. Will is an expert on the BBC Antiques Roadshow, mostly specialising in glass and he is also a graduate silversmith jeweller. He served on the jury of the British Glass Biennale exhibition in 2008 and has run a fundraising auction at each International Festival of Glass since it began in 2004.

NG: When you started your business in Stourbridge, did you have a particular knowledge or interest in glass?

WF: My knowledge of glass was restricted very much to 20th century. I knew my Lalique, my Orrefors and my Kosta, and in terms of Stourbridge I knew the big names. But to be honest, moving into this area almost 15 years ago now, my knowledge of regional and local manufacturing skyrocketed. People of this town and region have a huge pride in their glassmaking heritage and know exactly what they are talking about. You can't flannel; if you get it wrong they will put you right, but they will also educate you and share. The sheer volume of glass we handle (we sell more glass by far than any other UK auction house from 18th century to contemporary) meant I went on a very steep learning curve.

NG: What types of Stourbridge glass are collectors most interested in these days?

WF: Interest in Stourbridge glass is international, and it is all down to rarity and quality. The greatest and most sought after are late 19th century and early 20th century glass – the great Victorian and Edwardian periods – especially cameo glass from the likes of Thomas Webb



and unusual technical pieces from factories such as Stevens and Williams. However, in the last ten years there has been a massive upsurge of interest in interwar and post-war glass.

NG: What is that in Stourbridge terms?

WF: There are two distinctive threads. Thread one, and probably 90 per cent of what we see is traditional cut crystal: excellent quality with pinwheel stars, mitre cuts, plumes, goblets, decanters, table suites, all of that. Sadly that's got a tiny secondary value. The second thread is design-led cut and engraved glass from the interwar and post-war periods. The interwar period in particular has a large commercial following. A notable name interwar is Keith Murray working at Royal Brierley. A massive amount was coming out of Stuarts especially because they were responsible for the 1934 Harrods Exhibition and they employed the likes of Paul Nash, Dame Laura Knight and Eric Ravilious as designers. Post war, Webb Corbett were on top of their game; they really got it right in that era and invested in designers like Irene Stevens and David Queensbury.

NG: Where would you say Stourbridge glass fits in the lexicon of glass; who do they sit alongside?

WF: It depends what period you are looking at and what type of glass. In the post-war era, in terms of quality of design and manufacture, what Stourbridge was

turning out was comparable with what was coming out of Scandinavia. Stylistically they were quite different but there was a wonderful outpouring of beautiful designed crystal from both places.

NG: What do you know about the contemporary glass scene?

WF: My knowledge and awareness of the contemporary glass scene was really spearheaded by being introduced to the International Festival of Glass when it started in 2004. Watching the Festival and Biennale grow into an internationally recognised event, the thing that is abundantly clear is that the bed of experience, ability and creativity is phenomenal. My issue is that contemporary glass hits problems getting out to a wider audience. When the public find it they are absolutely bowled over – I've seen people walking around the Biennale exhibition for the first time and literally stopping in their tracks.

I've started building a small collection of contemporary glass. One of the first pieces I bought was from the Biennale in 2008; it was by a student, Steven Whitehill. I would love a piece by Bob Crooks. I love his work but I would want one of the huge multi-coloured swirly ones. The other person whose work I admire is Graham Muir, who makes the big waves out of glass.

NG: If someone were looking to start a collection of post-war Stourbridge glass on a limited budget what would you say to them?

WF: The first thing I would say is to look for the design-led work, but read first. Invest your initial money in books with images – don't go at it willy-nilly – look and look and look and look. That's what I did. I have just sold a Graham Sutherland Art and Industry conical bowl (which is in all the books and archives) for £580. The lady bought it at a car boot sale, and the seller said 'I think that's Whitefriars' and sold it to her for a tenner.

THE CONTEMPORARY GLASSMAKER'S VIEW

Robyn Smith was a theatre wardrobe assistant and dresser in the West End of London and has lived in Australia, New York, London, Dublin and Harrogate. She came to Stourbridge in 2004 to study glassmaking at the International Glass Centre, Dudley College and now makes large-scale installations out of glass.

NG: What inspired you about glass?

RS: When I was studying in Leeds I had made little glass lace curtains that had been turned into wall hangings, but I had always intended them to be proper life-size curtains hanging in a window, so when I saw the Biennale exhibition and started at IGC my long term plan was to make them to go in the next Biennale. After a lot of trial and error and head scratching I managed it two years later and they were exhibited at the Red House Glass Cone as part of the Collaborations exhibition. It was a site-specific exhibition and my curtains were awarded Most Creative Spatial Response. I then entered them into the 2008 Biennale where they won the People Prize, voted for by the visiting public.

NG: What next?

RS: The Red House Cone bought the curtains and they are now part of their collection. I was also invited to exhibit at the Korean Craft Biennale, and used the prize money to take a Silvia Levenson masterclass at Warm Glass in Bristol. All the students at Silvia's masterclass were women creating alone at home and using domestic symbolism in their work. We bonded and decided to put on an exhibition at the next Festival in 2010 at Broadfield House Glass Museum called 'Hi Honey I am Home'.

NG: Your next work was a pair of mirrored glass gates over two metres high! How did that happen?!

RS: The curtains were about my journey through illness and the past and loss and I wanted the gates to be

more hopeful and optimistic – about pushing forward into the future in a hopeful way. So the gates had to be life-size and open. I had many ways I was going to make them but I decided on mirror whilst on the Making Moves project with Craftspace, Birmingham.

NG: The gates were so huge, where are they now?

RS: They have been on quite a journey. They were first exhibited at the 2012 Biennale, they then spent some time on show at Moor Street Station, Birmingham. They were exhibited at Worcester Cathedral in the nave, which is where I think they looked best; they looked like they were made for the space as they disappeared into the cathedral they reflected. They are now in a local church waiting for Charles Saatchi or a rich Middle Eastern hotelier to buy them!

NG: What keeps you in Stourbridge?

RS: The local network of artists, craftspeople and organisations that help and inspire me with my art. I also love the fact that there are remnants of industrial architecture all around as well as being close to beautiful countryside. It's not always just about glass; there is a huge expertise here in all types of materials – metal workers, laser cutters, acrylic workings, laminating – they may not be used to art but they will point you somewhere if they can't do the job themselves. It's a base where you don't have to go anywhere because there is always a group of international artists who come over to study or to teach every two years to the Festival.

Natasha George came to Stourbridge over ten years ago to learn glassblowing at the International Glass Centre in Brierley Hill. She was joint director of the International Festival of Glass (which includes the British Glass Biennale) in 2010 and 2012.



THE EXTRAORDINARY ORDINARY – IN EVERYDAY PHOTOGRAPHS OF THE BLACK COUNTRY

Dr Peter Day, Senior Lecturer in Photography at The University of Wolverhampton considers the work of documentary photographers who have drawn inspiration from the Black Country

Image: Brian & Ross Cartwright, Griffin-Woodhouse Ltd, Cradley Heath, 2010 © Martin Parr / Magnum Photos. From Black Country Stories, commissioned and produced by Multistory.

‘Oddly enough, it is the minutiae of any one character’s day that we found hardest to capture; what people do when they are home, uninvolved in some structured social event; what they do in their kitchens, what they talk about over tea, or the slow round of daily tasks. Perhaps it is because what they are doing is so commonplace that they wonder why you’re shooting it, and thus try to put some other face on it, to match their own image of a movie.’

Mark McCarty, *The Principles of Visual Anthropology*.

The camera records a truth of sorts. It creates documents of societies, economies and individuals, stored in files and archives, which separate and determine what future generations will know and see of our history. When we say history we mean this current and shared moment: the ‘now’. The political history of now, where what we democratically record, archive and store defines us. Photographs are perceived as one of the most reliable and most truthful recordings of our culture, history and ourselves – the visual memory of our lives, where each image is a trace of our existence. If each picture is a story, then the accumulation of these pictures comes closer to the experience of memory. Since Kodak first created the simple camera in 1888, they reassured us that all we had to do was press the button and they would do the rest. Our time and our memories were safe; the democratic snapshot image was invented.

We take images because knowing who we were is an integral part of understanding who we are. We reminisce and become nostalgic about the past, yet the minutiae of the everyday and the ordinary is not deemed worthy of recording and it is these living details, such as work and labour, as a testimony to our or any photographic social history, which are lost and not recorded. Images on their own do not have meaning but what we chose to photograph for the family album or social archives, focused onto similar and familiar events – the wedding, the holiday and celebrations

including birthdays, graduation or retirement – becomes photographic norms, deviant truths. These events present themselves as different and unusual amongst the usual everyday. They rise up and it is through these we tell stories, choose to remember and it is by recording and collecting these images that we create meaning.

The lack of interest in collecting everyday, mainly amateur, images into coherent and meaningful social collections and archives has meant that much of this work has been left in the hands of documentary image makers. These documentary imagists focus onto serial groups of images or numbers of images where an overriding visual narrative is created or imposed. Documentary image makers choose subjects and topics that they feel will make interesting subject matter. Documentary records the edges of culture, drawing on the unusual, the quirky, the subject as the object in the photograph. These images are created through outsiders looking in and not by the communities themselves. Here, ordinary life recorded is often unrecognisable, focussed onto the extremes, as this reinforces the stereotype of ‘how the other half lives’ as impoverished, without or outside real culture. Documented by strangers, even our own culture can start to look strange and alien. These partial images provide the atmosphere – swirling mood music of land, city and its people: the harsh physicality of daily life and inhabitants.

In the Black Country a rich heritage of images that detail extraordinary moments of everyday life exists. The work of John Bulmer, Nick Hedges, Peter Donnelly and more recently Martin Parr have created a narrative and texture which describes the spaces and locations integral to the history of the everyday. It is this cultural legacy that describes our times and community; a Black Country perspective in images from which we create our stories, have consciousness, and to which we can return: our emotional landscape. We are attached to these emotive landscapes; their familiarity and spirituality is reassuring, so that a greater sense of whom we are and a sense of purpose and meaning emerges. Martin Parr's images show that individuals are not inseparable from this notion of physical life, that the identity of the people of the Black Country is a reflection and measure of its geography and culture. In *Brian Cartwright and his son Ross, Griffin-Woodhouse Ltd, Cradley Heath (2010)* (see page 36) an everyday situation and a banal working moment is given visual status and worth, through photographing it. Brian Cartwright and his son Ross, is a family image: father and son, a throwback perhaps, to when families were communities, lived and worked together through generations, looked out for each other. They took care of their own and the greater nationhood. The Union Flag, this small singular craft is quite literally a link in a greater chain of powerful interconnectivity of family and nation, father and son and community.

It is estimated that in 2014, 880 billion photographs will be taken. It remains to be seen how many will be deleted or maintain a right to be forgotten. However, digital technology signposts a new definition of the visual medium of photography beyond the singular image, into one archived on phones, tablets and printed into individual books. The power of bodies of images or archives is greater than the singular image. An archive or collection of images quite simply allows us to see how things stand in relation to one another, whilst technology redraws the boundaries of those images considered worthy or influential. That which has been previously overlooked, this self-representation in

moments of life, trauma or rupture, is now important and significant and photography is a key expressive tool to describe and define who we are and the lives we have lived. Modern technology opens up new possibilities in the describing and the definition of a region within photographic recording that is both individual and personal. The gatekeepers and archivists of this history are not curators, museum directors, ethnologists or anthropologists but individuals who push these records and images above the threshold of historical visibility. Each individual is a custodian of culture on the Web and social media networks.



Peter Donnelly © Simon Donnelly

Peter Donnelly's images taken in the Black Country in the 1970s are such a personal and relevant detail. They imbue the industrial landscape of the Black Country, with ethereal beauty. Here, in Donnelly's images, the harsh reality of waste and fumes experienced and seen in an industrialised landscape soften and are reclaimed by nature, or more simply light; an even greater reminder that the devastating powers of industry are temporary. Donnelly's is a unique portrait of industry and working lives, not romanticised, but where hidden beneath the aesthetic surface, as these images could be described as beautiful, is a deeper and more critical view.



© John Bulmer

that we want to look back and say 'we were happy.' In the vast number of these images the tectonic cultural shifts of illness, death, divorce and sadness have seemingly ceased to exist. Just our happy selves are captured. However, emotional narratives are emerging online, in diaries and visual stories captured in blogs of individuals who are transcending moments of profound times (such as illness and loss) in their lives through personal trauma and its representation. These profound changes in our ability to record, store and view images democratises us as custodians of living times, and as such we are discovering an ability to find images in the most obvious of events, moments and places and take ownership of these times. Roland Barthes in his book *Camera Lucida* describes how only a small number of images ever really impact on our psyche. However, the vastness and volume of digital imagery transfixes us; it is where both high art and low art, the significant and irrelevant, are culturally the same.

In John Bulmer's documentary recordings from the Black Country in 1961 the concentration is on the community, in images taken of its people and their

Over the last century we have taken photographs in increasingly greater and greater numbers, indeed vast quantities of ourselves in portraits and social times are recorded, the most recent phenomena being the 'selfie'. Our own recordings – snapshots – are populist but episodic, and saved for happy times. The visual search for who we are seems to suggest

homes. This work records the inconsequential moments of living and specifically the lives led in the communities of the Black Country, and by so doing builds a dramatic picture, not simply of the region but a social historical archive that is a testament to a time as much as it is a place. Bulmer's image (left), whilst typical, is a unique recording of a family: on the one hand a literal work of a domestic interior, on the other a work that is overwhelmingly imbued with feeling and compassion. The home depicted as functional and basic, the family's lack of space and literal 'on-top-of-each-other-ness', is a window into the soul of the house and living; a fixed moment of stability and togetherness. Here, from a modern perspective simply being together, sharing and co-habiting, sheds light on our increasing materiality and isolation.

The opportunity to describe the significance of the everyday and us as a significant and important part of visual history is now possible and practical. It is the banal and everyday lives of us, our ordinary selves and ourselves at work, to which we struggle to give significance and relevance in our own imagery. It is not that the recording of these moments should be the domain of specialist or professional photographers, but it is in the art of documenting (documentary) and prioritising the moments that these images occur as historically relevant, significant, important and worthy of remembering. Therefore much of our lives, the commonplace and everyday existences are invisible to history, except in these bodies of work.

Black Country Echoes has brought together collections of photographs by Peter Donnelly, John Bulmer and Nick Hedges, which document the Black Country during the 1970s – 80s. By highlighting the significance of these collections, we hope that they will become part of local public archives so that they can be appreciated by future generations.



Settle

As evening starts to settle like a comfy old bench
 Grey and coddling as the fires are stoked
 And bicycle bells tinkle like a sacred rite
 Over the ruts and click-clack of cobbles,

The argument of day softens to a twilight grumble
 And the hung parliament of smoke debates
 The intricacies of passageways and folds
 That origami the cartography of our lives.

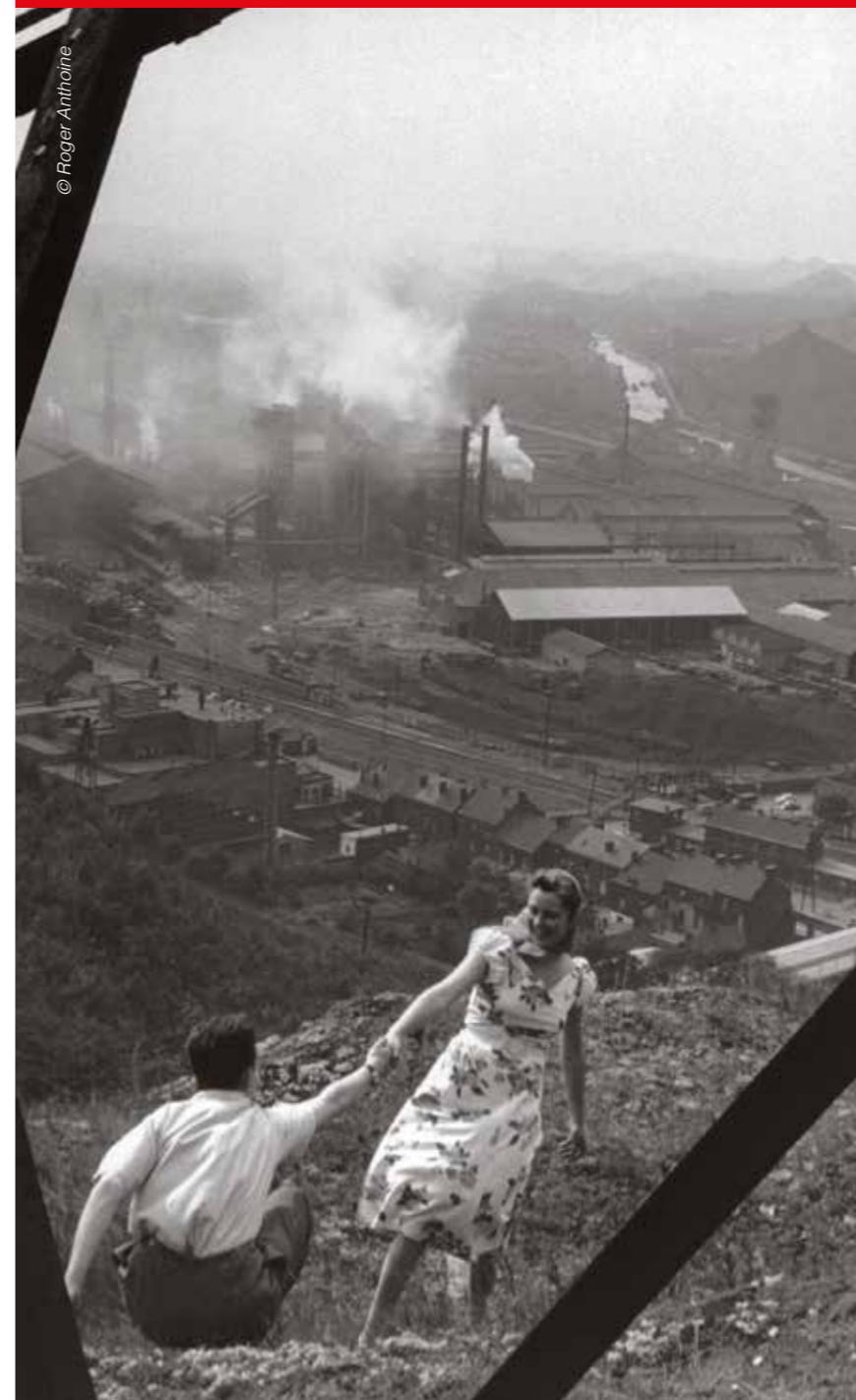
Tyres hiss, sheeding skins behind them, while
 Dynamos flicker half-hearted over setts.
 Kettles steam and trotters bubble,
 Lodestar in the pon of the encroaching night.

Silent the tide-less basin reflects, swallows secrets,
 Offers solace and a last resort.

Dave Reeves

Sheeding = shedding
Pon = pan

IMAGES OF CHARLEROI



Xavier Canonne, Director of the Museum of Photography, Charleroi, provides an insight into the rich photographic tradition of Belgium's Black Country – the Pays Noir

In 2010 the Museum of Photography of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation in Charleroi initiated a series of photographic commissions in the city of Charleroi, which it awarded to foreign photographers. Bernard Plossu, Dave Anderson, Jens Olof Lasthein and Claire Chevrier each immersed themselves in this city and their photographs became the focus of yearly exhibitions at the Museum of Photography as well as a publication.

Over the last five years, Charleroi (Belgium's third largest city in terms of population and the largest city in Wallonia) has become familiar with the scale of the task of changing the image of the city and reconstructing it in response to the new social and economic challenges in Wallonia. Capital of the Pays Noir (Black Country) and an industrial bastion, in the 19th century, Charleroi was one of the most prosperous cities in Europe – a financial power born from coal and steel. As with many such cities, from the 1970s

it started descending into a decline that grew more and more pronounced with successive crises and competition from foreign products. Residents gradually began to leave the city centre, either to settle in more 'bourgeois' neighbouring towns or to head to Brussels and its suburbs: in essence, this was a cultural and economic exodus. The loss of the population and the arrival of poor immigrants completed the process of impoverishment in this much-maligned city. Cited for its 'affairs', successive political scandals or for its crime, from the outside Charleroi is often perceived as the city of all evils and excesses. It serves as a foil for the north of the country as an example of 'bad Wallonia'.

In recent years, however, it seems that Charleroi has started to regain its confidence and raise its head. The establishment of new industries, a more proactive entrepreneurship, political practices leading to more sound financial and administrative management, the implementation of the country's second airport as well as the immense works, which for now disfigure this composite city, all give rise to the hope of a future economic and cultural recovery experienced by other post-industrial cities in Europe, France, Spain and the UK.

Established in 1987, the Museum of Photography, one of the main cultural actors in this city, proceeded to record the changes in the urban landscape with these photographic commissions. Though these were sometimes criticised – as some people felt that commissioning foreign photographers signified a disinterest in Belgian photographers – slowly, over time they became essential. They should now be viewed as representative of a city in the process of change. The recourse to foreign photographers was understandable because of the need for an outsider's perspective, without prejudice of any kind either emotionally-led or repulsing, as could be the case with Belgian photographers. Furthermore, the involvement of Charleroi itself as a subject in the works of these artists allowed it to be 'broadcast' further afield, spreading

outside the country and drawing attention to the special features of the city.

The collection at the Museum of Photography contains approximately 85,000 prints and three million negatives. Among these, numerous industrial archives testify to the rich history of Charleroi and its region. Whether these photographs had been commissioned by industrial employers or created by a photographer's deliberate desire for 'documentation', they are evidence that the city of Charleroi and its region have long been the subject of many depictions. They show the power of the industrial landscape contrasting with the more melancholy pastoral images; these are opposite poles in a setting where mines and steel had arisen amidst agricultural land.

Following on from the album engravings and lithographed plates, the photographs (often in large format) attempt to show the detail of the landscape, the chassis wheels and the high chimneys with bricks engulfed in their own smoke. These anonymous images from the last quarter of the 19th century – depicting the factories of Marcinelle-Couillet, Roux or Jumet, or those of Robert Melchers portraying the Falisolle collieries, or the photographs of Olivier Bévierre endeavouring to portray those of Farciennes, or the postcards presenting to the world the pits of Châtelineau, Gilly, Couillet or Ransart – are all evidence of a power forever conquered and of an inexhaustible soil, the first black gold of an industrial world.

The figure of the worker is not forgotten in these photographs. Groups of children – some very young – pose at the entrances of the workshops with their pickaxes, axes and oil lamps in front of them. The glassblowers and foundry workers from other groups comprise three generations. Other photographs, such as the amazing photomontages produced by Bévierre for Les Houillères Unies (The United Collieries) in 1892, seem to have been created for portraying the technical specifications of the industrial work. A very compelling

collection, they show the different levels of the mine as well as principal galleries with sized veins in detailed sectional planes.

These 'operas in smoke' attracted not only painters. Pictorialist photographers also used them as the subjects for some of their photography. Gustave Marissiaux endeavoured in particular to illustrate the industrial area of Liège. Misonne Leonard, a native of Gilly near Charleroi, after having long turned his back on the chassis wheels, preferring the light of the undergrowth and village inns, eventually surrendered to the poetry of a modern world where vapours and smoke replaced his beloved morning mists. It was Emile Chavepeyer who, in the 1930s, was among one of the first to succeed in combining the documentary and illustrative aspects in his photography, and to create a post-pictorial aesthetic. He exalted figures of the foundry and the blast furnace workers, those of the lock keepers and the bargemen, as well as those of the coal 'gatherers' climbing onto the slag heaps to pick up bits of forgotten coal. Alongside him, Roger Populaire became the bard of the banks of the Sambre, intent on depicting its people, their living conditions and the daily rituals.



© Claire Chevrier

In the 1950s, the photographs of Roger Anthoine and Hermann Chermanne were to continue this work on the city of Charleroi, on its industrial activity and its corporations. This photography ventured to portray its social organisation, the maternity hospitals, schools and the Université du Travail. It showed an increasingly rich country, seemingly recovered from the damage of war and from five years of occupation. It was also at this time that Charleroi was welcoming Italian immigrants at its station; they were arriving to work in the mines, filling in for the labour lost in the war. And so began the revival of the industrial machine.

Hope seemed to emanate from the images of the school playgrounds, universities and popular festivals, though there were dramas in those years of plentiful employment which do recall the plight of those who produced the wealth of Charleroi and its region. On the sunny morning of 8 August 1956, an explosion in the mine at the site of Bois du Cazier caused the deaths of 262 miners, most of whom were Italians. It was the largest mining disaster in Belgium and was covered by many photographers such as Camille Detraux and Raymond Paquay, two photographers from the Charleroi region. Their photographs recorded pictures of rescuers piling up bodies as well as poignant images of families massing up the gates during an unbearable wait. Photographers from France, Germany and even the United States had travelled to Marcinelle to report on the drama which would occupy Belgium daily over five long months.

If the words 'Pays Noir' (Black Country) ever meant anything, then it really reflected that tragic time where, like in a disaster novel, days oscillated between the ascent of the remains and the solemn funerals, between sadness and anger. Yet in this landscape of factories and chassis wheels, which can sometimes prove to be so hostile, Roger Anthoine took a magnificent photograph of a young couple on a slag heap (see page 41) – the image of happiness despite what life throws at us. Love does not need a paradise setting.

When photographing a disaster or an earthquake, as a record of a tragedy, we should not only focus on the grimness and sorrow.

Things then began to settle, but corroding away little by little. It is usually too late when we begin to notice these things: one store closing and then another, a factory shutting down, leaving its buildings to wither and blend in with the weeds. Signs were taken down, trains no longer stopped and neighbourhoods began to darken. Empty houses had blackened façades and previously lively streets seemed to fade away. The city was ageing and taking its residents with it in a cycle of depression.

For five years, with the help of EU funds, major works were being undertaken in Charleroi. The first results began to appear gradually, changing the face of a city which had seemed to be long forgotten. There has been no better time for the photographers of today to create the archive for tomorrow.

Bernard Plossua chooses to depict 'fleeting visions' of the city: taken in black and white and using disposable cameras, the photographs are taken from the wheel of a car on the ring road, the circular motorway surrounding the heart of the city. Through another angle, Claire Chevrier offers us the antithesis: photographing the city from its towers or its ring road with clinical discipline. She makes order out of chaos, defining its axes and the boundary of its frame, while associating it with other post-industrial cities of Europe through both a sociological and architectural approach. Meanwhile, Dave Anderson has opted for a stroll through the streets, passing by the residents – those who remained, those newly arrived, those who knew a prosperous city and those who could not choose to live elsewhere. He combines different origins and generations, details and landscapes. The eyes of this American are generous, reflecting empathy for a region that he found in many ways so close to those affected by the crisis in the United States. In Charleroi, Jens Olof Lasthein – with his panoramic views capturing scenes of spontaneous

encounters – discovered that he could follow a thread he has been tracing in recent years between the Black Sea and the White Sea; cities, sometimes far removed from the capitals, where people survive under conditions imposed on them by the new world economic order.

There are many different viewpoints. Even if they do not form the truth (as this does not exist in photography), they approach the reality of a city and of those who constitute the state generation after generation. It matters little that these photographs may have been perceived by some as pessimistic visions. This archive, both documentary as well as artistic in nature, will soon find its place in the history of the city. It will be a valuable source of future lessons for generations to come.



© Dave Anderson

© John Bulmer



Gaggia (Down the caff-ay)

Posh coffee. Frothy coffee.
The Gaggia steaming like a power press
Proper coffee this, proper coffee
Proper courting, civilised, no more monkey run
No more parading for prying eyes. This place is ours,
And the age-gap the ha-ha that marks the boundary.
No more clucking chicory syrup from a bottle,
No more Camp. Four walls now, furniture;
Goin' up in the world. Propper coffee.

Dave Reeves

Monkey Run = 'a parade of courting and hopeful single teenagers,' an area or street where young people would go out in their best clothes to try and attract a partner.



© Arthur Lockwood

Christmas Eve

Tonight the Black Country is tinselled by sleet falling on the little towns lit up in the darkness like constellations – the Pigeon, the Collier – and upon the shooting stars of boy racers who comet through the streets in white Novas. It's blowing in drifts from the pit banks, over the brown ribbon of the cut, over Beacon Hill, through the lap-loved chimneys of the factories. Sleet is tumbling into the lap of the plastercast Mary by the manger at St Jude's, her face gorgeous and naive as the last Bilston carnival queen. In the low-rise flats opposite the cemetery, Mrs Showell is turning on her fibre-optic tree and unfolding her ticket for the rollover lottery though we ay never 'ad a bit o luck in ower lives and upstairs in the box-rooms of a thousand semis hearts are stuttering and minds unravelling like unfinished knitting. And the sleet fattens and softens to snow, blanking the crowded rows of terraces and their tiny hankies of garden, white now, surrendering their birdfeeders and sandpits, the shed Mick built last Autumn when the factory clammed up. And the work's gone again and the old boys are up at dawn to clock-on nowhere except walk their dogs and sigh at the cars streaming to call centres and supermarkets because there ay nuthin in it that's mon's werk, really bab, there ay...



Peter Donnelly © Simon Donnelly

But it's coming down now, really coming over the stands at the Molineux, over Billy Wright kicking his dreams into the ring road and in the dark behind the mechanics the O'Feeney's boy props his BMX against the lock-ups and unzips to piss a flower into the snow well gi' me strength Lord, to turn the other cheek fer we'm the only ones half way decent round ere and the tower blocks are advent calendars, every curtain pulled to reveal a snow-blurred face. And it's Christmas soon, abide it or not, for now the pubs are illuminated pink and gold The Crooked House, Ma Pardoes, The Struggling Mon and snow is filling women's hair like blossom and someone is drunk already and throwing a punch and someone is jamming a key in a changed lock shouting for christ's sake, Myra, yo'll freeze me to jeth and a hundred new bikes are being wrapped in sheets and small pyjamas warmed on fireguards and children are saying one more minute, just one, Mom and the old girls are watching someone die on a soap and feeling every snow they've ever seen set in their bones. It's snowing on us all and I think of you, Eloise, down there in your terrace, feeding your baby or touching his hand to the snow and although we can't ever go back or be what we were I can tell you, honestly, I'd give up everything I've worked for or thought I wanted in this life, to be with you tonight.

Liz Berry

BLACK COUNTRY ECHOES:

PEOPLE | LANDSCAPE | INDUSTRY | ART

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