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The Durham Miners' Gala and the spirit of community

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Abstract Can industrial communities survive the loss of their industrial heritage? Can communities once thought to be in terminal decline reinvigorate themselves? Evidence from the Durham coalmining communities suggests that the answer to both questions is yes. This paper presents evidence from a study of the annual Durham Miners' Gala – the 'Big Meeting' – that reflects a revival of community vitality around the event. Together with an analysis of the *Gala* itself, the complex background to the resilience of the *mining communities* is explored.

Introduction

One of the assumptions of the late twentieth century was that there had been a death of solidarity in communities that had lost their industrial heritage (Crow, 2002). This was accompanied by the view that social exclusion from mainstream society, and particularly unemployment, had undermined social cohesion within marginalized communities. The policy agenda became dominated by the analysis and amelioration of social exclusion (Hills, le Grand and Piachaud, 2002; Littlewood *et al.*, 1999; Byrne, 1999; Madanipour, Cars and Allen, 1998; Levitas, 1998). In the North East of England, as in other areas, a regeneration policy that had largely been based on property refurbishment became concerned with issues of individual and community empowerment and capacity building (Cameron and Davoudi, 1998). However, rekindling social confidence and communal infrastructure has not proved easy particularly on the basis of place. As Crow points out 'there are good theoretical grounds for anticipating that place will be of declining significance as a basis for social solidarity' (2002, p. 38), yet in the North East there is an example of the resonance of community solidarity based on a shared industrial past.

Each year in Durham City, the Miners' Gala or 'Big Meeting' takes place (Armstrong and Croft, 1994). Traditionally the Gala has represented the spirit of the Durham mining communities, the link between industry,

community and union. This is despite the fact that many mining communities were quite literally pushed 'off the map' (Philo, 1991) in the post-war plans to designate certain Durham County communities as 'D' villages which would gradually be abandoned. Yet nearly a decade after the last pit in Durham closed, mining communities still parade behind their banners. This paper will look at the role of the Gala and examine the importance of community, heritage, pride and emotion in pulling together marginalized communities around this festival.

The Durham Miners' Gala: community beyond the pit

Since 1872, the highlight of the Durham mining communities' social calendar has been the Gala, with its open-air mix of colliery bands, banners, political speeches and fair held annually on the second Saturday in July. In 1919, 350 DMA lodges were represented in Durham in an era that saw 31 million tons of coal produced in the Durham coalfield. In 1952, 300,000 attended following the terrible Easington Disaster of 1951 in which dozens of men and boys were killed underground. At the Centenary in 1972, with thirty-six working collieries, thirty bands paraded and 140,000 attended. However, writing in 1974, against a background of job losses, a local author Sid Chaplin feared for a 'deep-set tragedy of the decline and fall of the banner, and with it a complex pattern of lodge and village life' (Moyes, 1974, p. 3).

When Wearmouth Colliery, the last mine of the once great Durham coalfield closed in the early 1990s, it could have been assumed that the influence of mining culture and politics in the region would decline and the famous Durham Miners' Gala would meet a similar fate. This had proved to be the case for other such events elsewhere; the Northumberland Miners' Picnic held a few days after the Gala had rapidly declined. Recording his family history in 1995, Mark Hudson reports that 'up to the 1960s Durham Big Meeting was bigger than Christmas . . . the most hardened capitalist could breathe the atmosphere of socialism, would become giddy drinking it from the very air' (1995, p. 122). He gives an estimate at its height of half a million people and 200 bands attending, declining to only a few thousand in the early 1990s when 'no-one in Horden gave a fuck about the Big Meeting any more' (Hudson, p. 299).

In 1993, around 8,000 turned up as the final pit closed and Redhills, the Durham Miners Association (DMA, part of the National Union of Mineworkers) headquarters was up for sale. Yet this was not the end. As a DMA official recalls, the union resolved that the Gala must not be allowed to die 'it mustn't, we need this political platform'. A call went out for financial support and other unions and local councils responded

positively. An article in *The Times* came to the attention of Michael Watts a New Zealand millionaire, who supported the Gala generously for six to seven years. From its low point the Gala recovered its momentum and in 2002 when the research discussed here was undertaken, there were estimates of 40–50,000 people, thirty bands and scores of banners in attendance, the biggest since 1960. In 2003 that estimate was raised to 60,000 (equivalent in size to the London Pride march). This resurgence is met with delight by Gala organizers who comment on the increasing interest in the mining heritage:

> There isn't a week that goes by without my being invited to the unveiling of a new memorial or a new banner, it is just simply astonishing. There is a real buzz, a real resurgence in interest in the past and in mining. The communities are ready to remember their past once again with pride. (DMA Gala Organizer)

The continued dynamism of the event is indicated by the presence of new banners representing pits that closed as long ago as the 1930s. This paper aims to explore why the Gala continues and indeed regenerated itself. The analysis is based upon historical and sociological literature, interviews with DMA officials, community leaders, development workers, participant observation and a rapid appraisal survey of Gala attendees at the Gala of 2002 (full details of this research will be published in Dodds, Mellor and Stephenson, forthcoming).

The big meeting

The overall organization for the day lies in the hands of the organizers, the Durham Miners Association which supports the Gala financially. Any changes in procedure (which are rare) are agreed well in advance with representatives of the communities themselves. Communities and bands must ask permission to join the procession. In recent years the union has opened the Gala up to other trade unions although the event continues to be dominated by mining banners and mining communities. In 2002, there was a substantial presence from the Fire Brigades Union in advance of their industrial action.

The Gala day begins early with bands, banners and their communities assembling at various points in the town. Slowly bands move off along a route that has remained unchanged for over 100 years. The separate points of the march combine into one procession as it passes under the balcony of the County Hotel where radical leaders stand as they have done since 1872, chosen by rank and file (now former) miners. In 2002 this included Michael Foot and Tony Benn. Beneath the County Hotel balcony each

band stops, turns its banner to face the balcony and plays two tunes, the first is a bright number as each lodge/community group waves to those standing on the balcony who wave back in acknowledgement. The second is a hymn-like lament such as 'Gresford', the miners' hymn, composed in 1936 by Robert Saint, a Hebburn miner. The mood becomes sombre: a moment of high emotion. Traditionally this is a moment to remember those who lost their lives mining. Then there is a roar from the crowd as the banner is turned and the band plays a march and goes off with a swagger as the next banner and band takes its place in the spotlight. This is an electrifying moment of ritual. As Moyes claimed, 'there is in every sensitive participant in a Big Meeting a realization of being part of something deeply moving, something continuous, steeped in the significance of recorded time'. He records one miner as saying: 'Aa divvent knaa what it is. Ye come here and get pushed about and squeezed in the crowds and yet aa wadn't miss it for worlds' (Moyes, 1974, p. 69).

The banners are unquestionably beautiful, 'land-sails' as the novelist Sid Chaplin described them (Moyes, p. 3). They display a political or ethical message, symbols of the mining or local community or the faces of political and trade union leaders. A general rule (which is disputed) is that no one appears on a banner in his or her lifetime but an exception has been made for Tony Benn, the former MP and Government Minister. The banners represent a considerable financial outlay from £24 in 1872 to £6000 by 2002. For Beynon and Austrin 'There are no union banners in the world which are the equal of those of the Durham miners. In their number, their colours, their design and their complexity of motif they are an astonishing testament of a vibrant political tradition' (1994, p. xvi).

Each year three lodges parade from the field to the Cathedral high on the hill for the emotionally charged Miners' Service, first held in 1896. Originally the three chosen were those who had had most men killed, but today the service is to dedicate new or replacement banners. In 2002 there were three new banners from the coastal collieries of Seaham alone. The enormous Cathedral is packed with those who come to see the banners being treated, as one former miner suggested, 'with the respect they deserve'.

For mining people, the Gala symbolizes identity and pride as it links the present with the past. When asked why they had attended the Gala in the rapid appraisal research, the majority of respondents mentioned tradition, their mining history, community and the fact that they had 'always come'. Very few had travelled alone and the vast majority had come in community and family groups. The Gala was, and is, a hugely enjoyable event, a festival of the communities. Despite the closure of the mines the festival continues with added importance. It is an opportunity to reclaim pride, heritage and community after a period of bereavement brought about by

pit closures and the failure of the 1984–5 strike. The mining communities also keenly recognize the importance of their traditional art forms, such as brass bands and banners, and the role they have played in pulling communities together, re-establishing pride in heritage and identity at a grass-roots level. Anthropological evidence points to the importance of festival, and in particular 'festival reclamation' in regaining or asserting communal pride (Magliocco, 2001). The continuation of the Gala also supports Herkommer and Koch's claim that where there is a common experience and familial and community links are strong, solidarity can be maintained even in difficult circumstances (1999, p. 107). Shared notions of heritage and identity can also motivate marginalized and disadvantaged groups into collective action. Hintjens notes that it was these concepts that acted as a catalyst for aboriginal peoples in their (so far successful) attempt to limit the expansion of uranium mining in Jabiluka (2000).

Regenerating the spirit of community

Celebratory events can certainly catalyse communities. The Yorkshire Dales town of Settle recovered from the devastation of the Foot and Mouth epidemic by quite literally 'putting out the flags'. As one resident put it 'It's a striking way for the community to say: We're back; we've recovered' (*Guardian*, 16 April 2003, p. 10). Something similar is stirring across the once great coalfields of Durham, with many of the mining communities dedicating new banners and putting up memorials to their mining past. Fund-raising and other activities linked to the mining heritage are providing a focus for networks of communication to be built and re-built following a period of decline and crisis. Coffee mornings, bring and buy events and Karaoke nights have brought networks within communities together to consider the development of new banners to be taken on Gala day so that the community 'can be seen' once again. Further research being carried out reveals a resilience and resurgence in mining communities whose origin has yet to be fully documented.

This resurgence is also not shared by all communities in Durham, even ex-mining communities. If, as Gilchrist suggests, strong communities are based on networks which develop where people feel that they are part of a web of diverse and inter-locking relationships then what is occurring in some former mining villages amounts to a great deal more than simply a knees up and a get-together (2000). These are the threads, which weave a community together: pride, identity and a common goal. While the original Gala was based upon the mining union's Lodge structure and it continues to be supported by the DMA, formal and informal community development activities are increasingly important. Interviews with commu-

nity leaders across the old Durham coalfield reveal the fervent activity throughout the year that goes into the preparation for the Gala day. Funds are raised through community activities such as coffee mornings, sponsorships, bring and buy sales, raffles, etc. These are headed up by deeply committed community activists, some of whom were originally union activists. However, a direct link to mining or the strike is not essential. Community development workers have also played a role in helping communities rediscover or build up organizational skills in order to support the process of fundraising and particularly the process of applying for funding. Other support has been for running formal meetings and promoting activities within the community.

However community development work in mining communities needs to be handled carefully particularly where there is a history of activism around the unity of community, employment and place (Francis, Grayson and Henderson, 2002). An example of innovative development work occurred in the Easington district of Durham where the local Council responded to the relatively isolated activities of people in the community with a coordinated development strategy. Towards the end of the 1990s, the Council re-oriented its regeneration strategy away from a primary focus on enterprise development to a more broad-based strategy that aimed to re-build the capacity and infrastructure of the community. Arts, sports, health and education were to be brought together, and a particular focus of this work lay in a cultural strategy around community arts that became a national pilot. Development workers and artists worked with local schools and the community, including work around banners. Regeneration partnerships in the local area when deciding priorities often put refurbishment of banners forward. As the Senior Development Officer points out, the emphasis in regeneration is now a 'Can Do' philosophy that aims to rebuild the community from the bottom up. Banner refurbishment and the pride of community that goes with it is part of this process.

The renewed interest in the mining heritage is also linked to current community concerns. An interesting example is the hamlet of Browney where the pit itself closed as long ago as 1938. Members of the community decided to relaunch their identity as a mining community around a new banner. A phone call was made to the DMA asking for permission to march in the Gala of 2002. The DMA responded if you have a banner you can march. Four thousand pounds were raised to make a loving recreation of the old banner (now in the Beamish museum) in silk even though its images were rather obscure for the 21st century. Making the new banner was connected with a contemporary campaign around the survival of the community's primary school where the caretaker was a member of the Banner Action Committee. The Parish Council was also supportive.

Members of the Browney School Parents Action Group paraded behind the banner in 2003 to protest at the possible closure of the school thereby linking existing community issues with the remembrance of the mining union heritage.

One of the reasons for the renewal of banners is that many of the original banners are too delicate to be paraded or have been lost or even passed into private hands. Ownership of the banners has become a matter of dispute; the view of community activists and the NUM is that all the banners should be in the hands of the union or the community. Many of the new banners are replicas but some have new images or slogans. The Seaham banner re-dedicated in 2002 proudly displayed its pit buildings with the legend 'Gone but not forgotten'. There are also some interesting political changes. The Blackhall Lodge has added the face of Tony Benn to Keir Hardie, Aneurin Bevan and miner's leader A. J. Cook and the reverse which previously celebrated 'Leisure through Modernisation' now shows a mixture of rural and seaside scenery with a pit far away on the skyline. The new slogan is 'Need before Greed'. However, the new Vane Tempest banner shows the famous view of Durham Cathedral from the river with no slogan apart from 'The Famous View'.

Despite the importance of contemporary community identity and activity it is important not to lose sight of the past. What remains at the heart of the Durham Miner's Gala is the history and organization of the miners themselves. Solidarity had to be created and sustained and it was the unions, the chapels and the cooperatives that built the original solidarity. New grass-roots groups based in economically disadvantaged communities are using the development of new banners and the Gala as a focus for regeneration with new sources of support from a range of agencies. A driving force in the development of these networks is an emotional link to the past. Communities are taking a pride in their past which is enabling them to heal the wounds of defeat and economic decline and begin to assess their future needs. As Robinson has argued 'Community is not an irrelevant legacy of 19th-century industrialism. Nor is it a romanticization of the past. Revived, it has to serve as the basis for regeneration and social inclusion' (2002, p. 332). In agreement with the views of Robinson, Hustedde and King (2002) and Hoggett and Miller (2000) we see emotional attachment and involvement in issues of heritage, both within communities and in the minds of DMA leaders as highly significant. In our survey of people's reasons for attending the Gala tradition, history and community emerge as strong sources of motivation.

The success of the Gala reflects a symbiotic relationship between the union and the community. The union has a continuing role in financing and organizing the Gala and it takes the political credit. At the same time

community groups appear very happy to connect their community identity with their mining history. This combination may be unique to county Durham, but hopefully the combination of pride in political and industrial history and current community concerns can rekindle similar levels of bottom-up collectivism elsewhere.

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