

The ferry for Stranraer left at 8 a.m. I stood on the deck watching the coastline disappear and marvelling at the patterns made by chimneys belching smoke into the sky. I felt loath to leave. I'd arrived with an empty diary and I was leaving with a wealth of memories, not the sort you have to dredge from the depths of your mind, but the sort that float lightly beneath the surface and return instantly at odd and surprising moments. I would no longer close my ears and eyes to reports of violence in newspapers and on television. I might feel irritated by the squabbling, but the irritation would be eased by a small nugget of understanding and a vast feeling of warmth towards the place and the people. And I might think twice before muttering that religion makes fools of men. It can and it does. But there's Strongbow at the back of it all; one nation trying to swallow another nation is inclined to make men mad. But a murderous little war is no answer; 2,500 people have died since 1968.

'Hallo, we met at the Peace Weekend. I'm a friend of Kevin's. I know all about your purse!'

He was an art student who one day hoped to teach. He'd been in the Peace Movement since he was thirteen and stayed, he said, because he thought about things more than most people of his age and had found no alternative outlet for his energy and his desire to do something to help. On that morning, at that early hour, he was downcast. He needed to get away for a while and was heading for Portsmouth where his brother now lived and owned a shop. He had no intention of leaving for good; he just knew he had to get away for a bit. The Anglo-Irish Agreement had escalated the Troubles and this had prompted the downcast mood.

He had a friend who worked on a building site; the company often did work for the security forces. 'We have always known that the IRA pick off people who work with the security forces, but now it is stated policy and people have become frightened. My friend went to the boss and said he thought he'd better leave and was told that the company were paying "protection money" and therefore would be left alone. Paying protection money does not mean that you are going to be safe, but not paying it certainly means you are not going to be safe.'

We talked of art. He told me stories of five-year-olds drawing flowers and then colouring them green, white and orange. I assume he was a Catholic. They say you can tell by simply looking at someone. But that seems absurd to me and anyway I never learnt the trick. And I certainly was not going to ask. Only once during my visit did I feel the need to ask a man whether he was a Catholic or Protestant. I had to struggle with the words and felt deeply embarrassed.

## Chapter 7

# Newcastle's Backstreet Butterflies

I broke my train journey from Stranraer at Penrith. I had planned a visit to the Lake District before going to Northern Ireland, feeling certain that I would need a quiet couple of days to rearrange my thoughts. But in the end I didn't flee from Belfast, I left with reluctance and somehow the contrast with the north of England's - or even England's - most picturesque patch was unsettling. I suppose you could call it culture shock. I found that the aloof tranquillity of the hills and mountains and vales and the aching placidity of the still lakes and woods made my thoughts turn time and again to the warmth, vitality and immediacy of those I'd met in Northern Ireland. The permanency of nature; its perfect seasonal rhythms grated against the transiency of human life, the friction of ideas and the rough and tumble of untidy lives.

I am not immune to the wonders of nature, but I am moved more when they take me by surprise. Driving to Kinlochbervie I was surprised; boating on Loch Erne I was surprised. But how could I be surprised in the Lake District, when writers have been evoking the area, often in stylized exaggeration, for more than 200 years? For a couple of days I became a tourist; the kind of tourist that potters around villages, has lunch on the lawns of pubs; and spends hours on boats chugging up and down Ullswater and Windermere. It was a visual feast and, sated with scenic beauty, I resumed my train journey to Newcastle; travelling from a place renowned for its loveliness to a place renowned as a 'waste land'.

The metro yielded my first impression of Newcastle; it's an impressive, extensive and integrated transport system that whizzes Geordies across their city with clean, swift precision. The stations are light and brightly painted and they have clever machines which, once you've told them where you want to go, tell you the cost of your

journey and give you change. The metro raised my first question: how come a 'waste land' could afford such a lavish system? The answer began to crack open the myth that Newcastle is a depressing city in terminal decline, resigned to a never-ending retirement reminiscing about past prosperity and past eminence.

The metro was built in the early 1970s. It cost £200 million. Edward Heath's Conservative government was looking for a home for a new, experimental, fully integrated system where with one ticket passengers could hop on buses, trains and ferries and crisscross the city. Newcastle lobbied to be chosen: it was an area of low car ownership, the railway lines were already in existence, running each side of the Tyne to the coast; and the city acted as a regional centre with people travelling some distance to both work and shop. They won the prize and with it a clutch of grants to help pay the cost. If you mention Newcastle to transport planners around the world, they say, 'integrated public transport system', they don't say 'waste land'. That label is for home consumption, awarded by people in the south who never travel north.

What a pity the metro was not on the political agenda in the early 1960s. If it had been, if the politicians then had the sense to see that good public transport was the answer to traffic congestion in towns, then decision-makers might have resisted the temptation to give priority to the motor car and plaster our cities with concrete motorways. If they'd had the wisdom to ignore car lovers and car builders, I might not have got lost.

Stepping out of the metro at Jesmond, I stood and gawped. The road was bisected by a huge concrete arch and I could not see how to cross to the other side. I started to walk and stopped to ask a passer-by if I was going in the right direction. No, he said, you should have turned the other way outside the station. I retraced my steps and walked in the opposite direction, stopping once again to seek reassurance that I was on the right track. No, said the woman, you should have turned the other way outside the station! I cursed the kind of people who can never admit that they don't know the answer to a question and instead, with all the confidence in the world, give the wrong instructions. I also cursed the car and all those in love with gear levers; it was *their* motorway that had impeded my path.

When I finally arrived outside the boarding house that I'd telephoned from the railway station, I was shown up to a tiny room at the top of the house. From the window all I could see was the concrete arch and all I could hear was the hum of traffic. I heard myself saying, 'No, thank you,' to the room. 'It's too close to the motorway.' The owner

didn't try to change my mind. Instead she suggested I call further down the street where a friend had a similar house. I did. The Riley family were most welcoming. The room was again at the top of the house, but the motorway was out of sight.

'We have some lovely boarders,' said Mrs Riley. 'The Royal Shakespeare company always stay here on their tour to Newcastle. Lovely, they are, good little drinkers. They always come back after the show and have a few. You'll love the breakfast. We do a "full house" – eggs, bacon, sausage and tomatoes. We always get fresh eggs from the country and we always pay a few pence more for the best bacon. The evening meal is at 6.30.'

The room was tiny and the double-bed practically filled the space. There was a cracked basin, a red chair covered in cat hairs, a gold-and-green carpet and pink-and-brown curtains. Everything looked weary: the colours had clashed for so long they were drained by the fight. A shower cubicle was sited on the landing outside my door and when it was in use my basin belched with indigestion. The towels were tiny; there was an electric bar on the wall to provide warmth and the only plug (which I needed for my hair-dryer) was hidden, cringing above the skirting-board, suffocated by the bed. And when I pulled the bed out to reach it, a layer of dust met my eyes. It was a regulation English boarding house. I'd been told that Tourist Boards around the country were doing their best to improve standards of such places; perhaps they hadn't reached Jesmond Road or perhaps they had and had decided, as I did, that the friendliness of the Rileys more than compensated.

I settled speedily into my room, eager to walk the streets of the city centre and discover whether the metro was a mirage, or a monument to misspent money – a fine example of regional aid as temporary balm rather than a pathway to a permanent cure for the disease of economic decline. Such a cure is not easy. As with Glasgow, the Industrial Revolution made Newcastle wealthy. It has always been strategically important. The Romans gave it a fort; William the Conqueror's son gave it a castle, a new castle, from which it took its name; and coal gave it wealth, aided of course by its position at the head of the Tyne River. Coal, iron, steel, glass were all exported in bulk from this city; ships in huge quantity were built along its banks. All that began to crumble between the wars; it was briefly revived during the last war, but since then decline has continued. When the party began thousands flocked to Newcastle for work; when the party was over thousands left again, either reluctantly or gladly, but many could not and would not move.

I turned left outside the front door, and left again, past the Playhouse Theatre, past the Civic Centre. When I came to a bookshop called Thorne's I went inside. It was huge, a reminder that this is a university town. I browsed and thought of J. B. Priestley. He'd included Newcastle in his *English Journey*, 'a rambling but truthful account of what one man saw and heard and felt and thought during a journey through England during the autumn of 1933'. It was raining when he arrived and he had a cold and was full of self-pity (even though for the most part he was chauffeur-driven and stayed in decent hotels). In this mood, he cursed his publisher in London who, he speculated, had just finished another good lunch and was about to arrange for some other poor author to leave home for months on end. Having wallowed awhile, he set out to find the one person in the city whose name he knew. He was a bookseller specializing in rare books and first editions. This chap (who was never given a name) took Priestley under his wing. The two were inseparable for a couple of days. He took Priestley to a boxing match; to a pub where they were rehearsing a Greek tragedy in the rooms upstairs; and he introduced him to Bob, who worked long hours for £2 a week and who had risen above the beer and betting mindlessness of his mates to spend his spare time helping at the People's Theatre and the centre for the unemployed. Bob saw the 'workers' as incapable of selfishness, indolence or corruption and employers as cunning tyrants; he saw the world in black and white, which gave Priestley a fine opportunity to try and paint in some shades of grey.

I continued my walk. A group of Chinese children were playing on the pavement, outside a Chinese takeaway. Two were using an empty Coke can as a football, and two were using an empty Coke can as a tennis ball, which they batted to and fro between miniature tennis rackets. Teenagers hung around in groups eating McDonald's products - chips in paper cups, minced beef and cheese encased by a bread bun laid to rest in a polystyrene cradle. Their hairstyles were intriguing. Some were just well cut, but others were grossly exaggerated, sticking up into the air cockerel-like and often multi-coloured. The sight of them caused me to remember that Geordies have a reputation for being trend-setters. Marketing men love the city, they say it is a good place to test new products because the kids loved trying stylish new things. They discovered this by coming up from London to tramp the streets with clipboards, stopping to ask teenagers all manner of questions. Rumour has it that 40 per cent of those stopped told the clipboard bearers that they thought designer clothes were worth the extra money and that they loved to try new things. The clipboard

bearers went back south to London and wrote: 'In Newcastle there is intense awareness of cult fashions among the young.' And as a result Newcastle was the first to get hair-styling mousse and gel.

I took Grey's monument as the centre of Newcastle. Lord Grey, as prime minister, fought with much difficulty to get the 1832 Reform Bill passed, and this monument was erected in memory of him and of that occasion. He looks down upon an array of wide Georgian streets, beautiful streets; streets of great dignity; streets that hark back to a time of great confidence. Like Glasgow, many of these once-grimy buildings have been sandblasted clean. Cynics suggest that Newcastle waited to do this until there was no industry left to make them dirty again. But this was a coal-mining area, and the miners took home free coal to heat their houses and therefore no local decision-maker dared to adopt the Clean Air Act which forbade the use of anything other than smokeless fuel. In the early 1980s there were few miners to enjoy free coal, the Act was implemented and the sandblasters moved in.

The shops in this area surprised me. I expected them to be forlorn and empty and they turned out to be numerous and glossy and bustling. There's a story that one branch of Rumbelows, a store selling electrical goods, had sales which topped those throughout the rest of the country and won the staff a free trip on Concorde. And that's not all. As well as the Georgian streets with their shops, there's a modern intruder called Eldon Square. It's an undercover shopping centre. If you want to go shopping when it is raining, I suppose it has some merit. A thing of beauty it is not.

For many years, with or without Eldon Square, Newcastle was seen as *the* shopping centre for the north-east region, which is why the centre is so much bigger and more bustling than I'd expected. It services a very large area. Now, believe it or not, there's a rival on the other side of the Tyne, in Gateshead. It's called the Metro Centre and it has a vast parking lot, an indoor fun-fair, a cinema, American trees and shops, shops and shops. It was built by John Hall, a former coal-board surveyor turned property developer. Mr Hall courts publicity and the media is happy to oblige. Poor-boy-makes-good has always been an attractive tale; even more so in the 1980s. Some of this publicity has suggested that Hall is one of Mrs Thatcher's favourite entrepreneurs; *he* is what *she* is all about.

Hall's father was a miner and a life-long Labour party supporter. Hall, who left grammar school at sixteen, believes that the Labour party has failed to keep up with people like him: 'Labour is backward

with that damn philosophy which makes people believe they're oppressed and that they can do nothing for themselves.' I intended to go over the water to see the Metro Centre site, but I never got there. (Since then I have seen it several times on television.) I dislike shopping malls and I hate shopping. It is a necessary evil and not a hobby. I realize that for many people it is pure pleasure, a jolly day out. If such people had an entry in *Who's Who* it would under 'Recreation' read: 'going around the shops'.

Defoe would be speechless. In London, in the early eighteenth century he spotted a brightly decorated pastry-cook's shop with a glass window in which 'trifles' were displayed. He was displeased. How could a shop spend precious money on its appearance – it was a stepping-stone to ruin! And if he thought pastries were 'trifles', what would he have made of electric toothbrushes and gadgets to squeeze oranges and all the other daft consumer luxuries? He'd think – quite rightly – that we'd got our priorities wrong.

The north-east has one of the highest unemployment levels in England; it's around 20 per cent. I can't be more specific. Who has confidence in the government's statistics anymore? The basis on which the unemployment figures are worked out has changed six times since 1979. I've never heard a justification for all these changes that sounded convincing. The Labour party argues that the changes were made for one reason alone: to hide the true figures. They no longer include the sixty-year-old who hasn't got a job and is unlikely to get one before he reaches sixty-five. They no longer include sixteen- and seventeen-year-olds because they are on training schemes. Whatever the true figures, there's no disputing one fact – the north-east has one of the highest unemployment rates.

Jeremy Beecham, the leader of Newcastle council, has a hard task. Potential investors down south are reluctant even to make the journey north, so he makes the journey southwards and talks and talks trying to convince the City to travel to Tyneside and discover for themselves that it isn't a waste land, an area beyond hope: that it is dying for the opportunity to respond to new ideas. Mrs Thatcher decided to help. After the 1987 election victory she became determined to leave her mark upon the 'Inner Cities'. The result is the Newcastle Initiative, a blueprint for inner-city revival. A group of agencies is busy promoting the virtues of life in the north and backing projects to revive theatres, tart up tatty bits of the city, cheer up council estates and transform the banks of the Tyne. All this face-lifting is intended to create a new northern image and that new image is meant as bait to encourage those who can create jobs. It is said to be working; something called the

Great North Conference took place, and it was announced that by 1991 the Japanese would have invested £700 million, and that two officials from a Chinese bank were said to be interested in property and manufacturing industries. Oh yes, and British Telecom was considering a project or two. At least the journey from London is considered worthwhile.

But until these overtures reach the finale, who is doing all this shopping; who is breaking all these retail records? The answer is too simple; most of those in work, say, 80 per cent of those in work – those with decent wages – have never had so much money to spend. They're flush. A good number of them have money to spare for the first time in their lives and are relishing their new-found freedom to spend. Who can blame them? But what of the rest? If we say that the unemployment rate in Newcastle is 20 per cent and that 20 per cent of those in work are poorly paid, that leaves 64 per cent who have money to spend. It also leaves a sizeable under-class with no money to spend and, as my long walk ended, I decided that rather than face another 'Bill' with an 'Aunt Maggie' I would find a council estate and a school and see how the pupils were being prepared for a world where work was precious. These youngsters are the unlucky ones, born during the baby boom of the heady sixties to emerge from school in the eighties into a dramatically slimmed workforce. Those born in the seventies were substantially fewer and when they emerge in the 1990s they are likely to be *courted* by employers.

Fifteen years ago Longbenton Estate had a poor reputation. It was like a battleground, with trees torn up, cars abandoned, holes in the road which the council did not mend and graffiti-scarred buildings. There were gangs roaming the streets known as Longbenton Aggro Boys – or LBABs for short. Today the picture is much more pleasing. The council has been slowly renovating the estate, rewiring the dwellings and adding central heating and modern kitchens. Outside porches have been built over front doors to add a little character to faceless houses, and fences have been erected around front gardens.

Longbenton Community High School stands at the end of Hailsham Avenue. I chose to visit it because I had only the haziest idea what the word 'community' meant, and the estate itself was said to have an unemployment rate reaching 40 per cent. John Burn has been headmaster since 1979. He's large, laid-back and extremely likeable, and in true Geordie fashion made me feel most welcome. He claims a working-class background – his father was a clerk – and after grammar school he went to Bristol University to read chemistry. 'I always wanted to become a teacher. I felt it was unjust that I had got to grammar school

youngsters came from working-class homes. The girls in particular showed that they had accepted the message that education was to be prized. There was Lyn, who had a modest ambition to become a hairdresser or beautician but who intended to get A-levels in biology and chemistry first. There was Elaine, who had a similarly modest ambition to become a medical secretary but who intended to do maths and English A-levels and, if those results were good, she might just be persuaded to go to university.

The boys predictably were somewhat less mature and tended to let their written answers be jokey. Paul wrote that he wanted to be very, very rich so that he could watch television all day and have a villa in Spain; Christopher said he wanted to win the Tour de France and join the Navy; and Tommy said he wanted to be free of debt, have a nice home and a wife whom he could trust. Under questioning, even those who said that they wanted to leave school at sixteen admitted that if they failed to get a job they would turn right round and come back to Longbenton. What they feared provided a common thread: they feared a world without work.

Paul was pleased. His enthusiasm for widening the horizons of his pupils was as potent and infectious as his headmaster's. 'What we are trying to do is to get the kids to believe in self-empowerment. We want them to believe that they have control over their own lives and that with effort they can do anything. This area has no tradition of further education, but we are overcoming that. It also has no tradition of self-employment, so we try to show them that it is a viable alternative to being an employee.'

In the afternoon I was invited to take over the A-level sociology group. I was nervous. The class lasted two hours and I made a point of asking the teacher to return after an hour to check that all was well. I'm not sure what I feared; I suppose I feared that two hours was too long for me to hold the attention of a dozen seventeen-year-olds. What I didn't realize was that schools these days encourage their pupils to *talk*; encourage them to have views of their own and encourage them to believe that their views are interesting and important. Twenty years ago we sat behind desks and were talked *at*; we were never asked our opinions about anything and if a stranger had come into the room and started asking questions, we'd have been tongue-tied and embarrassed. Maybe it is true that young people leave school nowadays with a poor grasp of syntax and an inability to spell, but they are infinitely more articulate and aware of the world around them.

The two hours sped by. The group contained one mature student, Margaret, a former nurse who, now that her children were grown up,

wanted to return to work and found the thought intimidating. She decided that an A-level or two would prove that her mind still worked. She had just received the results of a mid-way A/O exam and had got a grade A. There had been three mature students at the beginning of the course. A man had dropped out and the other woman had made it to the A/O exam and was having second thoughts. The younger students much appreciated being mixed with an older age group; it made them think that there must be something to this 'education' if the middle-aged return for more. And Margaret felt that she benefited from the presence of younger people because she had to fight to keep up.

Longbenton has an 'open' sixth form. That means that anyone who wants to take an A-level can do so even if the teachers think they are quite likely to fail. That may not be so good for published records of exam results, but it is good for the students. This group contained a twenty-one-year-old who had left the school some years before, worked in a supermarket and hated it and now felt in need of further qualifications. Another had done a one-year business-studies course and then decided to embark on a two-year A-level course. A third boy had seen his father go 'south' in search of work and was determined to get his A-levels and try the police force as a career. There was a quiet blonde girl who didn't talk unless I specifically addressed her. She wanted to be a solicitor but had great doubts about her ability. (The school shared her doubts, but there was no way they were going to tell her.) A rather perky blonde told me she worked in a Wimpy Bar two evenings a week and on Saturday. She hated it but needed the money to spend on clothes and to be able to put petrol in her mother's car. A third girl said her boyfriend had told her she placed too much importance on this word called 'work'. He'd been unemployed for two years. And lastly there was an impressive young girl who started the whole afternoon off on the right foot by opening the discussion with a moving account of how her father had died, leaving her mother, a born-again Christian, her sister, a university student, and her brother who hadn't done a day's work in seven years. Attempts to get him to return to school had failed; he was tired of competing with his sisters.

All of them also feared a future without work. Each of them knew full well what that meant; they'd seen it at close quarters either through their parents or their brothers and sisters. Unemployment was, it seemed, a regular topic of conversation among them and with their teachers. They wanted work because they wanted money and a sense of purpose.

Stimulated by what I'd learned, I headed for the failures. This school has them just like any other. But instead of ignoring them they

have a club for the unemployed; for those who have left school and failed to get jobs. They use the premises to keep in touch with each other, to gossip, to play snooker and table tennis and to take advantage of the fishing trips that are organized. The club is run by another Paul. He'd left school four years before for a job as a supermarket cashier, which he had hated and abandoned. He'd been unemployed for more than two years before he was asked to run the club. He is paid by the Community Programme, £63 for twenty-one hours a week. He has a council flat: 'I got that through someone I know. That's how we get things around here, jobs too.' He liked nice clothes and he wore seven rings. He was well dressed the day some while back when he went to sign on and was hauled in. 'They asked me straight if I was fiddling because I was so well dressed and my hair was well cut. I told them my girlfriend was a hairdresser. They fielded that one by pointing out that they now knew my face and would be looking out for me. And I answered by saying, "How long do you intend to keep me here? I've got to go windsurfing." "How come?" they said. "It's free at my old school," I said. I remember the look on their faces! To be truthful, I was shocked. One of my mates had been caught and got six months in prison. I thought someone had been ratting on me and I was worried about my flat. That's when I decided I'd better look around for something.'

We all laughed. That day's local paper had a story about fifteen men, all employed by the same security firm, who had been caught working while claiming the dole.

Paul then asked me if he could put his feet up and relax. 'All of us here will be absolutely honest with you, but if you identify any of us we'll simply deny that we said anything and accuse you of making it all up. OK?' OK.

Wayne (1) had left school three years before at the age of fifteen. He has a wife and a three-year-old daughter. At first he'd worked with his father in a fish-and-chip shop, then he became a labourer on a building site, then he'd taken a welding course and since then he has had a two-year spell of unemployment. He takes any work that comes along.

'There's this darkie that gets me jobs. He comes to my house and pays me in the hand and that's all I want to know. I get some kind of work most months. Last time I had to drive down to Peterborough and pick up £10,000 worth of shop fittings, bring them back and work until all the fittings were up. I started at 9 a.m. on a Tuesday and finished on Wednesday at 3 p.m. I got 85 quid for that. We get £53.15 a week for the three of us plus £28 a month for the child. I manage to run a car. The dole will do me. I've been to Scotland for ten days with

the fishing club. I play a lot of rugby and the blokes there say they could get me a job for £80 or £90 a week, but I'm not touching anything under £150. Yeah, sure I'd like a steady job, on the railways maybe, but I'm not working for slave wages. I can manage on the dole, but it's not like having a decent wage. Those in work can spend 30 quid on a night out. I can't do that.'

Wayne (2) had left school seven years before. He was twenty-three and had ten jobs at the last count. For nine years, from the age of eleven, he had done a milk round, and had left school to do it full time, but when his friend sold the round the job had ended. All the other jobs - gardening, painting and decorating - had been poorly paid. Now he cleans a few windows when he needs a bit of extra money.

The other four Waynes had much the same story to tell. They had no qualifications and no inclination to get any qualifications. They despised poorly paid jobs and were prepared to live on the dole plus as many cash-in-hand jobs as they could pick up without Social Security officials becoming suspicious. I wondered if they wouldn't soon get sick of this kind of life. They thought they might as they grew older, but it hadn't happened yet. They were resilient, unambitious, street-wise and very entertaining company. They looked fit, through rugby, tennis, football, windsurfing and snooker, and seemed happy enough. They certainly didn't moan. They had each tasted work, low-grade stuff and didn't like it. They were not frightened by the dole. They were not frightened by the future.

J. B. Priestley came across a club for unemployed youth on his travels. The organizer, a man called Bob, was trying to get them interested in rehearsing for a concert party. Bob had little sympathy for the boys because, unlike older men, these youngsters did not 'fret' about lack of work. There was no loss of self-respect, no anxiety in them. They seemed undisciplined and carefree. They were below the level of worry. Priestley commented: 'They were not citizens, though some of them soon would be husbands and fathers. If the time ever came when they had to work hard and to obey orders, it would find them resentful and untrustworthy. Having grown up in one kind of world they would be puzzled and probably annoyed by any other kind of world. They knew nothing about responsibility. They are the new playboys of the western world ... the dingy butterflies of the backstreets.'

My backstreet butterflies were not dingy.

I walked down Hailsham Avenue in the best of moods. I'd expected to find Newcastle depressing and it was not. I'd expected to find the students at Longbenton Community High School a little resentful of a

world that seemed to offer them so many problems at such a young age. Instead they seemed to understand the nature of this current bout of unemployment; when we'd discussed what was causing it they seemed only too glad that the world was ridding itself of back-breaking jobs which needed merely muscle power and which caused ill-health and enslaved men to a funless life of long hours of work and free time in which they were too tired to play. The world of their fathers. The future had to be better than that.

Although the community school movement is several decades old, there are still very few such schools. I hadn't seen a 'typical' school; I'd seen a school that fired my imagination. Why are we so slow to catch on to such a good idea? Presumably because there are too few headteachers and too few teachers with vision and stamina. And that's not surprising, when teachers are treated like detritus while merchant bankers get rich. Why shouldn't teachers be among the most highly regarded and the most highly paid? Headteachers in state schools can aspire to £30,000 a year, but most achieve a modest £20,000, and only in the last year has training for headteachers been available, yet practically every piece of research has shown that a good headteacher is the most essential ingredient. Teaching must become a prized profession with good teachers being well rewarded. The country can easily afford it. It's useless to keep tinkering with the system, with what children learn and how and where they learn, unless there's an adequate supply of top-quality teachers. And we've been tinkering away non-stop since the 1944 Education Act first offered free secondary education to everyone.

In 1944 a system was laid down on certain crude assumptions. And those assumptions were that since we need only 'X' per cent of professionals to keep the country going, then only 'X' would be selected through examination at the age of eleven to go to grammar schools. The rest could go to secondary modern schools where the brightest of that bunch could form a pool of skilled manual workers and the others, unskilled, could be relied upon to do the donkey work. The great charm of this system was its honesty in recognizing that that was the way society worked. The justification for such rigorous selection at such a young age was that the examination was open to everyone and that the poorest could just as easily end up in grammar schools. But then educational researchers got to work and proved that those from poor homes did not in sufficient number reach the grammar schools. The middle classes hogged the places and the working class were consigned to the stigma of failure. The system was divisive and had to be changed.

I well remember the day I heard that I'd failed the 11-plus. There was no mistaking the importance of that examination nor the feeling of failure. I spent two years in a secondary modern school before passing the 13-plus and moving to the local girls' grammar school. At that point one would have thought the problems would have ended. But 13-plus successes were still thought of as 11-plus failures, not least because no languages were taught at secondary modern schools and I was dumped in the bottom stream of the year, where the standards were lower than the top stream in the secondary modern school. Within a year I had caught up two years of missing French and was moved up to the top class. I beat the system, but none the less felt that the introduction of comprehensive schools in the sixties was a step in the right egalitarian direction. Yet other changes were needed.

The hideous, examination-obsessed curriculum had to go. All that rote learning and memory testing had to give way to something more engaging; something that increased rather than curbed one's desire to learn. A new examination has been introduced which is far more practical and which encourages pupils to find things out for themselves instead of sitting behind desks being spoon-fed. Progress is assessed on a continuous basis and the marks gained form a substantial part of the final assessment. This prevents the short-term swots from getting away with it all and is a much more suitable apprenticeship for a working life, where one is expected consistently to give of one's best. Teachers complain, of course. They say the system involves much more work for them. Pupils complain. They say the system involves much more work for them. But almost everyone agrees that it is a fairer system. Before long the same thinking will have to be applied to A-level courses, for there is little point in abolishing the supremacy of memory-testing at sixteen and then reasserting it at eighteen.

So far so good, but the Thatcher government has gone much further. It has introduced a national curriculum designed to offer a broader education for everyone - science and a foreign language even for those who up till now have been considered too stupid to cope with such subjects - and with checks at seven, eleven, fourteen and sixteen to establish what children have learned. The Education Reform Act also aims to break local-authority monopoly of education by introducing a new tier of independent, state-funded technical colleges designed to improve our poor performance in both science and technology, and it gives power to parents to remove a school from the controlling hand of the local authority and be funded directly by central government. This is undoubtedly the most controversial measure; it is designed to enhance the power of parents, which is a

good thing, but it is also designed to diminish the power of local authorities (as with housing reforms) and enhance the power of central government, which is not a good thing. No one could deny that local authorities needed a good shake, but to curb their complacent bureaucracy by adding hundreds more civil servants to the payroll of the Department of Education is merely displacing a problem rather than curing it.

This heady brew of change is enough to make anyone punch drunk. The Thatcher government has made much of educational reform. It will be some years before the results can be adequately assessed. Whatever one's political colouring, it is vital that the package improves both the quality and the quantity of education. I dwell on education because it is a subject of great importance: Britain's economic well-being now depends on having a properly educated workforce. It's also important for the country's social and cultural well-being. No country can afford to have an illiterate and socially uncivilized underclass with no communal sense. Folk not frustrated by ignorance enjoy better lives, they don't feel powerless, they demand more of the society in which they live, they strive for better homes and a better health service, and governments of whatever colour have to respond to such demands. No one should begrudge taxes being spent on education: we will all benefit if improved education, from nursery schools through to universities, is made available to more people.

Since the Labour party in the sixties missed the opportunity to abolish private schools, they are now - I think - with us to stay. Newcastle Royal Grammar School and its 1,000 pupils occupy a site within walking distance of my temporary home. Its headmaster is Alastair Cox. For years the school has offered places to boys who pass the entrance examination but whose parents cannot afford the fees of around £2,000. Some sixty boys a year benefit from such a scheme. In recent years however some of these assisted places have been awarded to fee-paying boys already in the school whose parents fall on hard times. Alastair Cox said that in the previous year or so twenty or thirty parents had been made redundant and had been forced to seek the school's help. It isn't only the unskilled who suffer in a world where working practices are changing so rapidly. None the less, the number of those affected is small; small enough for the school to ignore the topic of unemployment. Cox admitted that he did nothing to introduce the pupils to thoughts of a workless world. He had noticed however that the boys were more inclined to aim for careers in secure professions like medicine, the law and accountancy, and avoid such subjects as philosophy and the classics. Some 82 per cent of those leaving New-

castle Royal Grammar School head for a degree course at a polytechnic or a university; 9 per cent head for other kinds of further education; only 9 per cent go straight into the workforce. The figures speak volumes. Cox did not know what a community school was. I think I embarrassed him with my questions.

For me the visit added a vital piece to the jigsaw. I will never again be able to listen to a discussion about the widening gap between the north and the south of England without thinking of Newcastle Royal Grammar School. If Newcastle Royal Grammar School is able to ignore unemployment and two miles down the road Longbenton Community High School is obsessed with it, then we'd be doing the country a favour by talking *less* about the north-south divide and *more* about the real divide: the divide between rich and poor. To keep suggesting that the north has little and the south has much is to do a disservice to both. It paints both an unnecessarily gloomy picture of the north (that seriously deters potential investors) and an undeservedly golden picture of the south. It is a misleading basis for discussion.

On my last day in Newcastle I decided to pay a sentimental visit to Jarrow, to a place made famous by the 1936 March when 200 cloth-capped men walked into history and touched the nation's conscience, to a place which has done more than its share to promote a poor image of the north. The town still has high unemployment, but you don't see the abysmal poverty of the 1930s. There were no bare feet and no ragged children. What you see is an environment ransacked by the town planners. The old centre dominated by terraced houses has gone; instead there is a shopping-centre, a boring, blank-eyed shopping-centre, full of shops that take welfare tokens for clothing. The Co-op has the prime and the biggest site, closely followed by Comet Discount. The Freezer Centre windows covered with garish stickers shout their generous offers of meat-and-potato pies at 95 pence. The bread shop offers chip butties for 30 pence. The Job Centre offers work to a waitress for £1.98 a hour; and work to a chef for £5 a hour; and work to an exhaust-and tyre-fitter for £115 a week. John Ross and Sons, Estate Agents, suggest that an end-of-terrace house within reach of the town centre would suit a first time buyer at £12,500, and there's a semi-detached bungalow in a quiet position going for £35,000. The Venerable Bede's monastic church still stands. Bede is a great name in ancient literature, for he told us all we know about England down to A.D. 700. How many people associate him with Jarrow? He's overshadowed by Catherine Cookson. Her sixty-odd books have sold some 80 million copies in seventeen different languages; that's 80 million people who see Jarrow and Tyneside through bug-infested



walls, scrag-end of mutton for tea, drink-sodden men, and worn-out women.

At the metro station I paid my 55 pence for the ride back into central Newcastle and then found I could not persuade the ticket machine at the barrier to accept it. I tried another machine but the same 'Not valid' sign appeared. An elderly man was watching me. 'Just walk through that door there,' he said. 'The one that's marked for push-chairs: just shove it open. What are you doing paying for your ticket anyway? I've never bought one. You just walk in one door and then walk out the other. You've got to learn these tricks when you're not working.'

'But what about inspectors? What if you get caught?'

'Oh, you've got to keep an eye out for the inspectors, of course. But that's easy, there are always two of them together and when you see them coming, you get off. Once or twice they've caught up with me on the train and I've said that I was just about to get off and had dropped me ticket on the floor. Then I bend down and start looking for it and one of them'll say, "Hang on to your ticket next time." Best time to travel is the morning before 9 a.m., with the workers; the ticket inspectors don't start until after 9 o'clock anyway. I go everywhere free in the nice weather. I'm going to see my mate now for a cup of tea.'

I asked him how long it was since he'd worked: 'I'm sixty-three now and I was fifty-six when it happened. I was a driver with the electricity board and my left foot went bad. All I could offer was driving and I had no chance of another job with all these youngsters around. I manage. I have to economize. I have to watch the beer - I like a beer. And I shop around for bargains.' He reached into his pocket and pulled out a tiny packet of Virginia Gold tobacco. 'This costs £1.09 in Jarrow, but in a kiosk outside South Shields Station they sell it for 96 pence. That's a saving of 13 pence and remember, I don't pay for the train fare!'

We got on the train and sat together. He wore a cloth cap, a pullover under his jacket and carried a plastic bag. He smiled all the while as he told me his stories. George Orwell, writing of the struggles of the poor in the 1930s, said: 'Instead of raging against their destiny, they have made things tolerable by lowering their standards.'

## Chapter 8

# The Durham Moors: Country Matters

The bus to Wolsingham took some time to track down. Repeatedly my request for a timetable met with a blank stare and a shake of the head. At the bus station in Jarrow I was lucky. The man behind the counter showed his dogs at the Wolsingham Show and knew all about the bus. It was a small single-decker that left from outside the Co-op in Newcastle. Its main function that Saturday morning was to bring in women from the dales for a day's shopping; on the return journey there were only a handful of us, including a woman who was going to spend a few days with her sister and who sat behind me and sucked sweets.

Within fifteen minutes the city had given way to the countryside, one of the reasons Tynesiders consider themselves fortunate. Before I could sink into contemplation of things rural, I spotted a road sign to Consett. Consett in 1980 became labelled as the first post-industrial town when British Steel closed its ironworks, putting nearly 4,000 men out of work. Since then the media from Britain, Europe and America have crawled all over the place making depressing documentaries and writing sad articles to sandwich between the glossy advertisements in newspaper colour supplements. I felt the place must be talked-out and resentful at being constantly associated with shops selling day-old pastries; it does nothing for their self-esteem nor for their efforts to attract new employers.

I believe, in time, when the new revolution is complete and new industries have relocated from the south - which is already happening - there will be dancing in the streets. After all, we hated the Industrial Revolution didn't we? Having started and exported the Industrial Revolution, having become the workshop of the world, having pioneered urbanization, we poured scorn on the satanic mills and sweatshops; we turned against industry and disparaged cities. I suppose we were