

HARDY TRAVELLING BRITAIN WEEK 8
(N-E)

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Tyneside and Cleveland

Journey Down the Tyne

I was told when I was in Newcastle that ordinary Geordies cannot always get on with people from further south, but can tolerate Liverpudlians, with whom they feel to have something of a natural affinity. This was put down to the fact that both Newcastle and Liverpool were once great ports that nurtured tough working-class communities, and have each endured long periods of economic decline. For this reason it was suggested the cities' football supporters tended not to fight one another when their respective teams clashed.

If these resemblances are true, and mean the two cities can be regarded as distant relations, then they might go some way to explaining something else that is a feature of them both – their chronic incidence of car theft. It was appropriate that I should be thinking about cars and car theft when I arrived in Newcastle. Though one of the advantages of travelling through densely-populated urban areas in England is the ease with which you can move around on public transport, because my destination when I came away from Burnley had been the north-east, I'd had almost a hundred miles of open country to cross; a significant chunk of it taking me straight through the heart of the Yorkshire Dales via Richmond, much of it devoid of human habitation, and much of it dripping wet when I saw it and obscured by a fog-bank. The use of public transport under

the circumstances would not have proved easy, so I'd changed to travelling in my own car. In addition to this, when I turned my attention toward Newcastle, joyriders, along with pit-bull terriers, were very much on the nation's lips. The Meadowell riots had only just happened, and Kenneth Baker was pushing through a number of parliamentary bills. When I had driven past Darlington on my way up to Tyneside, I had tuned into the local radio station, which was carrying as its main story the killing of a baby by joyriders in the Scotswood district of Newcastle. I was aware, too, that joyriding was supposed to be very much a social phenomenon of modern Tyneside, and if as a phenomenon in the media its appeal has receded somewhat today, whatever else one thought about Newcastle at that time, one associated it with car crime and joyriding. But what truly amazed me, in spite of all these negative preconceptions – no matter how much I knew exaggeration could prevent there being a sensible perspective placed on things and on Newcastle – was how quickly I came upon an incidence of car crime, how promptly the problem of car security raised itself, once I arrived in the city.

No sooner had I booked into the big Victorian hotel alongside Newcastle railway station, parked my car adjacent to the platforms round the back, and transported some of my baggage inside, than I went back out to fetch the rest and saw two policemen rushing between the cars. They ran across to another man who was waving at them several hundred yards from my vehicle, and together they all bent down and began examining a sports car. A Geordie business-type who had parked close enough to see what was happening told me that a couple of kids had just been attempting to steal a Golf GTI, but they had been disturbed and made their escape. I said I was amazed because I had just arrived in Newcastle for the first time and had not managed to take my coat off before car theft presented itself. It was highly likely it was pure coincidence I should see it, but it wasn't exactly doing my impression of the city much good. He laughed and welcomed me to the city of car crime, then immediately launched into an abusive tirade against the social deterioration affecting modern society. He thought joyriders, along with hardened criminals, should be rounded

up and exterminated. We lived in a society that was far too bloody liberal, he said. If the human body became diseased we took the necessary measures to remove whatever it was that was threatening the part of it that was still healthy and functioning normally. If a vicious dog stepped over the mark and savaged somebody, it was immediately destroyed. We didn't try and coerce it with do-gooding sentimentalist claptrap, as a way of hedging round whatever expediencies might need to be taken. We were pragmatic and simply got rid of it. And so we should be with crime, he said. It was a disease threatening the main body of society, and it had to be regarded as a gangrene that must be isolated and ruthlessly annihilated. Why should he pay his bloody taxes to keep the shit that was destroying society alive in prisons? What purpose did it serve? The government took his taxes to keep these people comfortable, and failed to address the problem fundamentally or take the necessary moral action, with the result he also had to spend thousands more pounds making his business premises secure. There were, he continued, certain human beings that resembled him and me in that they walked around on two legs and could articulate sounds in their throats, but there the resemblance ended. One had to regard them as one regarded dangerous animals in the wild. They did not conform to normal civilized values. They could not be reasoned with. And the social or economic causes for them being how they were were largely irrelevant. *Ipsa facto* these people were there, and they were not going to go away. This had to be accepted as the starting point for any subsequent action or discussion. I managed to splutter out that society's inability to face up to these things had probably got something to do with liberal society being too cowardly, and trying to appease its own miserable conscience by failing to face up to social truths and realities. It couldn't come to terms with the mental condition of many of the people perpetrating violent crime, and so it removed them from society and pushed them away out of sight instead, believing it was doing society a favour. Special prisons for violent offenders were a perfect example. He nodded but said that quarantining criminals in prison was no good. There was no soft option. Before long, unless we took a tough stance, the disease would have advanced so far it would

prove terminal. He demanded I look at Newcastle, at which a train across in the station emitted a tremendous burst of flatulence and rumbled frantically out of the platform, adding a note of farce to everything he had just said and enabling me to get away.

I was horrified to come across a complete stranger and plunge into a discussion of such gravity. What unnerved me about his frankness and his fascist demeanour, as we stood there in the damp darkness, was that he looked like every young school child's favourite uncle, and he was carrying a bunch of flowers. I suspect his anger was a gut reaction to his feeling vulnerable at having been so close to crime. Nevertheless, when I had carried all my belongings into the hotel, I took the precaution of stripping my vehicle of everything thievable, except the carpets and the vast accumulation of newspapers that always travels with me wherever I go, then, on the advice of the hotel receptionist, drove it down to an NCP car park at the opposite end of the station. It was a roofed compound manned twenty-four hours a day and protected by video surveillance cameras, and for a fairly stiff price your vehicle was secure overnight. Then I returned to my hotel and locked myself in my room until it was time to go down to dinner. When I did go down to dinner, I found myself leaving the television switched on, just in case.

The subject of Tyneside car crime did not finish there. My publisher had put me in touch with a producer at Tyne Tees Television. He is a producer of current affairs programmes, and so was able to show me something of the unofficial, as opposed to the marketed official, face of the Tyne. The following morning he picked me up in his car to take me on a sort of guided tour of the Tyne, and we had not been driving for more than fifteen minutes before we saw two young joyriders along the outskirts of Jarrow. A red sports car had come up close behind at great speed and lurched past us. Suddenly, it swerved across all three lanes on the carriageway at an angle of nearly ninety degrees, with the severity of the notorious handbrake turn. I had my window down and so heard the long slithering of tyres over the wet road surface as the vehicle corrected itself and screeched to a halt in a lay-by. Immediately, two animalistic, almost

Neanderthal-looking youths leapt out, left the doors wide open and the engine running, and fled as fast as they could across a scruffy patch of municipal grass. What had caused them to do this was the sight of a couple of council workers dressed in uniforms and luminescent-green vests who were supervising the installation of a new street lamp on a traffic island further along the road. From that distance they looked exactly like highway policemen. In these parts they have nicknamed this car thieving activity 'twocking' – Taking WithOut Consent. Ram-raiding was invented on Tyneside, and is one of the area's more dubious if notorious exports. So much for sentimental thoughts about the old Tyneside working class, I said, as violent images of riot police and news bulletins from South Africa, not to mention the sales figures of Catherine Cookson's novels, slid into my mind.

Whenever you visit a town or city you come away carrying an impression of the place environmentally, and afterwards find yourself making generalizations whereupon you search for nods of approval from people who know the place in question. My initial impression of Newcastle had not been good. I had arrived there when it was dark and had come close to witnessing crime. During that funny hour between six and seven in the evening when you are in a strange city, when I had potted out onto the streets to search for a local newspaper, the place had seemed black and somehow steaming and misty and rather murky. (This was due entirely, I should think, to the after-effects of the wet weather.) It was almost as though smoke were drifting from manhole-covers and drains throughout the city, as is supposed to be the case in downtown New York. Newcastle almost felt intimidating, and had done from the moment it materialized rather fortress-like, clinging to the face of, and piled upon, its hundred foot gorge when I first approached it by car in the gathering dusk late in the afternoon. The first most noticeable quality that struck me about the Tyne by daylight – apart from the splendour of Newcastle city centre, of which more later – was the enormous quantity of council estates. I do not mean high-rise blocks of flats or deck tenements. The area seemed to me to have comparatively few of these. I mean pre-war, and probably just post-war, semi-detached houses that became the

fashion when working-class slums were pulled down and communities began to be dispersed around the edges of towns and cities. I have never seen so many of these council houses as I did when I was shown Gateshead, Jarrow, Hebburn, South Shields, North Shields, and Wallsend that day. Soon after we crossed the magnificent Tyne Bridge (prototype for the Sydney Harbour Bridge in Australia) and headed away from Newcastle, we travelled along a wide dual carriageway and stared across an absolutely immense expanse of municipal rooftops, all of which were of that grey semi-detached mining community variety, all of which appeared identical, and all of which receded, row after furrowed row, to some unfathomable misty distance. The tremendous sense of perspective was emphasised because of the flatness of the landscape. Apparently what we were looking at was two different estates that blended together somewhere in the middle of the blur of chimney-pots, but it was impossible to decide where that middle was. I have never seen anything quite like it. These council estates were everywhere. They seemed to be separated only by expanses of waste ground covered in a parched straw-coloured grass, bisected by long-abandoned railway cuttings dotted with bent supermarket trolleys and rubbish, and joined together by a succession of dual carriageways and roundabouts teeming with articulated lorries and traffic. The impression left behind, though I am sure it was not entirely accurate and must have been heavily subjective because I was a casual visitor passing through, was of an immense bleakness; a vast working class landscape coloured buff-and-concrete, with hardly any patches of green, hardly any trees, entirely without character or charm, not a decent civic building in sight, and no real substance or much indication of life. It all looked so bland and so utterly functionless. Street after street of little semi-detached houses all exactly the same: a few figures crossing the roads carrying shopping bags as the side roads flickered past one by one: boarded-up windows: a few video shops, some washeterias and newsagents, doubtless struggling to survive. The calender suggested this was autumn in England. Although during my travels up to press I had only seen a limited indication visually that this was in fact true, even when I had passed through the damp and dismal Dales, the

theory was that trees were turning vigorous colours of yellow and brown and red throughout the land. There was supposed to be the exquisite smell of woodsmoke in the air. Young school children were being taken on their first nature rambles, were learning about the sycamore, the elm, the horse-chestnut, and pressing leaves flat in little paper folders. But the change of the seasons did not appear to be registering very eloquently here on this south bank of the Tyne. Nature's visual sonnet of the fall had been more or less banished from these dolescapes, except when it settled to lay waste to great patches of urban decay down along the waterfront, across which you half expected to see tumbleweed rolling and hear strong superlatives sounding.

The inspiration for this book came from J.B. Priestley's journey through England in the autumn of 1933. I did not retrace his original footsteps, did not visit the same factories or stand on the same street corners and compare the scenery then and now; and when I set off I was intending to cover more ground in the south of England than he did. Though his book describing an urban ride through England is the only one of its type that in my opinion is still worth reading, I wanted to avoid referring to it, except when I felt it was absolutely necessary. But when I was in Newcastle, it was impossible to avoid making comparisons between some of the things he saw and said, and some of the things I saw and thought, particularly when I was taken down the Tyne that overcast morning. I had left myself in the capable hands of my guide, but there was something of an unintended resemblance in the way I was driven down the Tyne in a saloon car by someone who was a native of the area, starting out along the old Quayside, and being shown all the towns, just as Priestley had been by his antiquarian bookseller friend. And as I passed those gigantic housing estates, it was impossible to avoid feeling that these environments were not places where people really lived, but places where they were stored. I do not know why I should have responded like this to these houses. They were supposed to be a major improvement over their dank Victorian forerunners. They had their bit of space between them. They had gardens and would have rooms of a reasonable size, and had long had kitchens and bathrooms. I spent some time in similar houses when I was young. We had some relatives

who lived on a council estate of this type. (They still do, and have since bought their house.) I could, if pushed, feel about them a certain amount of nostalgia, especially about the metal window frames to the little boxroom overlooking the garden at the back of the house where I occasionally used to stay. There was a seven- or eight-year waiting list for council houses in the industrial area where I lived when I was a teenager. Our name was at the end of that list, and a little postcard dropped through the letterbox one day, long after both my parents were dead, saying we could finally have one, by which time it no longer mattered. But I had never experienced municipal housing developments on anything approaching the scale I saw down the Tyne. Though they were strongly regimented, these houses were not crammed together, not tiny house after tiny house, not row after narrow row, as the nineteenth-century industrial housing had been back in East Lancashire. People could, in a modest kind of way, spread themselves out in these newer places. I can imagine how idealistic they must have appeared on those old black-and-white newsreels when they were built, with Standard English patronizingly informing us that Bob and Judy and Jackie and Dave, and little baby Nigel, and not forgetting dog Ted and cat Tiddles, were coming to make a new life for themselves as the great working-class exodus from slummy slumland began. There was plenty of daylight and air came into these new environments, filling the gaps between the gables, and I could see this was still the case that morning. There was no longer the eternal twilight of closely packed terraces spread beneath a pother of tepid industrial smog. Narrow streets – the ones being so artfully romanticized, now that they have gone – no longer became shallow brick canyons permanently divided down the middle of the road by straight shadows whenever the sun was in the sky. But in them something was also missing, for what heritage trail will these modern council estates follow? What nostalgia is flowering here?

When he described Gateshead, Priestley said it was nothing better than a huge dingy working-class dormitory. He said Jarrow was 'a barracks cynically put together so that shipbuilding workers could get some food and sleep between shifts'. The best thing they could have done with these places

was pull them down and start again. Well, they did that, because the Gateshead and the Jarrow he saw have almost completely disappeared. But I could not help feeling that the same description applied when I gazed across those immense carpets of misty municipal rooftops today. One vast dingy dormitory had simply been replaced by another, with a few basic amenities lifting them up a notch or two on the scale of civilized living. It must have been the overwhelming vastness of the scale, the dreary monotony of the overall urban scene, but you could not escape the powerful conviction that the people living there lacked a certain amount of individual liberty and direct control over their own lives. These were passive lives that were organized largely at the convenience of bureaucratic bodies and public institutions. That is the language the layout of the environment spoke. The army of unemployed among them provided economic stability and employment for the local unemployment industry. The populace was herded together, not living together. That is the crucial difference between these places and the modern residential housing estates to which they are related. These, too, can be dull and horribly monotonous, soulless and stifling. But there is about them some indivisible quality, a whiff of freedom in the air, something in the way curtains are hung in windows and cars are washed on drives, that says the owners are still in charge; that governments are still dependent upon their taxes and have an interest in attracting their votes; that these are the people that really matter. No doubt the flatness of tone I perceived to that urban wasteland outside Newcastle, the lack of colour, was emphasised by the ceiling of low cloud cover that was now hanging stubbornly over the country. But it was a flatness that persisted, and it was noticeable wherever we went, and it did not go away.

As it happened, we saw a bit of sun that morning after all, though it was the only time I saw decent sunlight when I was in Tyneside, or when I was in Cleveland further down the coast several days later. It managed to squeeze out for us from between the clouds, which parted to reveal a small patch of blue sky for about ten minutes, when we stopped and descended a flight of concrete steps at a promontory

of land beneath a railway bridge, somewhere near South Shields. There we looked solemnly down the great silent length of the Tyne in one direction, and toward the yawning expanse of the ocean beckoning in the other. Perhaps I was full of sentimental preconceptions as I stood there, but I could not help feeling that staring out at that glistening grey estuary was like looking across the silent aftermath of some great and recent battle. Again I thought back to Priestley standing by the edge of the Tyne, among the piles of coal dust and mud. He described the air of nearby Jarrow as being thick with the enforced idleness of poverty and misery. Some of that air is still there, stale with the stink of the decades. He mentioned, as a thousand guidebooks have mentioned, that the Venerable Bede was associated with this region. Though he did not go into detail, what was behind the depressed condition of the Jarrow he saw, and at the root afterwards of the hunger march to London by unemployed workers, was the closure of the Palmer Shipbuilding and Iron Company's works. Palmer's had launched their final ship in 1932, the year before Priestley was there, gone into liquidation the following year when Priestley made his journey through England, and had been sold to a controversial organization set up by the shipbuilding industry called the National Shipbuilders Security, and shut down completely, the year after that. The reason for the controversy surrounding the National Shipbuilders Security was that it bought up and deliberately closed down shipyards to reduce shipbuilding capacity, to leave some semblance of an industry that was lean and healthy. These were the 'surgical operations' Priestley mentioned in passing as he looked down at the river from Wallsend, near to a collection of broken-down ruins of working-men's allotments which are still there, clinging to the hillside above the Tyne, after all these years. It was a sort of asset-stripping operation, streamlining the industry in the way British Coal has been pruned back since the miners' strike, to make it ripe for privatization. The result, then as now, was a necessary pyramid of unemployed people, misery, and despair. The source of much loathing and suffering among Geordies sixty years ago was that the owners of the redundant shipyards were compensated with levies, whereas the yard

workers were thrown on the social scrapheap and received absolutely nothing. Like the abandoned yards they were left to rot. At least the look of decomposition visible on some of the ashen faces I saw milling around Tyneside had not quite progressed to the stage of rigor-mortis; probably because in the majority of places marginally improved state benefits, and a body of unemployed with relatively high standards and expectations from life, whatever its dire economic predicament, keeps resentment just below the necessary flashpoint. At least, that is the case at present.

In a way, the economic contraction Priestley saw had come full circle not long before I was on Tyneside, because it was difficult to avoid thinking about the industrial battle that had raged down there among the shipyards over more recent years. That piece of land upon which we were standing overlooking the river had been turned into a sort of viewing station, and to me it resembled a wretched little bandstand without a roof. There had been some attempt made to landscape it, and the path leading toward it. The viewing area had been surfaced with the proverbial herringbone-patterned brick pavements, but what it was there to view neither of us could really understand. Perhaps there was a greater philosophical meaning behind it than first met the eye, or maybe it was something to do with the Geordies' ironic sense of humour. I suspect it was meant to be a kind of pulpit so that people – not tourists: it could not possibly be meant for tourists – could overlook an imaginary past now gone, as we are busy overlooking what is dangerously close to becoming an imaginary England that has gone, instead of picturing the definitive England there might be. A rusty, overgrown railway siding came almost up to where we were standing, and finished suddenly behind a rather lethal-looking spiked metal fence. Directly beneath us, over a thick black stone retaining wall, were the smashed concrete foundations and rubble-strewn remnants of a shipyard, and some empty loading jetties or landing-slips bobbing with rubbish. Up river we could see a vestige of shipping and a tangle of tall cranes, now painted bright primary colours of blue and yellow, injecting a bit of life into the dreary desolation of the overall scene. The rest was silence, a tremendous all-consuming misty silence, except

for the incessant screeching of seagulls drifting high overhead.

There is still some shipbuilding along the Tyne, and it is important to remember this. There is also some vigorous and supportive voluntary community work going on in these places; and what I saw of the people when I was there again the following day suggests there is a sharp sense of humour coursing throughout these Tyneside towns, despite seemingly insurmountable odds for a growing percentage of their populations. But both the positive face of the region's old industries as they stand today, and the favourable qualities of the majority of its people, are overshadowed by the story of decline and the maelstrom of rising crime and social disintegration. The transition from an age when coal and traditional heavy-manufacturing industries totally dominated the area has, of course, been swift and decisive. As recently as the mid-1970s, coal, steel, and shipbuilding accounted for 35% of economic activity on Tyneside. That figure has now been reduced to a mere 3%. During the 1960s there were hundreds of coal pits in the area. Now there are about half a dozen, and the rumours are that in a few years' time there will probably be none at all. At the same time we are putting enormous amounts of money into the building of huge terminals at some of our ports to cope with a massive increase in cheap imported coal, despite many of our own seams remaining sound for decades to come and being one of our greatest national assets. And we have the audacity to call this sense. The story of Tyneside shipbuilding is the story of Britain's heavy industry you hear wherever you go – immense contraction, but profitability and stability for the fortunate few still in work, like the five-hundred lucky stevedores at Liverpool docks. I should add that I do not know what the economic or political answer for these butchered industrial heartlands is. I think the social malaise is becoming so deeply ingrained it would take generations to put things right. We might already have reached the point of no return, whereby a vast chunk of the British population will simply exist outside the workings of mainstream economic activity and never participate constructively in society again; dependent on a welfare industry supported by the taxes of those able to take part in the motions of a civilized lifestyle elsewhere. This, I repeat, as I shall repeat

it again throughout this book, is the terrifying danger which I believe as a comfortable proportion of society we ignore at our peril. And it is no excuse for a sort of social or intellectual moratorium to be imposed on any sensible discussion taking place about these devastated urban populations. Nor should it mean that to speak about these things sympathetically should have you denigrated as 'left-wing'. And why should drawing attention to these things have you habitually dismissed as being anti-your-own-country? These places are a miserable testimony to the failure of human beings to organize themselves sensibly, nothing more. Whatever your politics, Left or Right, blue, pink, or red, they are there and they cannot be ignored, for the sake of history and the truth.

Of course, the truth is that the vast majority of Tynesiders, like most of the British people, lead prosperous and civilized lives. The vast majority of Tynesiders are in work. Sound industry has been investing heavily in the area. New buildings have been going up. Waterside development has flourished. On another occasion I might book into a hotel in central Newcastle, and put myself at the disposal of somebody who shows me something different. There *is* another and different Tyneside, which I glimpsed briefly when I was there; one which results, apparently, in more Porsche motor cars being sold in Newcastle than anywhere else in the country; one where I was told that to attempt to reserve a table at short notice at the city's most expensive restaurant, at around £60 per head, would almost certainly reveal it to be fully booked. Later I was taken out to Ponteland, Newcastle's wealthiest suburb, where I met a very successful maker of video films for rock groups such as Simple Minds, Queen, and the guitarist Eric Clapton. This was no arrogant cigar-smoking prima donna of the kind I had occasionally seen swanning around Soho studios, like Vietnamese pot-bellied pigs, in London. This was a slim north-easterner born and bred; a man who looked more like a businessman than a creative film-maker; a man who despite lucrative offers from Europe and America to poach his talents, cannot leave Tyneside, and cherishes the moment when his aircraft touches down at Newcastle International Airport after the completion of another globe-trotting assignment; a man who started out

working in one of the area's coal mines as a teenager, to which he used to make a gruelling journey by bicycle and train from one side of the city to the other, to start work at six a.m. The sight of this man standing before a pair of French windows, pouring several whiskies from a crystal decanter in a room full of antique furniture looking onto a leaf-speckled lawn in a prosperous part of Newcastle, as an autumn afternoon gave way to dusk and we were all engulfed by shadows, was another symbolic snapshot, not only of the Tyneside we rarely hear about, but the north of England we rarely hear about.

But, though I am probably in danger of stirring up a small hornet's nest by focusing on it for the umpteenth time here, the depressed Tyne I have described so far is a reality. So are such places throughout the land. I think one has to acknowledge that this is so, and go and look at them and walk about them and talk to people living in them to keep a reasonable sense of perspective upon oneself, because a growing number of the inhabitants of these places are going to have an ever-increasing connection to the manner in which we prosperous fortunates conduct our own lives. To see what I mean, compare the yellow pages in major urban conurbations from ten years ago to those of today, and look at how security services have increased; or remember the stories that seem to be surfacing with increasing frequency about restaurants that are doing well because the patrons can see the car park from their tables. These are almost throwaway asides, but they are important because they reveal to us, very succinctly, the emerging pattern to society – a society that is continually looking back over its shoulder to protect what it owns. Directly linked to this new pattern are these dole places as they exist at this moment, as I saw them at the beginning of the 1990s, as is the penetrating silence hanging over so many of this country's smashed industrial areas. Standing beneath that railway bridge near South Shields my companion told me it was this silence down the Tyne that spoke historical volumes. For a few seconds he became impassioned. He said he had not been there for some time now. He was only a couple of years older than me, but shaking his head and motioning to the river he said that until comparatively recently, if we had been standing in the same position, we would never have heard the sound of

do it using the ferry, and here I met a couple of Tyneside characters. At first glance, when I walked the few hundred yards from the market square of a very busy South Shields down to the landing stage, when I saw the boat, I thought I was looking at the same fat little ferry boat from 1933. It was bulbous and dumpy and exuded character, and resembled a tug boat caricature culled from one of my son's story books. To my amazement, despite its antique appearance and its knobbly, many paint-layered quality, it had only been built about twenty years earlier, no doubt in one of the region's defunct shipyards. And it chugged and swung itself out onto the river and moved with what seemed to me to be a remarkable, almost unnatural agility for a boat.

I was standing on the upper deck, staring down at the sluggish grey water, staring downriver at the yellowing sky and the distant remnants of industrial clutter gathered along the waterfront, when a denimed Geordie young man standing near to me by the railings piped up and began saying how wet the water looked. We started talking and it turned out that, of all the things he could have been, he was an unemployed mortician from Gateshead. The way he put it was that he was one of the unfortunate mugs who had to clean people up when they had been shovelled up from the road after accidents before they were buried. 'Somebody has to bloody do ett,' he laughed. Unfortunately he was now on 'extended leave, sick pay courtesy of the bloody DHSS'. I wondered if he ever got blood under his fingernails, or if that pink tinge was grafted into his skin like a butcher's at the end of a day's work. He looked decidedly undernourished, almost emaciated. I used to think the observations made about the physical quality of different parts of the population under different economic circumstances were exaggerated, especially in these days of nutritious junk food and central heating and pop records for all. But I have been into enough of these areas to know that the stunted quality of this man's physical stock is sometimes a characteristic of the poorer parts of the population that have a history of malnourishment and bad diet, in the same way the tallness and the broadness of the English upper-middle-class is a noticeable quality of some of the examples of male human

stock you see circulating around Oxford or Cambridge. You see far too many of these shrivelled, pasty-faced young men in the dole areas for it to be anything but a symptom of their, or their parent's and grandparent's, social circumstances. Besides being extremely thin, this Geordie on the ferry was small, almost effeminately so. He must have had bad eyesight, too, because his eyes leered at me constantly from behind a pair of glasses that had such thick lenses they magnified them to enormous proportions, so that the corners disappeared off the edges of the frames. I was aware of a pair of enormous eyeballs waving around in front of me and looking up at me all the way across the river, flashing above a row of teeth that were stained with nicotine, and from between which issued a never-ending barrage of bad language, and a non-stop catalogue of coarse-grained wit. Waiting to meet him, as everybody filed off the boat at the opposite side of the river, was another youth who physically was the exact opposite of this mortician: he was tall, considerably rounded and overweight, and had a sort of acned scabby face, covered in sores. Because his legs were well endowed with flesh, they rubbed together above his knees constantly as he walked, so that there was a rhythmic swishing noise in the air as we moved away from the little landing stage. He had the coarsest, most aggressive Geordie accent I have yet heard. I was amazed — or 'ameerzed' as they would say round there — at how short his hair was. I had not shaved for two or three days, but the stubble on my chin was longer than the hair on this second youth's head, so that from a few feet away you were aware only of a sort of pinkish-grey stain on his scalp. He too was on 'extended sick leave courtesy of the bloody DHSS'. Together these two young men were going to get drunk in one of the pubs in North Shields, and thus pass another aimless afternoon. The large youth was told that I was there because I was writing a book. 'Ay mon, an' I hope yer goanna write about all these f—— yuppy bastards that's movin' into the careea,' he shouted. His words came out like bullets from a machine-gun, and he laughed to punctuate his own wit. As he did so he pointed to the top of the hill, where there were some new waterside-type apartments under construction that I had seen the previous afternoon, across the road from the riotous Meadowell estate,

itself about five minutes' walk from where we were standing, and which in those parts is known as The Ridges. (Originally, it was going to be arranged for me to talk to some youths from the Meadowell estate, but I had decided at the last minute this was too obvious.) The word 'bastard' is an obligatory suffix to the rhythm of much ordinary Geordie speech. No other regional accent pronounces it quite as menacingly or as forcefully (or as humorously), where the first vowel is lengthened to about half a dozen times its proper length.

Walking with them both up a steep grubby back street into the centre of North Shields, the overweight youth lagging behind and forever gasping to us two 'baaastards' to hang on, I was struck by the ease with which you can get into conversation with the more robust element of the working class. What is especially noticeable is the way they are less squeamish about touching or being touched. They are constantly slapping you on the back and thumping your arm to make a point. You are, in fact, not unnerved by close physical contact with such people in the same way you might be with middle class people, for working class expression is almost wholly physical in outlook anyway. It is the intimacy of the physical contact that relates to the intimacy of their communities, such as I had noticed in that café in Blackburn. While we were still on the ferry the first Geordie youth had immediately shaken my hand when we had told each other our names. For a working-class male to shake a complete stranger by the hand in this way is a sign of friendship and an indication that masculine territory is not being defended, and that the conversation can continue quite freely. Educated middle-class men would find it difficult to get into conversation with each other under similar circumstances so spontaneously, probably because they would be on their guard due to trying to judge one another's intellectual or emotional credibility, and striving, as always, not to reveal their true feelings. You might even wonder if there was a seedy sexual motive behind a forthright public approach, such as I experienced from that Geordie, from a middle-class man. And if a middle-class man were to grip your hand after only a couple of minutes as a gesture of friendship, you would begin to feel very uneasy indeed. Behind the gutsy bravado and boisterous

bad language of the working-class male that will suddenly stand a stranger a drink there is usually humour and a no-nonsense genuine honesty that is sometimes so sincere it is embarrassing. This has sometimes struck me so powerfully I have thought afterwards that those educated persons, who squirm at the uncouthness and directness of working-class expression, might be inadvertently reacting against the controlled precociousness a substantial portion of their own class takes for granted as necessary to normal social behaviour.

This much admitted, I cannot deny that as we made our way up that quiet back street it was to the forefront of my mind that I was carrying two-thousand pounds worth of camera equipment in my rucksack, and if the previous fifteen minutes' conversation had been nothing but elaborate play-acting, and I had been selected on the ferry to be mugged, if they had chosen to attack me I would have stood no chance. I was startled at how quickly everyone who had stepped off the ferry with us appeared to have simply vanished into thin air. There was an uneasy moment when we passed behind a couple of parked removal lorries when the two youths went very quiet while we were out of sight of any windows, and my hands and body were tensed. It is appalling that I should have been thinking these things, and that I should put them down on paper now, but that is the kind of social atmosphere under which we are all beginning to live, and that is why I think it is worth recording it. You expect sincerity to be bogus and manipulative. You half expect friendly strangers to wallop you over the head as soon as you are out of sight round a corner in a rough working class district because you know these things actually happen. While it is certainly no suburb of Kensington, the South Shields we had left behind across the river has long had a more substantial middle class community. Property values there have always remained on an upward curve. When I was there I saw schoolboys wearing smart uniforms, a fair quantity of trees, and the first Christmas decorations slung between buildings I had seen in England so far. (Binns the department store presenting the first Christmas window display I had seen.) The gents' toilets in the market square at South Shields had potted geraniums arranged above the cubicles, even if thinking about this distracted me enough

so that I almost slipped flat on my back when I skated across a disgusting crustacea of slimy pigeon droppings, on my way down to board the ferry.

North Shields by contrast felt run-down, hence my smouldering feelings of unease. The dim damp side streets I passed through with these two youths did not suggest the populace might possess the frailty and innocence of the inhabitants of an undiscovered South Sea island. There was a sort of starkness to the place, ingrained into the very make up of the old bricks and mortar, and of the dusty windows of empty or boarded-up shops. To our right was a row of completely derelict Victorian buildings outlined on a hill, devoid of roof slates. And in between my walking up that street and finding my way to the Metro station at the top I passed close to only four more human beings, who were not exactly advertisements for sunshine-and-breakfast-cereal cosy suburban living. The first was a very old lady staggering drunkenly round a corner muttering to herself. She looked like something from the 1930s, and I do not exaggerate when I say that. She had a witch's face, with a turned up hairy chin, emaciated hands, thick stockings gathered round her ankles, and – something I do not think I have seen before in my life – she was actually wearing a shawl, or some kind of hood. The next person I saw was a small old man with an ear that was either deformed or missing. And finally, two tattooed youths, again with five o'clock shadows for haircuts, who stiffened as they nearly walked into me from round a corner, who had faces carved from granite and some of the most fearsome expressions I have come across. Once again, I was probably in the wrong place at the wrong moment and forming inaccurate impressions for which I should be wholeheartedly apologizing to the north-east. But if the things I saw down the Tyne were only the things I wanted to see, or they presented themselves purely by coincidence, then there had certainly been a number of strange coincidences since I had arrived in Newcastle a few days earlier.

Fortunately, those Geordie youths did not attack me, and their warmth and openness as we parted made me feel ashamed for thinking that they might have done. They wanted me to join them for a drink, but I declined because the last time I did such

a thing, years ago on a train with a gang of football supporters, on the way back from Skegness, I ended up severely inebriated. We shook hands again and made our fairwells in the bitter cold at the top of that street, stepping stupidly around several piles of dog-dirt smeared disgustingly across the pavement. These were rough streets that not only had the sharp wind of impending winter blowing along them, but the cold gust of genuine poverty. Those youths knew better than I did that they did not have much of a future to look forward to, yet they appeared still able to go out and get plastered and make the best of a bad job. (Perhaps somebody somewhere has calculated that ability very astutely.) Contrary to popular belief, not all unemployed young men are criminals in the making, though how long that will remain so I would not be prepared to say. Together these Tyneside young men slapped me on the back and were gone to some smoky North Shields pub. As I crossed the road to make my way up to the station, they shouted that I must go back there and look them up sometime. Though I made copious notes about them when I returned to my hotel room that evening, notes to which I am referring now, I forgot the most important detail of all, for today I cannot even remember their names.

The Tyne and Wear Metro is the jewel in Newcastle's crown. It has only been running since 1980, but it was a pleasure to use it. I feel I cannot praise it enough. Using a modern rapid-transit system such as this raises the spirits enormously, as had the sight of the new tram system being installed filled the air with optimism back in Manchester. These things bind cities together, and their more widespread introduction seems such elementary common sense it is remarkable that so few of our major conurbations possess them already. The only drawback to the system operating on Tyneside is that nobody checked the tickets. Every time I used the trains, I did not have to present my ticket to a collector at a barrier. I could have travelled free on every occasion and nobody would have been the wiser.

Nevertheless, the trains running round Tyneside, and I used a reasonable number, and peered in through the windows of several that were stationary in sidings, were astonishingly and impeccably clean. I used them to reach South Shields, as I have

already described, and when I left those youths in North Shields, travelled from there in a circuitous route through Tynemouth and Whitley Bay, round through Gosforth back into the centre of Newcastle. None of the trains had been vandalized. There was no graffiti, and positively no litter. The underground stations in the centre of the city, though they had light-coloured walls, were free from graffiti too. They were as sparkling as an airport terminal. There was an air of cleanliness and crisp efficiency to the running of the whole operation that in my opinion left the London Underground standing. Admittedly, the further away from the city you go, the more graffiti does begin to become a natural part of the station scenery passing outside the windows. But you would think that in densely-packed urban landscapes such as those to be found on the north and south banks of the Tyne, that in places such as Jarrow and Hebburn with continuous histories of mass unemployment, the stations and trains would have been reduced to smithereens long ago.

There is another jewel in Newcastle's crown, and that is the very central part of the city. Anyone who thinks Newcastle is merely another north country dump should go and stand in front of Grey's Monument and look down Grainger Street, and also down Grey Street, where it blends into Dean Street and falls gracefully toward the railway arch, down toward the Bavarian-influenced Quayside. If you stand in front of Grey's Monument, which rather resembles Nelson's Column and celebrates Charles Earl Grey, who was behind political freedom being granted to Newcastle by the Reform Bill of 1832, and look down the length of Grainger Street toward the Central Station at the bottom, you see something I know of no other major city in England possessing today. And that is wide city centre thoroughfares fronted by solid Victorian architecture that retain a completely nineteenth-century scale. There is not a single modern office building rising above the roofline of Grainger Street breaking the view anywhere along its length. The entire street is three and four storeys in height from one end to the other – a distance of perhaps half a mile – and I spotted only one new building that had been slipped furtively between the others, about half way down. Turn ninety-degrees to your left from looking down Grainger Street, look down Grey

Street, and you see an abundance of classical architecture put up by banks, building societies, and insurance companies, curving majestically away, again completely unbroken. There is an almost overpowering feeling of homogeneity to these streets in Newcastle, which were influenced by parts of Edinburgh in the way they were planned and laid out, and some of Nash's work in London. How they have remained intact on such a scale amidst decades of architectural butchery and fashionable banality is quite remarkable. Over thirty years ago, Ian Nairn said that too few people knew about the city of Newcastle, which had the ability to stop you dead in the street. That remains so today. To my mind these central streets of Newcastle constitute one of the finest civic panoramas anywhere in provincial England, and it only amazes me to think that they are not more widely publicized, if one considers the present climate. The story is not quite so good if you look behind Grey's Monument, and it is a pity the city council does not make a more determined effort to remove some of the appalling modern and rather scruffy shop frontages. Nevertheless, to walk from the impressive arched portico of the railway station at the foot of the city centre, echoing atmospherically to announcements and the roaring of diesel engines; to cross into Grainger Street and walk up to Grey's Monument at the top, and perhaps wander through the lively covered Grainger Market, is a satisfying experience. To turn right down Grey Street, to pass through one of the magnificent restored ceramic arcades, is fascinating. To step across into Dean Street, past a non-stop succession of smooth classical frontages and bold corinthian columns rearing eloquently behind a perspective of reproduction gas lamps, is enormously uplifting. To continue down beneath the railway bridge, where the road suddenly steepens to plunge beneath the green arm of the Tyne Bridge, slicing through the sky above a jumble of medieval roof tops, and to come finally to the waterfront and glance across from the railings to the old Baltic Flour Mill at the other side of the river, is to realize you have just conducted one of the great city walks in Britain, if not Europe.

It seemed fitting as a final glimpse of Newcastle, and a pleasant antidote to some of the less savoury aspects of Tyneside

I had experienced elsewhere, to come away stimulated by efficient public transport, and the realization that Newcastle is one of those cities to which you have simply got to go back.

Middlesbrough

On another day being ferociously lashed by rain I drove away from Newcastle in a southerly direction through Gateshead, along more wet and streaming dual carriageways, until I reached Sunderland. Sunderland is another former prominent shipbuilding centre that has recently endured chronic industrial decline. The part of it I stopped at briefly that morning appeared to be comprised along the waterfront of derelict industrial reclamation schemes and not a great deal more. There was a horrible air of melancholy hanging over the empty side streets just there, that nauseating feeling again that you are witnessing the aftermath to something. The bits of remaining nineteenth-century architecture that were scattered around were being pounded relentlessly by the rain, against a backdrop of what resembled enormous metal aircraft hangars. One of these sad remnants was an old brick railway viaduct that suddenly finished half way across the river and was visible some miles in the distance before you reached the town. No doubt there is a small engraved plaque somewhere telling you where the rest of it used to go. Nearby was a sign saying VERY DANGEROUS DOGS. It was so deserted, Sunderland might have been on holiday, though it wasn't because this was a weekday morning. The detail that sticks most strongly in my mind as I drove through the outskirts, because of its contrast against the air of decay, is the sight of rows of multi-coloured bunting flapping madly in the gales above the wet forecourts of new car showrooms. There is, I believe, still a small amount of shipbuilding carried out there – inside those huge corrugated hangars – though to stare across the wide emptiness of the grey and thrashing Wear that I crossed, you would not believe it for a single moment.

This whole region, from the southern part of Tyneside

downwards, used to be a heavy coal mining area. I had never been to this part of the country before, so I spent most of that day exploring it and drove through a bland and uneventful Wearside and County Durham landscape, criss-crossing slowly from one industrial town to the next, in the general direction of Middlesbrough. I looked at the unusual colliery town of Seaham clinging to the coastline down toward Hartlepool, a place I had wanted to visit for many years, but which was the usual anticlimactic disappointment. I looked at the smaller colliery village of Easington, and at the abysmal prefabricated newtowns of Washington and Peterlee; the former being comprised chiefly of modern carriageways and roundabouts and divided into numbered districts rather than named suburbs, and with a sign telling you, inevitably, how to get to a pit museum and to the Old Hall. I also looked at Shotton, where the legends have it there was once a slag heap as big as a mountain, but where there are now some straggly lengths of housing and a suspiciously undulating, rather unnatural-looking bright-green field, where the man-mountain must once have risen but where I think there is still a mine. Throughout all this the rain never stopped. From the outskirts, Middlesbrough contrived to suggest that it might not be a normal town populated by people, with car parks, nursery schools, houses and televisions, but might actually be one enormous oil refinery. This was the huge ICI plant out at Billingham, and it had about it the air of one of those mysterious government installations that were home to unpleasant goings-on in the old *Quatermass* films. Though the refinery dominates the town, and is a tangle of silver-plated domes and catwalks filling the sky at the end of some of Middlesbrough's central streets, Billingham is technically across the river, and is actually a part of Stockton-on-Tees.

I had arranged to stay with some friends of a friend at the charming village of Great Ayton, a few miles outside Middlesbrough. Their home is several cottages that have been combined to make a single large residence. It was a fascinating den of slightly uneven floors, stripped pine, low ceilings, ticking clocks, decent antiques, piles of grated cheese sitting on chopping boards, steamy windows with rain drumming against the

glass late at night, and superbly-crafted traditional bespoke furniture. Great Ayton is located in pleasant countryside, vigorously marketed as being associated with the life and times of Captain Cook. Cook's mother is buried in the church yard. The village is watched over by an unusual hill called Roseberry Topping that resembles a small inactive volcano and is visible for miles around. It is one of those places with a manicured green, a small private school established in an old gentleman's residence, large Japanese jeeps parked in effective positions outside rows of lamplit windows, and its little banks and building societies are housed in converted cottages. There is an antiquarian bookshop, where I at last picked up an original copy of Priestley's autobiographical aside *Margin Released*. And running through the centre is a rushing stream populated by constantly-quacking ducks. During my first evening there I walked round the village amidst cascades of fluttering leaves and to the sound of howling winds, and down one isolated lane saw a man smiling to himself, his eyes closed, gently playing a piano through a lighted cottage window. Great Ayton seemed to me then to be the quintessential village England on a wet late autumn evening, the secret place where nearly all English people dream of settling down. It formed the ideal setting from which to conduct operations in Cleveland over the next few days, for, having found myself drawn into a contemplation of the Tyneside dolescapes back in Newcastle, I was determined this time to emphasise some aspect of Middlesbrough that was more positive. At any rate, that was my intention to begin with.

As is fairly widely known, Middlesbrough was the fastest-growing industrial town in the country during the first half of the nineteenth century, concentrating chiefly on the manufacture of iron and steel, and latterly shipbuilding. The fact that it is a fairly new town is obvious when you spend an hour walking round it. It has little character and no charm. It has about it something of the air of a frontier post. The only decent civic building that I saw when I was there was the town hall. Unusually, it was built from stone (Middlesbrough is mostly built from brick), and on a smaller scale resembled the Gothic town hall I was to see the following week in

Bradford. Like Newcastle, Middlesbrough suffered badly when traditional manufacturing industries contracted over recent years, but unlike Newcastle it did not, and does not, have a very substantial middle-class element mitigating the air of decline as sharply, once you are milling with the crowds in the central part of the town. Like Burnley it is much more obviously a working-class town. Like Burnley and some of the other textile towns further down country, Middlesbrough was one of those working places that had most of its economic eggs sitting in a single industrial basket, with the result that when decline did come it was hit, and hit hard. Consequently, it has chronic rates of unemployment of some 20%; a figure that will almost certainly have increased since I was there. That means, I suppose, that a fifth of the population is out of work, though it might mean a fifth of the working population. (It also means that four-fifths of the population are *in work*.) Among men unemployment stands at some 27%. Incomes in the town are generally low. There is a widespread number of people living on housing benefits and income support, with a large quantity of children receiving free school meals; and there are the usual high rates of mortality associated with poverty, and the obligatory high crime figures. The town's political complexion is so left-wing it is often referred to jokingly as East Moscow, or I dare say it was until the Berlin Wall came down. Despite all this, there is a massive industrial and commercial regeneration programme under way on Teesside, an area made up of the boroughs of nearby Stockton-on-Tees – a brief examination of which during one of the most torrential downpours I have ever witnessed suggested it had clearly seen better days – Hartlepool, Langbaugh-on-Tees and, of course, Middlesbrough. The usual types of leisure, retail, and marina housing schemes are being built across the area, along with a quantity of impressive environmental initiatives, including the construction of a major new barrage across the Tees. These are being funded and overseen by the Teesside Development Corporation, a regional development organization of the kind operating in all the major industrial conurbations I had visited already. It was also said to me that Middlesbrough came out on top as offering a good standard of amenities according to

a recent survey of its population. This should be taken into account when considering my casual observations as a passer-through.

To try and manoeuvre myself away from negative subject matter, I got in touch with the local Enterprise Support Programme (ESP) and went to have a look at one of their new business centres. I wanted to see how subsidized new businesses were starting up in Middlesbrough, what the success rates were, and what type of work was being done. I suppose I imagined a new building somewhere, perhaps on an industrial estate close to the centre of the town, with tinted-glass windows and an abundance of flower beds and trilling telephones. As it happened, the complex I visited was situated in the centre of a district called St Hilda's. That sounds innocent enough, but anyone who is familiar with Middlesbrough will know all about St Hilda's. Because I was new to the area I did not know about it, but it happens that St Hilda's is the town's most active red-light district, close to old dockland and the blue Transporter Bridge straddling the Tees. One might just as well have said you were going to look at Whitechapel in the London of the mid-nineteenth century for the reputation St Hilda's has among the population of modern Middlesbrough. They say round there that it is 'over the border', because it is separated from the centre of the town by the main railway line. But this talk of a border is really meant to convey the feeling that if you go there you are entering rather dangerous enemy territory. Though the housing does not look too bad – there are some modern terraced dwellings of the sheltered-and-shrubberied variety, mixed with older semi-detached council houses, but no nineteenth-century terraces, and no 1960s slum tenements – it is a severely depressed area. There are patches of bald waste ground situated between the clumps of houses, smattered with scorch-marks from bonfires, and across which roam gangs of wild-eyed young children. Forming a backdrop in one direction is the great steaming refinery, across the river at Billingham. The male unemployment rates for Middlesbrough as a whole I have described. But in St Hilda's they are proportionally the highest in the town, a staggering 43% according to official statistics collected several months before I

arrived. So there I was one cold, blustery afternoon, innocently preparing to emphasise some of the more positive aspects of strife-stricken Middlesbrough, and straight away I was drawn into a contemplation of the very things I wanted to avoid. From that moment on it was downhill all the way.

The Enterprise Centre in St Hilda's is one of four such establishments in Middlesbrough, heavily subsidized by the council. It is housed in a converted biscuit factory, but to see it from the outside you would have thought someone was pulling your leg if they told you the building was once associated with the production of pretty confectionary. The neat little drawing of the centre on a leaflet I have in front of me is a different image to the one that confronts you when you arrive. All you can see again is thick concrete, heavy metal-gauzed windows, and steel shutters – another of those police station lookalikes imported from Northern Ireland, surrounded by fragments of broken glass and barricading itself vigorously against the desires of unwanted scruffy humanity. When I eventually managed to find the centre I drove straight past it. I do not know what I thought it was, but I could not possibly associate the barricaded concrete fortress frowning at the top of that street with fledgling businesses. As I approached, a large hairy dog hurtled out from the entrance to some adjacent industrial premises and began chasing the wheels of my car in a ferocious fit of barking. Because I thought I was lost, I drove round the block, and when I passed down the same street again several minutes later, like clockwork the dog frantically emerged again and actually collided with the front of my vehicle and spun away, ricocheting from the impact across some grass in its snarling desperation and fervour. At least the little drawing of the Enterprise Centre on the leaflet is honest enough to include the metal gauze.

The ESP scheme has superseded the old Enterprise Allowance Scheme, which was centrally controlled by the government, where unemployed people were given £40 per week for twelve months to set up their own businesses. Instead, the new scheme gives people £30 per week for thirty weeks, but provides them with office or workshop space as starter units. Middlesbrough was one of the first such schemes to be set up in the country. Tenants can apply for additional

funds to purchase new equipment or to expand, if the merits of the business are considered by the ESP board to warrant it. After about two years the businesses are encouraged to move out of the centre into the real world, though I was told that they sometimes have to be nudged, and I should imagine a fair proportion of them immediately collapse. Nationally, the ESP is supervised by eighty-two Training Enterprise Councils spread across the country that have local business and industrial people sitting on their boards of committee. The idea behind decentralization, and the weaning away of the influence of the Department of Employment, was to enable the new scheme to have the flexibility to devise programmes suitable for the economic requirements of different areas, and for them to have closer links with the existing industrial infrastructure. The St Hilda's complex is concerned almost entirely with promoting manufacturing, with the emphasis at present in the small workshops there being on woodworking and metalworking. I was told there is generally a 50% success rate with businesses in the industrial field in the town, and about 80% with those involved in office and information work elsewhere.

The project manager thought it was unfortunate the Centre had been established in such a depressed area. The idea was for the Enterprise Centre to lift the face of St Hilda's and inject it with a new burst of life, but he could see why the residents in the streets outside had little regard for it. It did not benefit the local community in any way because the people working at the Centre, and utilizing the facilities, came mostly from outside. It had no connection to the chronic number of unemployed living in St Hilda's, and so there was a lack of respect for the premises, resentment had built up among the youngsters, and it was forever under attack. Each night, two or three security guards, and at least one guard dog, now patrolled the building. There is something quite pathetic about such a scene, where a hub of small houses fan out around an isolated industrial structure protected by uniformed men and dogs, like the castle with its moat. Until the security guards arrived the Centre suffered continually from theft and vandalism. The project manager himself had been spat at, stoned, physically harassed, threatened, and all the building's

tenants had had their cars vandalized, with tyres slashed, aerials bent, windscreens smashed, and so on. It was unthinkable to work there late in the evenings, he said. Throughout the time he was telling me this I had become aware of the sound of children chirruping louder and louder in the street outside. (Apparently, there is a 30% truancy rate in the area). The next moment, as if on cue (how many spontaneous cues there were, uncannily timed when I conducted this journey!), a man leaned into the office and said the children had barricaded the front door closed 'again'. We all rushed into the entrance hall to find that a gang of very small children had wedged a short plank of wood through the tubular steel handles of the doors on the outside of the building, so they could not be opened. 'See what I mean?' said the project manager, shrugging his shoulders. 'How can we seriously expect kids living in places like this to grow up with an outlook for environmental concern and an interest in wildlife, when it is drummed into them from birth they have no prospect of ever obtaining a job in their lives?' The situation had come to a head recently when the children had absolutely pelted the front entrance to the Enterprise Centre with dozens of eggs stolen from a milk float. As a result of that incident, the building was in the process of being fitted with thousands of pounds worth of infra-red camera equipment, so that it was covered from every angle. When anybody approached within fifty feet or so, the cameras would automatically begin recording, and the project manager could simply hand the police a videotape after any incident and let them get on with their inquiries.

As did numerous people say to me throughout this journey, the project manager reflected on the fact that there had always been poverty and people at the bottom of the social pile. But what was new, he said, was the mindless violence, the loss of self-respect, the utter and complete lack of respect for other people's property and the reneging against authority that was the hallmark of an emerging generation. Looking at the street outside again afterwards, now alive with children running this way and that, pretending to machine-gun each other dead beneath a bit of late afternoon sun that came out and slanted feeble yellow light over the entire scene, you could see perfectly clearly how the slow process of brutalization was

where we were sitting, and quite methodically and silently the administrator began handing them forms to sign and a number of ten pence pieces. This went on for quite a few minutes, and throughout that time I tried to decide what this money was for that was being handed over to them. It was only when nearly everybody had left that I was told, to my horror, that the men were actually being given their bus fares to get home. Now we have all probably heard that patrons of the Jobclubs receive free stationery and postage so that they can apply for jobs, which is a reasonable enough gesture; but to see grown men queuing up to be given bus fares so they can get home, like a bunch of untidy schoolboys, hits you in the stomach with a thump. Surely some arrangement could be made between the companies running the Jobclubs (they are generally put out to tender and run by private sector companies, not by the local authorities) and the local public transport executive, whereby the men could be given some kind of pass and avoid the petty indignity of being forced to queue up to be given a few shillings. It cannot do much for anybody's self-respect. On the other hand, they might be, and probably are, perfectly happy to be given a few bits of silver for their troubles, because it would be naïve and sentimental to assume they honour the gesture and spend the money on bus travel. Most probably they pocket the money and walk home. If I were in their position that is what I would do, and you cannot really blame them otherwise. Nevertheless, there is something tragic and deeply humiliating in sitting next to unemployed men twice your own age and watching them being treated like a group of social misfits. It makes you want to turn away with embarrassment. You do not know where to put your face. But what makes you squirm, and therefore what makes your perceptions despicable and hence creates your sense of unease, is that your feelings are essentially selfish. It is being pushed down your throat that *you* are comfortable. *You* do not have to think in terms of a few Godforsaken lousy shillings, and probably have not done seriously since you were a child. If your own small child comes into the bedroom on Sunday mornings and raids your trouser pockets for his moneybox, while you are ploughing through several pounds worth of newspapers and can only mumble disconsolately because you are too absorbed by an

editorial comment to bother responding to his request for cash, it hits you in the face with a smack what different universes people really do inhabit. It is so very easy to take money for granted when you are not poor. Whether or not you have worked hard for that money in your trouser pockets, whether or not these unemployed men screw the social security system for every penny they can and use it to supplement black market economics they take for granted; whether they still spend money on beer and cigarettes, or the fact that some of them spend their dole money on drinking instead of food to keep some semblance of a social life going, becomes irrelevant when you mingle among them. To respond to the sight of other human beings thinking seriously in terms of a few ten pence pieces is to be force-fed on your own superior social position, and unless you are completely blinkered I do not see how you can respond in anything except an unsatisfactory way. Even the analogy with schoolboys is disgusting, because you are generally picturing a group of children wearing decent uniforms (you do this automatically), not distorted and ill-fitting hand-me-downs. That mental process itself is merely a by-product of prosperity and the power and importance of money. Such realities cannot do anything but erode the potential for a peaceful, stable structure to society.

When I was travelling round England I came into contact with a small number of people in positions of considerable regional influence. These were people who had connections with public office and the workings of central government; people who filled me in about the present economic situation in certain areas, and who I have not necessarily written about here in the text. I was told at least once, by a figure not without influence, something anyone possessed of reasonable intelligence will have long since realized already – that a 6 or 7% unemployment rate is considered not only politically acceptable, but is also economically desirable. Though no politician of any colour would ever admit such a thing publicly, he said, it is now acknowledged unofficially as being necessary to curb wage demands and inflationary pressures. The horrifying truth of the matter is that it might well be economically prudent to maintain an unemployed sub-class so that the rest of us can

continue to live comfortably. Because of the pitiable workings of the human mind and the corrupting effects of power and prestige, anyone with genuine brain matter positioned between their ears realizes life is a cruel moral dilemma, and whether socialism or capitalism is the economic system applied hardly matters.

Though they were to the front of my mind when I was there, I could not bring myself to repeat these facts to the unemployed people I spoke to at that Middlesbrough Jobclub. And it is an awareness that catches in the throat when you rub shoulders with some of the unfortunate people, these brake-pads and hindrances to the desires of the society realpolitik, who are on the receiving end of such a policy, if it is in fact true. It creates a very funny feeling in your stomach when you look at their deferent expressions, when you see a row of cardboard files lined up on a table with grown men's names scrawled on them like so many school projects. But what I do know is this. Sooner or later if you go on treating a minority of people as so much human produce bagged up for sale and flung about on some crazy wholesale economic market to keep the prices stable higher up the retail pile, if you go on denying them their common humanity, you will eventually shoot yourself in the foot. The whole of human history gives testimony to that. Frustration spreads, gathers momentum, and ultimately explodes. One might just as well say that in today's social climate, violent crime is a necessary expedient to a general stability and prosperity for the bulk of the rest of society. Think like that, and it takes only a small step to arrive at the necessary reintroduction of capital punishment to retain the balance, when the economic cracks really do begin to appear. I am convinced we will see that move within the next generation or two anyway, once the present lot in the House of Lords have died off and been replaced by men brought up in a viciously acquisitive and increasingly reactionary and violent world, regardless of their class, culture, or background.

Before I leave Cleveland, in connection with some of the things I have just written, a story that was related to me by the people with whom I was staying in Great Ayton, illustrating how people can become conditioned by their social

circumstances. It is worth repeating because a number of our more enlightened commentators, with noses that rise so high in the air they slip over to touch the nape of their necks, dismiss certain human values at the bottom end of the social pile as a gender symptom of being not much more than useless working-class scum. A friend of this man and woman in Great Ayton is a teacher in a primary school, in one of the downtown areas of Middlesbrough. The juniors at the school in question decided it would be a good idea to invite some of the younger infants to a story-reading class. To get the two groups of children into the habit of giving and receiving letters, it was decided to set up an internal postal system within the school, rather as we used to send Christmas cards to one another at my school years and years ago, using little squares of gummed paper to represent the stamps. But it was soon discovered that some of the infants (children the age of five) had not bothered to open their letters. The teachers could not understand why. After much coercion, it was eventually discovered these youngsters were too *frightened* to open their letters. In the sorts of homes they came from, the receiving of mail was something they perceived as a time of sadness, upset, rage, and despair. Their parents generally only received threats or warnings of some kind, or the notification of court appearances, or that they had been denied welfare benefit. This threw the homes in question into turmoil and perhaps meant the children would be eating beans or tinned tomatoes on toast as the main meal of the day for another week. Their reluctance to open the letters sent by the older schoolchildren was a reaction against what they imagined would prove to be negativity, foreboding, and impending mental pain. They were merely trying to protect themselves.

The essential point to grasp is that the children associated the letters they were handed at school with unhappiness and broke out into a sort of cold sweat accordingly. They wanted to run to a corner and hide. The other thing to observe, particularly if one recollects the kids being desensitized that I had seen leaping about across the waste ground in St Hilda's, is that these Middlesbrough infants were still young enough to *feel*. Each morning my own infant runs downstairs to fetch the mail up proudly for his mummy and daddy. Does yours?