

*Northumbria University*

*Department of Humanities*

**Honours Dissertation**

**Urban Origins, Environmental Transition, and Post-Industrial Regeneration:  
The Consett Case Study, 1980-2000**

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## **List of Abbreviations**

BSC - British Steel Corporation

C2C – Sea to Sea Route

CMP – Consett Music Project

CTC – Consett Technical College

DCC - Durham County Council

DCRO – Durham County Record Office

DDC – Derwentside District Council

DIDA – Derwentside Industrial Development Agency

ISTC – Iron and Iron Steel Trades Confederation

MP – Member of Parliament

TWAM – Tyne and Wear Archives

WEA – Workers' Educational Association

## Introduction

Once it was a giant  
This steelworks, Consett named,  
Known the whole world over,  
Its products justly famed.  
Steel used in warships,  
In bridges far and near,  
The skills of its proud workers  
Lauded widely year by year.  
Now the ghosts of these men pass by.<sup>1</sup>

The above poem was written by the locally known 'Bard of Leadgate', Mervyn Craig.<sup>2</sup>

The ghosts that Mervyn discusses are signified by the monuments and memorials that densely populate the Consett and Derwentside landscape today.<sup>3</sup> Although Craig himself did not work in Consett's industries, he perfectly captures the nostalgic spirit of Consett and its people. The ghosts of Consett's industrial past are visible not only in its monuments, but also in the collective memory of its people. While the steelworks and collieries once defined the town's character, their closure forced a profound transformation that was neither immediate nor entirely welcomed. This uneasy transition is reflected in local artistic expressions, oral histories, and community efforts to preserve elements of Consett's industrial identity despite external pressures to embrace a new environmental narrative. To the present day, there are still several businesses that adorn the 'steeltown' characteristic that was once Consett's

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<sup>1</sup> Mervyn Craig, 'The Ghosts of Men', *The Miner and other Poems* (Eggleston: The Cromwell Press, 2003), p. 19.

<sup>2</sup> Leadgate is a neighbouring village that makes up the broader Consett.

<sup>3</sup> See Appendix A.

whole identity. Mervyn Craig's verse captures this tension between past and present, where the remnants of industry serve as both a reminder of economic loss and a symbol of resilience. This dissertation will explore how Consett navigated the challenges of deindustrialization through cultural memory, environmental regeneration, and the redefinition of identity in a post-industrial locality.

In the popular, historical imagination, the story of deindustrialization incorrectly and unfortunately centres around Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher as a scapegoat for all that went wrong. This sentiment has also been given credibility by academic historians. For historian Jorg Arnold, Thatcher and her government acted as the judge, jury and executioner of industry, describing how the 'risk' of industry 'was expounded most famously by the Prime Minister'.<sup>4</sup> Arnold is not alone in this thought as economic historian Will Hutton echoes the idea stating 'Mrs Thatcher scorns "industrial policy" as socialist', elaborating that 'Her regime has reduced government support for research to the point where in Britain [...] development is failing'.<sup>5</sup> While both economic historians correctly highlight Thatcher's unyielding stance and opinions on British industry, both fail to recognise the long and arduous process that was rapid deindustrialization. Although, Margaret Thatcher undoubtedly spearheaded deindustrialization, the process began a long time before the first female Prime Minister claimed Downing Street. The evolution of deindustrialization was a prolonged and multifaceted process shaped by economic, political, and social factors long before Margaret Thatcher came to power. This is a pattern clearly reflected in towns like Consett, which began experiencing economic stagnation and industrial strain as early as the

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<sup>4</sup> Jörg Arnold, "'The Death of Sympathy.'" Coal Mining, Workplace Hazards, and the Politics of Risk in Britain, ca. 1970-1990', *Historical Social Research / Historische Sozialforschung*, vol. 41, no. 1 (155) (2016), p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> Will Hutton, 'Thatcher's Half-Revolution', *The Wilson Quarterly* (1976-), vol. 11, no. 4 (1987), p. 132.

1960s. Instead, it began in what Michael Kitson describes as 'The Age of Transition'.<sup>6</sup> Kitson argues that despite 1950s industrial Britain being known as the 'Golden Age', the growing issue of diminishing quality and quantity of capital equipment as a result of poor investment and skill shortages in the UK.<sup>7</sup>

From a differing perspective, there was another great factor at play that drove the stride for change at a national level. The damage caused by industries on the environment was an immense and growing concern among policymakers and environmental activists long before Thatcher's time. In the 1950s, the Great Smog of London was a monumental moment that accelerated the shifting attitudes toward the impact of industries. Historian Erin Dooley describes how the sheer 'publicity surrounding it and other smog episodes' caused two very notable shifts.<sup>8</sup> These two changes being 'an increased public health effort' in regard to understanding air pollution, and secondly the development of 'governmental regulations on air pollution' in and out of the UK.<sup>9</sup> While Dooley does not specifically mention the coal industry, she does discuss how coal burning was a key component and therefore by affiliation the impact of the coal industry was enormous. By 1969, the growing publicity and concern for the ecological health of the environment was armed into 'an aggressive political agenda', through groups such as Friends of the Earth.<sup>10</sup> However, environmental historian John Dryzek describes how the UK was a great 'laggard' when converting public concerns for the environment into a serious topic within government's discussions.<sup>11</sup> The UK's position as

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<sup>6</sup> Michael Kitson and Jonathan Michie, 'The Deindustrial Revolution: The Rise and Fall of UK Manufacturing, 1870-2010', *University of Cambridge Working Paper*, no. 459 (Cambridge: 2014), p. 10.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 11.

<sup>8</sup> Erin E Dooley 'Fifty Years Later: Clearing the Air over the London Smog', *Environmental Health Perspectives*, vol. 110, no. 12 (2002), p. A748.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. A748.

<sup>10</sup> Jennifer Thomson, 'Surviving the 1970s: The Case of Friends of the Earth', *Environmental History*, vol. 22, no. 2 (2017), p. 235.

<sup>11</sup> John S Dryzek, 'States, Movements, and Democracy', *Green States and Social Movements: Environmentalism in the United States, United Kingdom, Germany, and Norway* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2003), p. 17.

a 'laggard', as described by John Dryzek, reflects a broader pattern of governmental inertia in addressing industrial pollution and its social consequences. While groups like Friends of the Earth brought environmental concerns into the public domain, national industrial policy often prioritized short-term economic gains over long-term sustainability or public health. As described by historian John Bradbeer, Thatcher's government, or any other government, did not adopt a serious stance or policy on environmental concerns until Thatcher's 1988 speech to the Royal Society (or when the Green Party garnered 15% of the vote the following year).<sup>12</sup> The tension between economic pragmatism and environmental responsibility is a reoccurring theme in the historiography of deindustrialization and Thatcher's government.

The North-East offers an essential regional lens through which to understand Consett's experience. As a steeltown, Consett felt the full weight of the region's industrial collapse and shifting economic policies. From the outset of deindustrialization in the 1950s and 60s, government policy encouraged the relocation of firms to depressed areas, such as the North-East.<sup>13</sup> However, during the 70s when unemployment and closures were rapidly rising, regional policy was finding itself under increasing pressure. For instance, Howard Elcock expansively outlines the long north-eastern economic concerns of the government throughout the process of deindustrialisation.<sup>14</sup> Elcock also outlines how the Conservatives and Thatcher's government greatly damaged pre-existing northern regional economic plans, stating that these plans 'largely fell victim to the "New Right" ideology' as well as the newly 'unfettered competition and development of the free market'.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the North East

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<sup>12</sup> John Bradbeer, 'Environmental Policy', in Stephen Savage and Lynton Robins (eds.), *Public Policy under Thatcher* (London: MacMillan, 1990), p. 75.

<sup>13</sup> Rob Atkinson and Carol Lupton, 'Industrial and Training Policy', in *Public Policy under Thatcher*, p. 50.

<sup>14</sup> Howard Elcock, 'A Surfeit of Strategies? Governing and Governance in the North-East of England', *Public Policy and Administration*, vol. 16, no. 1 (2001), pp. 59-63.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.60.

was also greatly affected by global treaties and regulation of the European Union that underpinned 'the new neo-liberal order' which 'altered the scale around which industries are ordered'.<sup>16</sup>

The fall of regional policy devastated steeltowns and one-industry towns like Consett catastrophically. While economic histories have aptly identified these financial and fiscal hardships throughout the region, they fail to capture broader consequences of the changing region policies.<sup>17</sup> By integrating cultural and environmental histories into the historiographical framework, historians have developed a more comprehensive understanding of the effects of declining regional industrial policy. Alice Mah explores these cultural effects in her work *Industrial Ruination*, one of which being the identification that 'drastically redeveloped policies affect people's lives' and how it is too often in 'unintended and undesirable ways'.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Robert Hollands further studied the cultural changes that were the result of deindustrialisation in the North East. Hollands explored the impact on gender following the decline of industry, describing how women became more and more at the forefront and young men had opportunities for 'alternative identities' in the 'cultural sphere'.<sup>19</sup> The choice of both Mah and Hollands to showcase the impact of deindustrialisation on human life is an understanding that economic historians left behind, often losing or marginalising human voice behind numbers and percentages.

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<sup>16</sup> John Tomaney, John Ward, and Neil Ward, *A Region in Transition: North East England at the Millennium* (Routledge, 2017), p. 22.

<sup>17</sup> See, Felicia Fai and Philip Tomlinson, 'levelling up or down? Addressing regional Inequalities in the UK', *Contemporary Social Science*, vol. 18, no. 3-4 (2023), pp. 285-297; Aaron Andrews, 'Dereliction, Decay and the Problem of de-Industrialization in Britain, c. 1968-1977', *Urban History*, vol. 47, no. 2 (2020), pp. 236-256.

<sup>18</sup> Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community and Place: Landscapes and Legacies of Urban Decline* (University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 187.

<sup>19</sup> Robert Hollands, 'From shipyards to nightclubs: restructuring young adults' employment, household, and consumption identities in the north-east of England', *Berkeley Journal of Sociology*, vol. 41 (1991), p. 61.



Environmental histories have contributed greatly to the understanding of the impact of deindustrialization. In an environmental understanding of Kielder forest and how the location's purpose changed with the shifting national and regional attitudes, Peter Coates, David Moon, and Paul Warde demonstrate just how deindustrialization can impact a location.<sup>20</sup> On a regional level Jill Payne, within the same volume, details how it was the 'de-prioritization of domestic resource autonomy' that developed an 'integration of aesthetics and industry'.<sup>21</sup> From an environmental perspective, Payne is describing how the relationship between industry and nature is shifting. This change is brought on a reconfiguration of landscapes that integrates industrial heritage into new forms of land. However, this shift is not purely aesthetic, it is deeply embedded in regional policy decisions. Consett's story offers an incredibly valuable addition to this field, and addition that has largely been either overlooked or outright ignored.

Overall, the existing literature on deindustrialization as a whole has greatly overlooked Consett, focusing on larger industrial centres such as Sheffield, Liverpool, and London for example. As a result, the specific social, cultural, and environmental consequences experienced in smaller industrial towns like Consett remain underrepresented in historical accounts. This dissertation will fill a gap in the literature by examining how Consett navigated its own deindustrialization process, and sought to forge a new identity in the wake of the closures.

This dissertation is structured into three chapters, each examining a different facet of Consett's deindustrial experience. Chapter one provides historical context by charting the

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<sup>20</sup> Peter Coates, David Moon, and Paul Warde, *Local Places, Global Processes: Histories of Environmental Change in Britain and Beyond* (Havertown: Windgather Press, 2016); see also for another case study - Christine McCulloch, 'Decommissioning, discontinuation and abandonment of dams: is there a case for a national strategy?' in, H Hewlett (ed) *Ensuring Reservoir Safety into the Future* (Thomas Telford, 2008), pp. 423-434.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 103.

rise and fall of the steelworks, demonstrating the centrality of industry to the town's identity and culture. In doing so, proving that Consett must be more greatly researched by historians. Chapter two will investigate how Consett's relationship with its environment evolved after the industrial decline, particularly in terms of regeneration and the emergence of a new, complicated environmental narrative. Finally, chapter three will look to understand the success stories of post-industrial Consett, and cases that combat the declensionist literature that dominates the field. Controversially, this dissertation will also investigate how Thatcher and her government's actions benefitted the people of Consett, albeit in a very limited or unintentional manner

## Chapter One

### Steel and Struggle: Consett in the Shadow of Deindustrialization

BSC's in such a hole, it wants us put on the dole.

So Consett folk unite and fight, to keep on working which is our right.

The Consett lads will not give in, to BSC's plan which is a sin; We will fight through hell and fire, to keep our jobs till we retire.

Our kids need jobs, so how the hell, can we sell ours and theirs as well;

Consett's not paved with fool's gold, we don't sell jobs of both young and old.

Top management of BSC (All evil men, we must agree).

Won't be forgiven for their betrayal, we've booked their cells in Durham Jail.<sup>22</sup>

- A Quote in Rhyme by Wilson Hindson, Amalgamated Union of Engineering Workers

#### Introduction

The history of deindustrialization cannot be fully understood through economic data or top-down political decisions alone. While policies and production figures provide a structural overview, they often obscure the deeply personal and social consequences felt on the ground. This chapter will justify how the story of deindustrialization must be told from a bottom-up perspective that explores the profound nature of the changing deindustrial world. Through the case study of Consett, a steeltown in the Derwent Valley of County Durham, this chapter aims to demonstrate how national industrial restructuring profoundly

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<sup>22</sup> 'Consett Workers Answer: We Fight', *Save Consett Steel Campaign*, no. 5 (Newcastle: Tyneside Free Press, 1980). DCRO ND/De 45.

reshaped everyday life in ways that statistics cannot adequately capture. In order to understand the importance of Consett in this historical field, it is first imperative to understand the relationship between the town and the steelworks. To justify this approach, the chapter begins by introducing Consett's origins and development, particularly its emergence as a steel producing centre in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Far from being a typical rural settlement in a vast expanse of British countryside, Consett's identity, economy, and population were forged by the presence of the steelworks, which dominated both its physical and social landscape. Secondly, the chapter will look at the decline of the steelworks and the impact it had on the people of Consett. By looking at statistics, partnered with human responses to the process of deindustrialization, the section will outline the extreme impact that the closure of Consett industry had on the town's population. The last section of will incorporate vivid and profoundly human sources from Consett and Derwentside's protests, as a means of looking beyond the shortsighted historiographical narratives to tell a clearer history of Consett experience of change during the deindustrialization period.

## **Introduction to Consett**

In 'The Official Guide to Consett' from the 1950s, Consett was described as 'owing its origins to the establishment of iron works and coal mines in the thirties and forties of the nineteenth century'.<sup>23</sup> Prior to 1839, 'there was no such place as Consett', it was not until the Derwent Iron Company's arrival that the town began to grow.<sup>24</sup> As Consett's 'lifeblood

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<sup>23</sup> George Bellam, *Rambles in the Derwent Valley. A Guide to Places of Interest and Beauty in the Derwent Valley with Illustrations*, quoted in 'The Grove Garage: for Quick Efficient Repairs', *Consett: The Official Guide* (1953), p. 63. DCRO ND/De 49

<sup>24</sup> Consett Lions' Club, *The Consett Story* (Consett: Ramsden Williams Publications, 1963), p. 7.

[became] wrapped up in iron in 1840' the population grew from 150 to 12,500 as of 1936'.<sup>25</sup>

A significant portion of Consett's growing population were of Irish background, part a result of the Irish famine, and the rapidly growing demands of the Derwent Iron Company.<sup>26</sup>

Estimates predict that by 1851, 22% of Consett's population were either 'Irish or of Irish decent'.<sup>27</sup> Not only was it migration from within the British isles, but some two centuries prior to the industrial developments in Consett, the iron also brought in business from places like Germany.<sup>28</sup> Although Consett was, and still largely remains, geographically isolated, its function as an industrial town made it distinctly urban. Consett's existence as a steeltown was deeply liminal, the town may have been rural in location, but its function was undoubtedly urban.<sup>29</sup> This is reflected in its governance too, from 1894 to 1974, Consett was governed by the Consett Urban District Council. In 1937, the geographical Consett Urban Area was formed through the joining of the urban districts of Consett, Benfieldside and Leadgate along with the parishes of Knitsley, Ebchester and Medomsley.<sup>30</sup> The Derwentside District Council, established under the Local Government Act 1972, consolidated the former Consett Urban District, Stanley Urban District, and Lanchester Rural District under one governance in 1974. For decades to come, and still to the present day, Consett's steeltown status was a forefront symbol of advertising and aesthetic for local businesses and groups.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> 'Iron and Coal: Consett's Heart', *Consett: The Official Guide* (1953), p. 37. DCRO ND/De 49

<sup>26</sup> For discussion on Consett's Irish immigrants, see – Godfrey F Duffy, 'County Monaghan Immigrants in the Consett Area of County Durham, England, 1842-1855', *Clogher Record*, vol. 16, no. 1 (1997), pp. 37-45.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38.

<sup>28</sup> In the 17<sup>th</sup> century, a number of German Lutheran families fled Germany and moved to Shotley Bridge. The environmental qualities of the location were ideal for the business. See – 'Our Villages', *Newcastle Courant*, April 12, 1878, *British Library Newspapers* (accessed March 14, 2025). Available at <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/Y3206640172/GDCS?u=unn&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=d1c83fdd>.

<sup>29</sup> Despite the urban function of the town, some sectors operated under a rural title, the post office for instance, see - Consett Lions' Club, *The Consett Story*, p. 104.

<sup>30</sup> Consett Lions' Club, *The Consett Story*, p. 88.

<sup>31</sup> Today there are countless examples, for instance Consett Ale Works who are 'determined that the legacy will continue to live on', available at <http://consettaleworks.co.uk/about>

Overall, Consett's history, urban developments, and position today is entirely the result of the steelworks' involvement in the area. Whether it be the hospital that still stands there today, or the original Consett Technical College, between 1840 and 1980, the steelworks functioned as both the economic engine and cultural centre of Consett's development.

### **Consett's Industrial Decline**

While Consett's rapid growth in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries was built on the backbone of iron and steel, its future began to unravel as industrial changes began to take hold in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. By 1974 the population of the 'new Derwentside District Council fell from 100,130 to 91,478' following redundancies, leading to many 'younger men with families [being] obliged to seek employment elsewhere', as was described in an economic report of the region.<sup>32</sup> Consett's longstanding Labour MP, David Watkins, who reigned throughout most of Consett's industrial decline, described the prospected closure of the steelworks as 'facing nothing less than a return to the depression. Three out of four people in Consett are directly or indirectly dependent on the steel industry'.<sup>33</sup> Consett was once a town with a thriving mining industry running in conjunction with the steelworks. However, following over 15,000 mining jobs removed, the steelworks became 'the remaining pillar of the community', solidifying its steeltown status.<sup>34</sup> MP David Watkins presented the Consett problem to parliament during a Commons sitting, telling the House of Commons that 'the people would be out of work and any steeltown which was

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<sup>32</sup> 'Derwentside', *Journal of the Derwentside District Council*, no. 2 (Swalwell, Newcastle: A.A Fletcher and Sons Ltd, July 1974). DCRO ND/De 50/2.

<sup>33</sup> 'Steel Closure Leaves Consett without Hope', *Financial Times*, December 13, 1979. *Financial Times Historical Archive* (accessed February 21, 2025), p. 5.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.

heavily dependent... would be turned into a state of industrial dereliction. This is quite unacceptable to the House'.<sup>35</sup> In response, the MP for Motherwell and Wishaw confirmed Consett's problem as a 'desperate situation'.<sup>36</sup> 'The government's strength is based very much in the south of the country... an actual hostility towards places like Consett and the sort of people that exist in places like that', MP David Watkins described how trying to get the House's help was like 'trying to get blood from a stone', the issue of the people was not taken into consideration at the highest national level during Consett's deindustrial process.<sup>37</sup>

Furthermore, as part of the recent DDC's deindustrial campaign to reclaim land, reports into the conditions and liveability of properties in South Moor, Stanley were conducted. The overwhelming majority of reports showed that the properties were 'unfit' to live in, and across all the reports the following declaration was signed onto each; 'evidence of rising dampness to all ground floors'.<sup>38</sup> While ostensibly a record of urban regeneration, these council documents reveal a sanitised narrative of progress that omits the lived narratives of people. At face value, this council fronted document chronicles a positive cleanup story. However, where governmental and council documents falter, especially in this document, is the lack of the human in the narrative. In a very impassioned handwritten letter to the Chief of Environmental Health Office, one of the former residents makes her feelings known. The resident describes how the council were far from transparent, telling how she was left 'waiting since last September, and every monthly meeting after that, for

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<sup>35</sup> UK Parliament, 'Steel Industry', *House of Commons Debate*, vol. 961, col. 514, by David Watkins, January 25, 1979. Available at [STEEL INDUSTRY \(Hansard, 25 January 1979\)](#)

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> David Watkins quoted in Jeremy Lack, *Consett: After The Blast* (Tyne Tees Television, 1981), documentary, 26:54-27:23. Available at Yorkshire Film Archive <https://www.yfanefa.com/record/15288>

<sup>38</sup> Derwent District Council, *The Derwentside District (South Moor, no. 3) Clearance Area, 1982*. DCRO ND/De 756/1/1

confirmation about the houses'.<sup>39</sup> Despite the council records describing the reclamation of lands as a positive for the community, it does not accurately tell of how the population experience deindustrialization projects. Grassroots and bottom-up voices and stories complicate the official narratives presented, therefore proving just why they must be incorporated in historiographical analysis.

Consett is, in many ways, a greatly unique study in the grand scheme of the dismantling of industry. The story of prospected unemployment in the North-West Durham region was already dire, however Consett was in many ways uniquely punished. 'Only one worker in North West Durham as a whole, and one worker in eleven in Consett, was not employed in these industries', Consett and their people were remarkable in the way they were affected by the closure of industries.<sup>40</sup> As of September 1980, the unemployment rate in Consett following the closure of the works totalled 'approximately 15.5 per cent', or near double the national average rate at the time.<sup>41</sup> In these facts, it is even more astounding that the literature on Consett is few and far between. The literature that has been written on the broader topic of deindustrialization often marginalize Consett, despite the small town's global influence in the world of steelmaking and the extreme level of effect the deindustrial process had.<sup>42</sup> Throughout much of the historiographical contributions on

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<sup>39</sup> Female resident to Mr Peter Hunter, Chief Environmental Health Officer, handwritten letter, August 17, 1982 DCRO ND/De 756/1/1.

<sup>40</sup> J.R Atkinson, *Unemployment and Economic Problems in County Durham* (February, 1973), appendix IV. DCRO DC/EDRU 30

<sup>41</sup> Kenneth Warren, *Consett Iron 1840 to 1980: A Study in Industrial Location* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), p. 171.

<sup>42</sup> Consett Iron Company supplied materials for the development of the Korean Railway Bureau, see – 371/1385. n.d. *British Foreign Office: Japan Correspondence, 1906-1913: Dominance of the Genro: 1912* (Kew, United Kingdom: The National Archives, 1912), p.71. MS FO 371/1385 read at Durham County Record Office; Consett also supplied specialised steel for the construction of British nuclear submarines, see – 'Reply to Navy by Steel Firms', *The Times*, August 10, 1966. *The Times Digital Archives* (accessed February 1, 2025), p. 8.



deindustrialization, the focus is often too closely directed toward larger cities and has ultimately distorted the history of the process of deindustrialization.<sup>43</sup> As argued by Stefan Berger and Christian Wicke, 'deindustrialization is a highly place-dependent phenomenon. The effects of globalization are felt usually at the very local level'.<sup>44</sup> Therefore, the importance of historiographical contributions on small town studies is immense to paint a more accurate portrayal of the topic. Where better to view the tumultuous journey through rapid industrialization than Consett?

### **Consett's Resistance and the Women's Miners Strikes**

The accumulation of the neglect toward Consett and its population finally culminated in mass strikes in response to the closure of Consett Steel Works. The Save Consett Steel Campaign epitomizes the overall consensus and opinions among Consett's locals. The Joint Trade Unions of Consett Steel Works, in response to projected closure of Consett Works, described the proposal as a 'grave commercial error' that precipitates 'severe unemployment and extreme social hardship in an already hard-pressed part of the North East'.<sup>45</sup> The British Steel Corporation forecasted that '70% of Consett workers will vote to accept redundancy without a fight', however this could not be further from the truth.<sup>46</sup> Reducing redundancy to a percentage dehumanises the process, obscuring the complex

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<sup>43</sup> For example, W.F Lever, 'Deindustrialisation and the Reality of Post-Industrial City', *Urban Studies*, vol. 28, no. 6 (December 1991), pp. 983-999; Steven High, 'Beyond Aesthetics: Visibility and Invisibility in the Aftermath of Deindustrialization', *International Labour and Working-Class History*, vol. 84 (2013), pp. 140-153; Ian Douglas, Rob Hodgson and Nigel Lawson, 'Industry, Environment and Health through 200 Years in Manchester', *Ecological Economics*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2002), pp. 235-55.

<sup>44</sup> Stefan Berger and Christian Wicke, 'INTRODUCTION: Deindustrialization, Heritage, and Representations of Identity', *The Public Historian*, vol. 39, no. 4 (2017), p. 12. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26421012>.

<sup>45</sup> <sup>45</sup> 'No Case for Closure', *The Joint Trade Unions of Consett Steel Works to the British Steel Corporation's document 'The Case for Consett Closure'* (July 1980). DCRO ND/De 47.

<sup>46</sup> Spokesman of the BSC Ronnie Dodds quoted in *The Engineer*, June 1980, as seen in 'Consett Workers Answer: We Fight', *Save Consett Steel Campaign*, no. 5 (Newcastle: Tyneside Free Press, 1980). DCRO ND/De 45.

personal and social consequences for individuals, families, and communities. The decision to accept redundancies, for many, was more than simply a case of finding another job.

Harrowingly, for many, deindustrialization was not merely an economic trend but a deeply personal crisis. One often marked by trauma and identity loss. In an edition of the *Save Consett Steel Campaign*, it was reported that ‘throughout Britain, inquests are hearing of people who have killed themselves as a direct result of redundancy and unemployment’.<sup>47</sup>

The closure of the steelworks was a far greater issue than merely economics or politics. It was a deeply personal and societal act that devastated the population’s lives. As described by Peter Wardley, ‘there is... a discussion of the human and social costs incurred when one-industry communities become... deprived of the heart’.<sup>48</sup>

The protests did not stop at the closure of Consett Steelworks, the 1984/85 Women’s Miners Strikes continued the legacy of bottom-up resistance.<sup>49</sup> The activism of women during the strikes illustrated the broader social and economic struggles of working-class communities in deindustrializing towns and cities. As historian Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite highlights, women were not simply protesting ‘for their husbands’ sake’, but instead it was ‘about protecting existing communities’.<sup>50</sup> By incorporating women’s voices, Sutcliffe-Braithwaite offers an insightful look into women’s stories to better understand the topic of the community in deindustrializing Britain. However, her analysis, like much of the existing literature, marginalises Consett which is mentioned only once. This oversight reveals a broader issue with deindustrial historical literature. Recovering stories like the Leadgate

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<sup>47</sup> ‘Consett Workers Answer: We Fight’, *Save Consett Steel Campaign*, no. 5 (Newcastle: Tyneside Free Press, 1980). DCRO ND/De 45.

<sup>48</sup> Peter Wardley, *The Economic History Review*, vol. 44, no. 4 (1991), p. 735.

<sup>49</sup> See Appendix B for banners and clothing used during some of the North East Women’s Miners Strikes

<sup>50</sup> Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite and Natalie Thomlinson, ‘Crisis and Drift: Autumn 1984’, *Women and the Miner’s Strikes, 1984-1985* (Oxford: Oxford Academic, 2023), pp. 157-158.

community kitchen that ran out of the local school in support of the Women's Miners Strikes, extends Sutcliffe-Braithwaite's insights into a new spatial context.<sup>51</sup>

As of 1949, during the time of reconstruction and growth following the end of the second world war, the percentage of female employee of the total insured employees in Consett was just 18.4%.<sup>52</sup> When compared to the 37.8% in Newcastle, the figures would suggest that women played a significantly less influential role than male employees in Consett.<sup>53</sup> This disparity not only highlights the gendered nature of Consett's workforce, but also explains why women's voices have often been overlooked in both contemporary records and later historical narratives. This is further proof that historians of deindustrialization, and even looking beyond that just of Consett's change, must incorporate grassroots and women's voices to avoid marginalizing an entire corner of history. But as this chapter shows, those women played a vital role in sustaining community solidarity during economic collapse. Although economic historians have acknowledged the decline of steeltowns like Consett, their focus on macroeconomics often misses lived human histories that shaped these communities. By looking at the human response to deindustrialization in Consett, in emotionally rich sources like strike pamphlets, interviews, and women's strikes, it becomes evident that the story is far more dramatic than what contemporary governmental sources or purely economic histories could ever tell.

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<sup>51</sup> Andy Plant, recorded by Connor Gettings, at Eden Miner's Colliery, Leadgate, 21 March, 2025, 3pm. 0:52:23-0:52:33.

<sup>52</sup> Kenneth Warren, *Consett Iron 1840 to 1980: A Study in Industrial Location*, p. 182.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

## Conclusion

To conclude, the process of deindustrialization is far from a single moment in British history. It was not a decision made by just Thatcher and her government. It was a process spanning decades, taking form through top-down policies devised by both Labour and Conservative governments. This chapter has examined how shifting national attitudes toward industry impact life in Consett, combining statistical evidence with archival grassroots sources to foreground the human experience of deindustrialization. Historians, like the previously discussed Mah or Jill Payne, who wrote through a cultural and environmental approach have better understood the humanity behind the historical process. This is a theme that will be preserved throughout the rest of this dissertations analysis to more accurately comprehend the effects of deindustrialization and post-industrialization on Consett both as a place and as a population.

For Consett, and many other heavy specialised, primarily mono-employment towns, the story of deindustrialization was not just one of economic decline, but of human struggle and resilience. This is a fact that was contemporarily neglected by top-down powers, and all too often today by historians who focus too linearly on statistics and percentages. This chapter analysed some powerful bottom-up sources to better display the intense human element of deindustrialization in Consett. The stories of strikes, protests, and people effected reveal the deep scars left behind by industrial decline. Chapter two will continue with the focus on the counter-narratives of the lived experiences of Consett's population. If the closure of the steelworks fractured Consett's socio-economic lifeblood, the subsequent attempts at regeneration introduced a new layer of complexity. Moving into an environmental history lens in the next chapter, the attempts at regeneration will be assessed

both from a top-down and grassroots perspective. Moving forward, the historiography of deindustrialization must continue to integrate both the Consett and the human element, recognising that beyond the economic data and policy debates, it was real people who bore the brunt of these changes. Understanding how people remember, resist, and attempt to remake a place is essential to not only Consett, but to the broader historical literature of deindustrial Britain.

## Chapter Two

### The Consett Study: Post Industrial Consett's New Identity in the Derwent Valley

#### Introduction

Until Project Genesis' involvement in 1994, Consett's regeneration was a determined yet severely fragmented effort to rebuild a community in the wake of industrial collapse. The funding spent as part of Consett and Derwentside's regeneration was disconnected and disjointed, with projects often lacking coordination and long-term vision. After the closure of Consett's steelworks in 1980, the town faced significant economic and environmental challenges.<sup>54</sup> In response, through the efforts of the DDC and the swift demolition of the steelworks, Consett began reclaiming its position in the surrounding countryside. Shifting from an industrial urbanised space to one focused on environmental and cultural regeneration. Christopher Smout identifies the growing significance of environmental tourism and engagement in the late twentieth century to economic growth, and how this point was already known as early as 1970.<sup>55</sup> Smout quotes Max Nicholson, the 'former director of Nature Conservancy' as declaring that tourism was founded in people interested in the environment itself, rather than for exploitation.<sup>56</sup> Consett's environmental turn was not merely ideological, but closely tied to emerging economic incentives linked to tourism and land reclamation. The local council redirected its priorities from urban development to

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<sup>54</sup> Consett was listed in the same category as Manchester and Liverpool in terms of severity of unemployment in 1982. See, Andrew Green, 'Considering Long-Term Unemployment as a Criterion for Regional Policy Aid', *Aid*, vol. 16, no. 3 (1984), p. 216.

<sup>55</sup> T.C Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History in Scotland and Northern Ireland since 1600* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 143.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

embracing the surrounding rural landscape in order to align with the growing tourist and environmental economic growth. Given these dynamics, this chapter adopts an environmental historical lens to examine how regeneration policies reshaped space and identity in post-industrial Consett and Derwentside. An environmental history approach will allow this chapter to understand the way that the changing relationship with the environment in the Consett and Derwentside area created a deep instability, uncertainty, and identity crisis throughout the area. This chapter argues that Consett's environmental regeneration efforts, although framed as progress, instead deepened the town's struggles to regenerate with an imposed rural aesthetic that was incompatible with its industrial memory. Sections two and three will observe the attempted embrace of rurality in educational projects, and the strong cultural resistance to this new artificial rural modernity.

### **Consett's Liminality and the Development of a Regenerative Identity Crisis**

The new, post-industrial environmentalist relationship imposed on Consett left the town in a purgatory state. Consett's regeneration was experiencing an identity crisis, stuck between whether it was part of a declining urban location, or within the rural landscape that surrounds it. According to the *Times* newspaper in 1990, Consett was part of the 'largest land reclamation scheme ever undertaken in Europe, costing upward of £12 million'.<sup>57</sup> By 1988, £41 million had been spent on the reclamation of the steelworks site and other environmental improvements.<sup>58</sup> The DDC's clear vision for Consett was to embrace the environment and reclaim its position above the Derwent Valley in the northern Pennines.

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<sup>57</sup> Peter Davenport, 'England still belongs to Mee', *Times*, (December 8, 1990). *The Times Digital Archive* (accessed March 12, 2025), p. 15. Available at <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0500084053/TTDA?u=unn&sid=bookmark-TTDA&xid=4e308d13>.

<sup>58</sup> Kenneth Warren, *Consett Iron 1840 to 1980*, pp. 177-178.

One of the most notable of these projects was the reclamation of the former railway lines. In original plans for the reimagining of the Derwent Walk line, the vision was ‘to provide a “wild-life corridor” linking locally important valuable wild-life areas in the Derwent Valley and thus to act as an “open Air Laboratory” for school children and the public’.<sup>59</sup> The repurposed Derwent Walk, Lanchester Valley Walk, and Stanhope and Tyne Walk, all of which were former railway lines that carved through Consett, would later form the Sea to Sea (C2C) route.<sup>60</sup> Andy Plant who was born in London and moved to Consett in 1983, and has been part of the local Labour Party team since 1986, describes them as:

Never had managed anything magical, but certainly always tried to have an attempt at the tourism strategy [...] So I think the area, even if not the town, is on the map because of the C2C. We desperately need to do more work of actually getting a few bob off of the cyclists as they go through. Sadly, we’re not quite at the right point for people to stop for lunch or overnight stays.<sup>61</sup>

As Andy Plant’s observation suggests, although the repurposed railway lines attracted transient tourist interest, they failed to embed Consett meaningfully into the economic circuits of environment tourism. In a 1988 leaflet, *Attractions County Durham*, published by the County Durham Tourist Board, the only reference to Consett is its ‘countryside walks on disused railway lines’.<sup>62</sup> What this source fails to illustrate is the severe disconnect caused by the repurposing of the railways. Originally closed in the 1950s and 60s, the last train to run through Consett did so on 17 March 1984, as part of a Railtour special and then the line was subsequently demolished. While larger deindustrializing city railways were being repurposed for mobility and commuting, like Newcastle Metro or Manchester Metrolink, Consett’s repurposed lines only served to isolate the town’s people and promote the new rural

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<sup>59</sup> J.R Atkinson, *Proposed Derwent Country Walk*, 1970, DCRO DC/EDRU 25.

<sup>60</sup> The Hownsgill Viaduct is an example of this repurposing along the C2C, see – Appendix C.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with Andy Plant, recorded by Connor Gettings, at Eden Miner’s Colliery, Leadgate, 21 March, 2025, 3 p.m.

<sup>62</sup> County Durham Tourist Board, *Attractions County Durham*, leaflet, 1988. TWAM G.URA/4/3; See Appendix D.



participation. Much like many other small towns, the Beeching Report and the following closures separated Consett from public transport, leaving only the Consett Bus Station as the hub for transport in the town.<sup>63</sup> This isolation exacerbated Consett's post-industrial unemployment, severing access to regional labour markets and reinforcing economic stagnation. This is especially damaging when the DDC admitted as early as 1983 that there would be 'no manual recovering [of work] by 2000', or no direct replacement of employment, in the Consett and Derwentside area.<sup>64</sup>

This limbo between rurality and urbanity is a contending topic in the historiography of post-industrial Britain. Kristin Bluemel argues that in order to achieve participation in rural modernity, there must be nostalgic 'relations to rural landscapes and rural literature' in order for 'rural people to [fully] participate in British modernity'.<sup>65</sup> The issue, however, is that unlike traditional rural communities, Consett's taskscape and identity were forged in the industrial urbanism, a setting defined by labour, production, and environmental exploitation. The abrupt imposition of a leisure-oriented rural aesthetic thus fractured the community's spatial memory and undermined its historical continuity. Therefore, Consett's forced new relationship with the rich rural landscape it is situated in was not a call upon nostalgia, but rather a new and unfamiliar imposition that disrupted the town's historical identity. Furthermore, Tim Ingold's theory of the 'taskscape' epitomizes Consett's struggle for a new identity distinctly.<sup>66</sup> Ingold posits that 'taskscape' exist as locations of dwelling and work, as

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<sup>63</sup> See for articles on the impacts of the Beeching Reports – Simon Bradley, *The Railways: Nation, Network and People* (Profile Books, 2015), pp. 255-256.; Denys Lawrence Munby, 'The Reshaping of the British Railways', *The Journal of Industrial Economics*, vol. 11, no. 3 (1963), pp. 161-182.

<sup>64</sup> *Consett*, handwritten notes of a WEA meetings (April 25, 1983). TWAM E/WEA 1/15/13.

<sup>65</sup> Kristin Bluemel, 'Rural Modernity in Britain: Landscape, Literature, Nostalgia', in Linda M Ross, and others (eds), *New Lives, New Landscapes Revisited: Rural Modernity in Britain* (London: Oxford University Press, 2024), p. 60.

<sup>66</sup> See Tim Ingold, *The perception of the environment: essays on livelihood, dwelling and skill: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Routledge, 2021).

opposed to a 'landscape' that has the purpose of aesthetic appreciation.<sup>67</sup> Consett's existence aligns closely with Ingold's argument, owing its origins to immigration, dwelling, and at the forefront industry and work. On the other hand, Consett's top-down regeneration projects seemingly align more closely with the development of a 'landscape'. Therefore, Consett's regeneration sought to establish a new taskscape, one founded in the vast landscape the town is enclosed within, unfortunately developing a regeneration period founded in a disorienting liminality.

Just how sincere were the DDC's attempts to reinvent Consett as a rural town taskscape in its surrounding environment? In a 2005 contaminated lands report on Berry Edge, Consett, it was determined that the 'site [...] formerly occupied by cooling towers, chimneys, generator house [...] still contains remnants of past use... up to 4.0m of made ground with slag and ash and abundant in-ground slabs and foundation obstructions'.<sup>68</sup> In the same report, a month later it was determined that the 'chromium values are elevated above acceptable values... and cannot be attributed to localised hotspots'.<sup>69</sup> The recommended levels of chromium in the land for residential land use is 200mg/kg, however in Berry Edge, Consett the chromium values peaked at '400mg/kg' and '960mg/kg' in some test samples.<sup>70</sup> While the reports were conducted beyond this dissertation's chronology, they trace contamination directly to Consett's industrial legacy. One particular issue with this sort of contamination, as described in the report, is that the ground would not be suitable

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., pp. 156-158.

<sup>68</sup> George Wimpey North, *Specified Methods of Works for the Consolidation of Abandoned Mineworkings* (Newcastle Business Park, Newcastle upon Tyne: WSP Environmental UK, May 2005), p. 2. DCC/NS 2/37

<sup>69</sup> George Wimpey North: *Remediation Method Statement* (Newcastle Business Park, Newcastle upon Tyne: WSP Environmental UK, June 2005), p. 4. DCC/NS 2/37

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p. Appendix E.

for domestic gardening. Therefore, it would be impossible for the people of Consett to engage with their new forced relationship with the environment when the environment itself is not capable of participating. As Andy Plant recalls, 'vegetable growing was still a big thing. If you think of the bungalows walking down here (Pont bank, Leadgate) [...] that was really quite noticeable'.<sup>71</sup> The disconnect caused by land contamination mainly affected the newly built houses situated upon old industrial sites. While much of the existing population of Consett was growing plants and foods within their own patches of nature, it was impossible for new residents to engage with Consett's new environmental direction at home. Consequently, it would be increasingly difficult to label Consett's new rural identity as an honest move toward a better, greener future with the knowledge that, for the new residents of the population, they could not engage in the new direction of identity, even at their own doorstep.

### **The Re-Education of the Workers and the Unemployed of Consett**

With the DDC's admittance that there would be no direct replacement of employment in the Consett or Derwentside area until, at least, the turn of the century, the role of re-education and cultural regeneration was monumental. Consett's post-steelworks liminality was not only found in broader regeneration projects, but also among the re-education schemes for the ex-workers and unemployed. As part of the regeneration efforts in Consett, a significant focus was placed on ecological re-education. Both top-down and grassroots organizations, such as the CTC and WEA, aimed to promote and educate the

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<sup>71</sup> Interview with Andy Plant, born in London and moved to Consett in 1983, part of the local Labour Party team; recorded by Connor Gettings, at Eden Miner's Colliery, Leadgate, 21 March, 2025, 3 p.m.

environmentally 'changing face of Consett' to the local demographic.<sup>72</sup> These environmental educational projects were rooted in the unemployed of Derwentside, and not targeted for those with the luxury of wealth in the post-steelworks economy. In notes taken from a WEA meeting, courses on the 'ecology and wildlife of Derwentside' were 'open to all' and offered to the ISTC, the former British trade union for metal workers, in the same breath as a course on 'welfare rights'.<sup>73</sup> There was a clear intention to both re-educate and re-purpose the former heavy industry workers and fashion them into their new rural identities. Despite being a grassroots project, the WEA had a great deal of influence in the Consett and Derwentside area, with up to 500 in attendance at one of their educational programmes.<sup>74</sup> The WEA also had direct communications with the former ISTC (now the Consett Central Branch for the Unemployed) seeking 'advice or some information which would possibly help our unemployed members'.<sup>75</sup> Consett Technical College also identified the importance of re-education in the Derwentside area. In a letter to the Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust, the CTC observed that 'it is clearly important to the local community that adult [...] education [...] is maintained'.<sup>76</sup> In the same proposal, CTC outlines the courses they offered to the unemployed and ex-workers as part of their project, with 'engineering certificates', 'Motor Vehicle Craft courses', and 'store supervisors courses' at the forefront.<sup>77</sup> The CTC also attempted to embrace the new rural climate in their own re-educational programmes. In the documentary *Town for Sale* that looks at post-industrial Consett, the re-education of former

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<sup>72</sup> Workers' Educational Association, *The Changing Face of Consett: An Introduction to Ecology* (Newcastle: 1983). TWAM E/WEA 1/15/13. See Appendix D.

<sup>73</sup> *Consett*, handwritten notes of a WEA meetings (April 25, 1983). TWAM E/WEA 1/15/13. See Appendix D.

<sup>74</sup> Simon Henderson, *WEA Northern District: Programme of Educational Work with the Unemployed of Derwentside* (April 2 1986). TWAM E/WEA 1/15/13.

<sup>75</sup> Edward Taylor, *Consett Central Branch for the Unemployed to WEA*, March 5 1983. TWAM E/WEA 1/15/13.

<sup>76</sup> T.C Storrie, *Consett Technical College, Proposal to Joseph Rowntree Charitable Trust for a Feasibility Project in Community Basic Education* (September, 1982). TWAM E/WEA 1/15/13.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

steelworker Arthur Carter is followed. Within which Arthur Carter describes how despite receiving his agricultural certificate and applying for work at a local farm, the farmer rejected his application, stating 'the farmer did not want to know me, because I did not have enough experience in farming'.<sup>78</sup> Unfortunately, the repurposing and retraining of the former heavy industry was not a smooth transition. As Alan Swinburne questioned, 'how would you get a 55 year old steel roller who worked in a plate mill all his life in a very heavy industry, go put crisps in a box? It just was not possible'.<sup>79</sup> For the people of Consett, the re-education and re-integration into employment within the town was a difficult regenerative process. Although well intentioned, the efforts of the WEA and CTC struggled to understand and embrace the new taskscape Consett found itself in. This is evidenced by a Newcastle University analysis of the issues of a 'so-called North-South divide' that looked at 280 sites throughout Britain and their prosperity during the 1987 general election, 'Consett ranked lowest of them all'.<sup>80</sup>

### **Consett Music Projects and Cultural Regeneration**

A problematic continuation of Consett's liminality exists within Ingold's concept of the taskscape. Ingold identifies that the temporality of the taskscape is best reflected by music and participating in cultural activities.<sup>81</sup> As part of Consett's regeneration, a substantial sum of funding and effort was put into musical projects in Consett.<sup>82</sup> These

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<sup>78</sup> Oliver Morse and David Dugan, *Consett Town for Sale*, documentary, (BBC Two, 1981), 30:21-30:50.

<sup>79</sup> Alan Swinburne, recorded by Connor Gettings, at Eden Miner's Colliery, Leadgate, 18 April, 2025, 10am. 03:13:02-

<sup>80</sup> Kenneth Warren, *Consett Iron 1840 to 1980*, p. 180.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., p. 157.

<sup>82</sup> Ray Hudson, 'Making Music Work? Alternative Regeneration Strategies in a Deindustrialized Locality: The Case of Derwentside', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, vol. 20, no. 4 (1995), pp. 460-473.

musical projects, known as the Consett Music Projects, were not merely forms of entertainment but acted as a means of re-establishing a collective identity within the community.<sup>83</sup> This, therefore, echoes Ingold's notion that music and participation in cultural activities contributed to the development of Consett and Derwentside as a taskscape. With this in mind, the cultural regeneration of Consett, through music and arts projects, only served to act as a rejection of the attempted rural modernity. Ray Hudson, in one of the very few focused studies on post-industrial Consett and Derwentside, identifies that when Consett was given more control over its economic future, the CMPs restored the 'Tommy Armstrong Memorial Trust'.<sup>84</sup> Tommy Armstrong, better known as 'The Pitsman Poet', often wrote songs about the life and experiences of miners and industrial workers.<sup>85</sup> Even the new cultural projects of 1980s Consett were connected closely with their urban industrial roots rather than embracing the new rural climate. Symbolically, a punk EP recorded with the CMP was titled *Rock & Dole*.<sup>86</sup> With lyrics like, 'what happened to the marching men? They're all locked outside. Who has got the key to let them all back in again', there was a clear disdain within the new cultural projects.<sup>87</sup> This cultural response indicates a resistance to the environmentalist landscape narrative that sought to redefine Consett as a rural space, reinforcing instead the town's urban, industrial memory and the deeply problematic liminality of Consett's regeneration that fashioned its identity crisis. This demonstrates how a community was expected to embrace its new environmental aesthetic, yet lacked the organic historical ties to the rural landscape that would make such a transition more

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<sup>83</sup> The Consett Music Project was formed in 1980 by 'former steel workers and unemployed young people', with the aim of 'drawing a bridge between the past and the future', see, Ray Hudson, 'Making Music Work? Alternative Regeneration Strategies in a Deindustrialized Locality: The Case of Derwentside', p. 466.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., p. 466.

<sup>85</sup> Tommy Armstrong, *The Trimdon Grange Explosion*, song (1882).

<sup>86</sup> The song *Marching Men* expresses the deep industrial culture still present in the town's regeneration. See, Decade Waltz, 'Marching Men', *Rock & Dole*, EP 7-inch vinyl, 1983; See Appendix E.

<sup>87</sup> Lyrics taken from *Marching Men* by Decade Waltz, see - Ibid.

seamless.<sup>88</sup> This dual development as both a taskscape and a landscape only served to reinforce Consett and Derwentside's difficult liminality. Natasha Vall, in the work *Cultural Regionalism*, portrayed the image that the art and music developments in 'North east England' and the 'Northern Arts [played] a decisive role in the creation of flagship cultural projects [...] landmarks of the region's transition to a post-industrial society'.<sup>89</sup> While Vall's work is greatly insightful and rings true for parts of the North East, had Vall looked closer at more of the North East, more specifically Consett and Derwentside, the struggle of Northern Arts' initiatives to reconcile cultural restoration with the local economic realities would be better comprehended.<sup>90</sup> Vall describes how Northern Arts was able to 'benefit from the "free money"' following the termination of the Tyne and Wear Metropolitan Council.<sup>91</sup> While Consett was a beneficiary of these newly inherited Northern Arts funds, whether that be through loans or the creation of the Steering Committee that gave direction to the music projects, the distribution and impact of this cultural investment only served to reinforce the town's sense of cultural in-betweenness.<sup>92</sup> In this timeframe, the Northern Arts' projects contributed to Consett and Derwentside's position within the taskscape rather than aiding the region's rural regeneration. Ultimately, the cultural grassroots regeneration efforts in Consett, though well-intentioned and often celebrated, functioned more as extensions of the town's former, declining taskscape than as bridges towards a new ecological, environmentally based one. Rather than helping Consett embrace a romanticised rural modernity, these projects reinforced its industrial memory. This oxymoron highlights the

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<sup>88</sup> Referring back to Bluemel's ideas of rural nostalgia, see footnote 4.

<sup>89</sup> Natasha Vall, *Cultural Region North East England 1945-2000* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011), p. 117.

<sup>90</sup> The only reference to Consett cited in the index of *Cultural Region*, discusses the failed showing of *Rapunzel* in 1949. See, Natasha Vall, *Cultural Region*, p. 98.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., p. 117.

<sup>92</sup> Ray Hudson, 'Making Music Work?', p. 468.

area's persistent liminality and post-industrial disorientation brought on by competing narratives of what should become.

## **Conclusion**

Overall, this chapter contends that Consett's modern day 'semi-rural' identity was not founded through careful planning, but rather the result of paradoxical liminalities that ushered in a scattered regeneration in Consett and Derwentside that prevented the revival of cultural and economic life. Before the involvement of Project Genesis in 1994, regeneration funding in Consett and Derwentside was largely incoherent. While individual projects like the WEA's ecological courses and the Consett Music Project provided short-term support, they operated in isolation, lacking the strategic coordination and integrated planning that Project Genesis would later provide. By observing the events through an environmentally historic lens, this chapter has established the complex and difficult position of Consett and Derwentside's identity more clearly. While the location operated as an urban steeltown for its entire industrial existence, the changing relationship with the environment and attempted ruralisation intensified problematic liminalities in the area's regeneration. Although there were large efforts to incorporate the new rural ideology into the town's education and identity, it ultimately failed to cultivate a new culture and ethos within Consett. The in-betweenness of Consett's identity and regenerative efforts ultimately failed to culturally or economically progress the town. By analysing the contaminated lands files, this discussion has showcased the damage that centuries of heavy industry caused to the land, and the severe difficulty is caused for the people of Consett to engage with the new environmental direction of the town even in the most basic of forms. Cultural and labour



histories must include environmental histories in order to comprehend the deep issues at play during regeneration, such as this chapter's focus on post-industrial development through shifting environmental attitudes and liminalities. After all, by the 1990s it was more widely understood that 'the "chocolate box" image' of rural towns 'often hides human problems which are every bit as real as their urban equivalents'.<sup>93</sup> The final chapter of this dissertation offers a counter argument against the overly declensionist and pessimistic narratives that are all too familiar in both scholarly literature, and recounts of Consett and other post-industrial towns. By looking at success stories and the opportunities granted to deindustrializing locations, the final chapter will challenge declensionist readings by foregrounding the resilience of post-industrial communities.

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<sup>93</sup> Gordon E Cherry and Alan Rogers, 'Rural Change and Planning: England and Wales in the Twentieth Century', *Studies in History, Planning, and the Environment* (London: E & FN Spon, 1996), p. 172.

## Chapter Three

### Thatcherism revisited: how the people of Consett, County Durham, forged new and different post-industrial futures, 1980-2000

#### Introduction

In one of the few mentions of Consett in Robert Colls' and Bill Lancaster's *Geordie's: roots of regionalism*, the story of Consett's deindustrialization is concluded to be 'the story of a defeat'.<sup>94</sup> Although Consett undoubtedly suffered immeasurably in the wake of deindustrialization and through its disorderly regeneration, the town's account is not without moments of resilience and successful regeneration stories. For too long, historians of all backgrounds have failed to capture the intricately nuanced opportunities of hope that were presented to industrial workers in post-industrial towns. However, as put by Matthew Kelly and Ben Anderson, 'New lives are made possible as new landscapes become possible', Consett's integration into its rural landscape presented new prospects for both the town and its people.<sup>95</sup> Christopher Smouth has put forth the idea that the history of British deindustrialisation and post-industrial towns 'need not be a disaster'.<sup>96</sup> This chapter will adopt Smout's anti-'declensionist' lens to reconsider how Consett's transition from an industrial town to a rural identity catalysed unexpected opportunities. Much of the existing literature centres Margaret Thatcher in narratives of decline, at times even veering into

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<sup>94</sup>Robert Colls, and Bill Lancaster, *Geordies: Roots of Regionalism*, 2nd ed. (Newcastle upon Tyne: Northumbria University Press, 2005), p. 156.

<sup>95</sup> Ben Anderson and Matthew Kelly, 'What Happens When Rural Modernity Ceases to be Modern?', in Linda M Ross, and others (eds), *New Lives, New Landscapes Revisited: Rural Modernity in Britain* (London, 2023; online edn, British Academy Scholarship Online, 18 Jan. 2024), p. 258.

<sup>96</sup>T.C Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History in Scotland and Northern Ireland since 1600* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 2.

personal attacks on her appearance and character.<sup>97</sup> While it is by no means the intention of this chapter to serve as a defence of Margaret Thatcher, it will look at the avenues created for Consett's people following Thatcher's closure of the town's industry in order to portray a more complete history of the case.

## The End of the Red Dust

Consett's identity was inextricably tied to its steelworks, which loomed both physically and psychologically over the town. The infamous and pervasive 'Red Dust' that coated the buildings and streets of Consett, a byproduct of iron oxide emissions from the steelworks, was more than a local quirk. It was found to be the root cause of severe health implications plaguing Consett.<sup>98</sup> The national average rate of throat or laryngeal cancer victims was 'one in 30,000' however in Consett the rate was '1:1216'.<sup>99</sup> A *Financial Times* newspaper at the turn of the century described how the older population of Consett 'wish it could have its red dust and steelworks jobs', but the youth 'are well aware of the health problems steelmaking caused'.<sup>100</sup> Although the closure created a cultural divide between generations, it also fostered a sense of spatial liberation among younger residents. The closure of the Consett steelworks directly catalysed the cleaning process of Consett and Derwentside's air. In this

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<sup>97</sup> John Su, 'Beauty and the Beastly Prime Minister', *ELH*, vol. 81, no. 3 (2014), p. 1086. Available at [https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24475617.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A6bb5c942aae98ba87e4d6b77da2d03b3&ab\\_segments=0%2Fbasic\\_search\\_gsv2%2Fcontrol&initiator=&acceptTC=1](https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/24475617.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A6bb5c942aae98ba87e4d6b77da2d03b3&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&initiator=&acceptTC=1)

<sup>98</sup> For the full discussion, see Michael McPartland, 'Geography, citizenship and the local community', *Teaching Geography*, vol. 26, no. 2 (2001), pp. 63-68.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 63.; see also, 'Cancer Inquiry', *Times*, September 12, 1996. *The Times Digital Archive*, p. 2. Accessed February 22, 2025. Available at <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/IF0500815849/GDCS?u=unn&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=84364014>.

<sup>100</sup> 'A Long, Hard Road to Recovery for a Former Steel Town', *Financial Times*, September 12, 2000, p. 7. *Financial Times Historical Archive* (accessed January 10, 2025). Available at <https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/HS2304092662/GDCS?u=unn&sid=bookmark-GDCS&xid=c78ca95c>.

light, the end of the steelworks and the disappearance of the 'Red Dust' should be interpreted not just as an economic catastrophe, but also as an environmental turning point. Moreover, the direct environmental reclamation of former industrial sites did not just clean the environment but also helped to develop new sites of nature and reshaped the physical identity of Consett. Projects such as Watling Woods, established in the early 1990s by Dr David Bentley and the Consett Acorn trust, stand as testimony to community-driven environmental regeneration.<sup>101</sup> Though relatively modest in scale, Watling Wood exemplifies how local environmentalism intersected with social renewal and the ecological taskscape cultivating in the town. The creation of such spaces challenges traditional declensionist histories that treat post-industrial taskscape purely as sites of loss or contamination. Historian Duncan Hunt describes how Kielder, much like Consett's woodlands and regenerated lands, have 'considerable potential for even greater wildlife benefit' in spite of their unnatural origins.<sup>102</sup> Similarly, Inaki Iriarte-Goni, in his self-proclaimed 'anti-declensionist' study of Spanish forests highlights how the process of industrial modernisation allowed for the 'growth in forest surface' alongside the increased production of wood'.<sup>103</sup> Consett, therefore, finds itself belonging to a wider transnational discussion of post-industrial opportunity. An environmental opportunity that reimaged spatial identity, and forged new and healthier junctures.

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<sup>101</sup> Chris Foote Wood, *The Derwentside Story: Derwentside District Council 1974-2009* (Bishop Auckland: Northern Writers), p. 143.

<sup>102</sup> Duncan Hunt, 'Species Conservation at Kielder: Animating Place with Animals', in Peter Coates, David Moon, and Paul Warde, *Local Places, Global Processes...* (Havertown: Windgather Press, 2016), p.199.; see also for more on Kielder – Leona Jayne Skelton, 'The uncomfortable path from forestry to tourism in Kielder, Northumberland: a socially dichotomous village?', *Oral History*, vol. 42, no. 2 (2014), pp. 81-93. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/24343436>.

<sup>103</sup> Iñaki Iriarte-Goñi, 'Forests, Fuelwood, Pulpwood, and Lumber in Spain, 1860–2000: A Non-Declensionist Story', *Environmental History*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2013), p. 352. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24690425>.

Moreover, while the environmental gains were locally driven, they emerged in the space vacated by national policy, a vacuum created by Thatcher's ideological departure from heavy industrial subsidy. The withdrawal of state subsidies from loss-making industries and the drive towards a service and knowledge based economy directly facilitated the collapse of heavy environmental polluters like Consett's steelworks. As argued by Leonard Lickorish, 'to disengage the State and reduce subsidies. coincided with massive increases in international competition... that would force change and decline on much of the traditional manufacturing economy.'<sup>104</sup> While the human cost of these policy changes was and remains immense, it is also true that such shifts created the conditions for spatial and environmental renewal and regeneration. In this way, Thatcherism's legacy, typically painted in stark morals, demands a more complex understanding.

### **Business Opportunities**

While the large focus of Consett's post-industrial life was on environmental regeneration, and culturally regenerative efforts through the likes of the CMP, the town also witnessed noteworthy entrepreneurial responses to the closure of its steelworks. Ray Hudson acknowledges that there were 'new and different' aspects to life for those in the North, yet ultimately concludes that 'on balance, it is more of the same – or worse'.<sup>105</sup> Yet these 'new and different' developments warrant closer attention, as they reflect a form of adaptation and reinvention that challenges linear narratives of Thatcherite decline. Margaret Thatcher once stated:

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<sup>104</sup> Leonard J Lickorish, *British Tourism: The Remarkable Story of Growth*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Routledge, 2010), p. 32.

<sup>105</sup> Ray Hudson, 'The North in the 1980s: New Times in the 'Great North' or Just More of the Same?' *Area*, vol. 23, no. 1 (1991), p. 55. Available at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20002919>.

Today, the preservation of the environment is a major challenge which confronts us all. But it is industry on which we must rely to generate the wealth that is needed to pay for environmental protection.<sup>106</sup>

Thatcher's assertion that industry must fund environmental protection reveals a fundamental tension within her economic vision. While rhetorically acknowledging ecological responsibility, the closure of Consett's industries were not primarily motivated by environmental concern. Ironically, it was this very closure that created space, both physically and economically, for new forms of environmentally conscious industry to emerge.

While the industrial closures left a void, they also paved the way for experimental models of 'industrial ecology'.<sup>107</sup> As part of the greener efforts throughout Consett and Derwentside, the new manufacturing businesses were able to find their homes in Consett. This stride toward modern, industrial ecology led to the development of the 'Number One industrial estate' in the early to late 1980s.<sup>108</sup> In its early days, the industrial estate attracted Phileas Fogg and Derwent Valley Foods, which generated 'national interest in both the product and the town'.<sup>109</sup> The crisp manufacturer was started by former steelworkers who invested their own money into the prospect. One of the founders, Roger McKechnie, was quoted describing Consett as 'a great place to start up a business in 1982' and the 'authorities were desperate for new people to come here'.<sup>110</sup> Environmental regeneration played a key role in attracting new businesses in Consett, but equally important was the support provided by the newly established organisations like Derwentside Industrial

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<sup>106</sup> Margaret Thatcher quoted in Margaret Thatcher, 'Better Environment Awards for Industry 1989', *RSA Journal*, vol. 138, no. 5406 (1990), p. 392.

<sup>107</sup> C Stone, 'Environmental consequences of heavy-industry restructuring and economic regeneration through industrial ecology', *Mining Technology*, vol. 111, no. 3 (SAGE Publications, 2002), p. A187.

<sup>108</sup> Taken from the *Number One industrial estate* website, see - <https://www.numberoneindustrialestate.co.uk/> accessed February 26, 2025.

<sup>109</sup> C Stone, 'Environmental consequences of heavy-industry restructuring and economic regeneration through industrial ecology', *Mining Technology*, vol. 111, no. 3 (SAGE Publications, 2002), p. A188.

<sup>110</sup> 'Roger McKechnie, founder of Phileas Fogg', *The Journal*, 25 June 2013.

Development Agency.<sup>111</sup> Alan Swinburne, who started his own business in 1980 after the closure of the works, describes how ‘we were lucky that when you started a new company in Consett, you were given grants [and] advice’ from the DIDA.<sup>112</sup> Furthermore, the significantly improved air quality in post-steelworks Consett enabled the introduction of the glassmaking industry to the town for the first time. Andy Plant, who was part of the labour team at the time, observed that ‘glassmaking that came here was very specifically because of the clean air that was developed’.<sup>113</sup> This development underscores the interconnection between environmental regeneration and economic diversification. Industries that were previously unviable due to pollution and Consett’s ‘red dust’ could now consider the town as a viable industrial site. Even more significantly, the town attracted high-tech industries, such as CAV Aerospace in 1990 and Gardner Aerospace in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, alongside Biopressing which specialised in cancer fighting drugs.<sup>114</sup> These developments illustrate that Consett was not merely surviving, but selectively evolving into a more diversified economic base, albeit on a smaller and more fragmented scale.

While much of Consett’s entrepreneurial revival focused on male-led ventures, some women carved out successful paths that challenged both economic and gender norms. Sadie Ayton, who herself worked in the steelworks as a stock taker until the 1950s, recalled how ‘apparently, we [women] lost our jobs so that unemployed men who had been in the war

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<sup>111</sup> Peter Boulding, Ray Hudson and David Sadler, ‘Consett and Corby: What Kind of a New Era?’, *Public Administration Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1988), p. 237. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40861419?seq=3>.

<sup>112</sup> Alan Swinburne, recorded by Connor Gettings, at Eden Miner’s Colliery, Leadgate, 18 April, 2025, 10am. 0:03:50-0:03:58.

<sup>113</sup> Andy Plant, recorded by Connor Gettings, at Eden Miner’s Colliery, Leadgate, 21 March, 2025, 3pm. 0:33:28-0:33:35.

<sup>114</sup> Chris Foote Wood, *The Derwentside Story: Derwentside District Council 1974-2009* (Bishop Auckland: Northern Writers), pp. 44-46.

could have jobs’.<sup>115</sup> She went on to open the notable *Sadie the Bra Lady* store in 1970.

Despite launching before the closure of the steelworks, Sadie’s business thrived by adapting to the shifting economic atmosphere of Consett throughout the 1980s and beyond. As a female-led, regionally based business, Sadie the Bra Lady resisted both the economic determinism often projected onto post-industrial towns, as well as the gendered challenges associated with Consett. Although exceedingly few, some people and businesses from Consett were able to bridge the gap between their urban past and rural futures and embraced the new taskscape developing around them. These individuals and community-led efforts do not erase the hardships caused by the abrupt closure of the steelworks, nor remove its imagery from the core of the town’s identity. However, they do complicate a straightforward reading of Thatcher-era policy as purely destructive. For example, in Owen Jones’ *Chavs*, Thatcher’s government is described to have ‘hammered’ the ‘old industrial areas’ into ‘the nightmare of unemployment’.<sup>116</sup> Yet, the stories of Sadie Ayton, Alan Swinburne, and Phileas Fogg introduce a more layered interpretation that suggests post-steelworks Consett was also a space of resilience and reinvention. While Jones and Hudson rightly identify the widespread social and economic damage wrought by Thatcherite policy, especially in places like Consett, these localised stories of enterprise and adaptation suggest that the post-industrial North was not solely a history of decline or ‘more of the same – or worse’. Although it was far from the mass prosperity that had been promised under the rhetoric of free-market liberation, Consett’s industrial decline was not solely a case of devastation. While entrepreneurship redefined Consett’s economy on a small scale, broader

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<sup>115</sup> Taken from an interview Sadie Ayton did with the Consett-based charity Building Self Belief, see – ‘Voices of Consett – Sadie (The Bra Lady)’, *Building Self Belief*, February 5 2024, accessed April 4 2025. Available at <https://www.buildingselfbelief.org/insights/voices-consett-sadie-bra-lady>.

<sup>116</sup> Owen Jones, *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London; New York: Verso, 2020), p. 142.



cultural shifts toward individualism and consumerism were simultaneously transforming everyday life.

### **Consett's Growing Consumerism and Independence**

Despite the economic collapse brought on by the closure of the steelworks, and the long-term vacuum it created in terms of unemployment and identity, the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the emergence of new forms of consumer and personal autonomy throughout Britain. Niklas Olsen described Thatcher's 1980s as a pursuit of a 'free society [which] required more people to think and act as entrepreneurs and consumers rather than as workers'.<sup>117</sup> While the joblessness and poverty rates in Consett and Derwentside are undeniable, a more micro-level reading of post-industrial life in the town reveals that car and home ownership increased. Andy Plant stated that in the Thatcher years 'you had the move to home ownership... the bungalows were being bought up very fast because they were going at very big discounts'.<sup>118</sup> Andy Plant goes on to describe how 'instead of one car for every two or three houses, you have now got two or three cars for every house'.<sup>119</sup> Alan Swinburne also echoes this sentiment, 'we always said there is a lot of new cars driving around Consett for a few years', highlighting a paradox at the heart of Consett's regeneration.<sup>120</sup> Visible consumer prosperity was present amidst extreme economic and industrial collapse. This emergent consumer culture, driven in part by national policies like Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme, allowed residents to assert new forms of independence and

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<sup>117</sup> Niklas Olsen, *The Sovereign Consumer: A New Intellectual History of Neoliberalism* (Springer International Publishing AG, 2018), p. 241.

<sup>118</sup> Andy Plant, recorded by Connor Gettings, at Eden Miner's Colliery, Leadgate, 21 March, 2025, 3pm. 0:44:30-0:45:04.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 0:47:47-0:47:58.

<sup>120</sup> Alan Swinburne, recorded by Connor Gettings, at Eden Miner's Colliery, Leadgate, 18 April, 2025, 10am. 0:05:31-0:05:34.

identity in the absence of secure, traditional employment. Peter Saunders and Colin Harris have identified that in the case of the privatisation of consumption, 'individuals can begin to control key areas of their lives' like housing and car ownership.<sup>121</sup> Similarly, Helen Carr identifies that the Right to Buy scheme provided 'citizenship and freedom through individual empowerment and entrepreneurialism'.<sup>122</sup> That is not to say that the Right to Buy scheme is without its criticisms, particularly regards its long-term impact on public housing and community planning. In the criminology field there is discussion of a link between the increase of homeownership and crime within council estate.<sup>123</sup> Furthermore, Ian Loveland argues that despite the Right to Buy scheme's proceeds exceeding those of 'all other public enterprise privatizations combined', 'only a fraction' of the total was granted to councils to build new houses.<sup>124</sup>

In the case of Consett however, where population decline and outward migration have characterised much of the post-industrial period, the adverse consequences of the Right to Buy scheme were arguably less pronounced than in larger urban centres. Although the growth of homeownership, largely down to Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme, cannot be understood as evidence of economic recovery, the movement toward independence and consumerism reflects an anti-declensionist sign of post-steelworks independence. In this context, consumerism and property ownership functioned as a clear material and capital gain in the backdrop of economic devastation. The visibility of modern cars and home

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<sup>121</sup> Peter Saunders and Colin Harris, 'Privatization and the Consumer', *Sociology*, vol. 24, no. 1 (1990), p. 72. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42854625>

<sup>122</sup> Helen Carr, 'The Right to Buy, the Leaseholder, and the Impoverishment of Ownership', *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 38, no. 4 (2011), p. 522. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41350323>

<sup>123</sup> Stephen Farrall, Colin Hay, Will Jennings and Emily Gray, 'Thatcherite Ideology, Housing Tenure and Crime: The Socio-spatial Consequences of the Right to Buy for Domestic Property Crime', *The British Journal of Criminology*, vol. 56, no. 6 (2016), pp. 1245-1250. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44074919>.

<sup>124</sup> Ian Loveland, 'Square Pegs, Round Holes: The 'Right' to Council Housing in the Post-War Era', *Journal of Law and Society*, vol. 19, no. 3 (1992), p. 355. Available at <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1409909>

ownership sharply contrasts the loss of traditional employment, highlighting how the economic status in Consett shifted from labour to ownership. The growth of a small aspect of personal liberty allowed individuals to reclaim a sense of agency and capital in a time of structural upheaval. This altogether reiterates the demand for a more multifaceted account of post-industrial life. Consett's experience complicates dominant declensionist frameworks, revealing how even within towns whose whole origins were destroyed within a single year, the emergence of unexpected opportunities was still present throughout.

## **Conclusion**

To conclude, the story of Consett's post-steelworks era resists simple categorisation as one of linear decline. While the closure of the steelworks undoubtedly inflicted deep societal damage on the town's economy and identity, it also opened the door for a series of complex, often contradictory, transformations. As this study has demonstrated, Consett's post-steelworks experience produced environmental, business, and consumerist shifts that are all too often overlooked or dismissed in modern literature. The physical cleansing of the town's air and environment, driven by both top-down and grassroots efforts, redefined the spatial and aesthetic identity and regenerative taskscape of Consett and Derwentside.

Meanwhile, the emergence of new businesses, like that of Phileas Fogg and Sadie the Bra Lady, illustrated a capacity of entrepreneurial renewal that challenges the notion that Thatcherite deindustrialization rendered such communities entirely ruined. The decision to dedicate a whole chapter to anti-declensionist narratives and success stories of achievement was entirely justified by the lack of existing literature on positive post-industrial narratives. These stories have not simply been under-analysed; they have often been excluded from

broader historiographical contributions that prioritise pessimistic stories and tones. Even in Consett, a place so heavily devastated by the closure of the steelworks, there are powerful, positive narratives that complicate the broader consensus on Thatcher and deindustrialization. This analysis does not seek to undermine or sanitise the genuine suffering experienced by Consett's people, but to complicate it and draw attention to how resilience and new forms of identity can emerge alongside difficult times. Crucially, this re-evaluation of the immediate post-steelworks Consett period does not intend to be a defence of Thatcherism. Instead, it demands that historians think more comprehensively about its outcomes, recognising that destruction can create a space in which something new can form. By acknowledging both the costs and the unexpected gains of deindustrialization, historiographical contributions move closer to a more complete and critical analysis.

## Conclusion

The closure of Consett Steelworks in 1980 was a destructive event. The steelworks was the origin, developer, and source of stability for all of Consett's existence prior to its closure. Consett offers a unique study as an extreme case of a location affected by deindustrialization and the subsequent efforts toward regeneration. In its absence, Consett and its people were forced to confront an uncertain and fragmented future without the steelworks. The first chapter of this study established the deep connection and authority that the Consett Steel Works had over Consett's developments. This influence extended not only to the development of the town, but also the development of the population and culture throughout the area. So much so, that when the steelworks was forecast to close, there were large scale strikes and protests against the decision. The Consett people even marched through Westminster to display their frustration and agitation with the closures.<sup>125</sup> This highlights the importance of analysing and incorporating human narratives into the historical discussion. This also confirmed the importance of incorporating oral histories into the discussion. Without recognising the lived experience of communities like Consett, we risk presenting an incomplete and potentially distorted account of deindustrialization and regeneration.

Secondly, this dissertation explored the immediate and long-term consequences of the steelworks' closure. The chapter adopted an environmental historic lens in order to thoroughly understand the shifting identity of the town. This analysis concluded that

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<sup>125</sup> See Neal Crossan, *Consett Steelworks March*, 2020, painting. See Appendix F. Available at <https://neal-crossan.pixels.com/featured/consett-steelworks-march-neal-crossan.html>; For footage, see – *Coast to Coast – Consett Crusade*, July 20 2012, YouTube video, 23:55-29:53. Available at <https://youtu.be/wqJ5Ujhng9U?si=5la6ceQpKjhuhPu>.

although the shift from urbanism to rurality was in fact based within a growing environmental tourist economy, it proved to be far from a seamless transition. Though Consett is geographically located within and surrounded by a vast expanse of countryside, the town's origins and function were entirely urban. Therefore, the vital step of reconnecting with a rural nostalgia was not possible, and this left the town's regeneration in a dichotomous state. The analysis of contaminated lands files proved that the transition to rurality was not only ideologically complicated, but also physically difficult. The long influence and effects of the steelworks are still found within the soil of Consett and Derwentside today. Regenerative efforts, like the CMP and the educational avenues, struggled to embrace the new ecological taskscape that Consett was moving towards. This complicates existing literature that places post-industrial cultural projects at the centre of progression. In the case of Consett, the music projects served more to hinder the transition to this new ecological taskscape culture. Historians must incorporate Consett and smaller towns # more thoroughly into the discussion of deindustrialization and post-industrial regeneration to fully appreciate how regeneration is not universally linear or successful.

The story of Consett from 1980 to the turn of the century is not one that fits simply into the dominant historiographical mould of industrial ruin, economic decline, and total working-class disempowerment. Instead, it is a greatly more complex and multifaceted narrative. It is certainly indisputable that deindustrialization, especially in steeltowns like Consett, was a devastating time of change that crippled towns, economies, and populations. However, Ben Anderson and Matthew Kelly describe how 'high explosives create a new landscape... into a fresh cycle of renewal', it is also undeniable that with this time of change

came regeneration and adaptations that opened opportunities for the future.<sup>126</sup> While the transition to an ecological taskscape ultimately failed to regenerate Consett's economy, it would be dishonest to conclude that it was without pockets of success. The new environmental attitudes and standards were directly beneficial to multiple categories of Consett and Derwentside. Whether it be the direct improvements felt throughout the environment, like the cleaner air or growing surface area of woodlands, the shift from environmental exploitation to environmental cooperation could be seen throughout. This new environmental attitude also brought about the introduction of a new 'industrial ecology' that attracted new industries (albeit on a much smaller scale). Another notable benefit that came from the closure of the steelworks and shifting national and regional policies was the abrupt increase in ownership and autonomy. Thatcher's policies, like the Right to Buy scheme have been largely criticised on a national level and without counter narratives. The study on Consett has showcased how, whether intentional or not, Thatcher's Right to Buy scheme provided Consett's population with an increased sense of independence and capital, at least in the immediate effect. While this line of argument is not intended to serve as a defence or apology for Thatcherism, it does ask that the topic is analysed with more nuance and contextual sensitivity.

In closing, Consett as a case study challenges and demands historians to reconsider how deindustrialization and post-industrial regeneration are understood and represented. It urges a move away from overly simplistic narratives of cultural and economic decline or success, and instead demands attention to lived experience and complexity. Too much literature either focuses on larger cities or on the nation as a whole, leaving smaller towns

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<sup>126</sup> Ben Anderson and Matthew Kelly, 'What Happens When Rural Modernity Ceases to be Modern?', in *New Lives, New Landscapes Revisited: Rural Modernity in Britain* (2023), p. 258.

marginalised. This study takes issue with that framework, and demonstrates the powerful arguments present in even small, isolated towns. It also demands that environmental history must be included in the discussion, as a means of understanding the difficulty felt by rurally located urban towns to find a new identity within modernity and the post-industrial environment. Ultimately, Consett demands that post-industrial history be written from the margins inward, with greater sensitivity to place, environment, and the lived experiences of those present.



## Appendix A

### Consett's Industrial Monuments



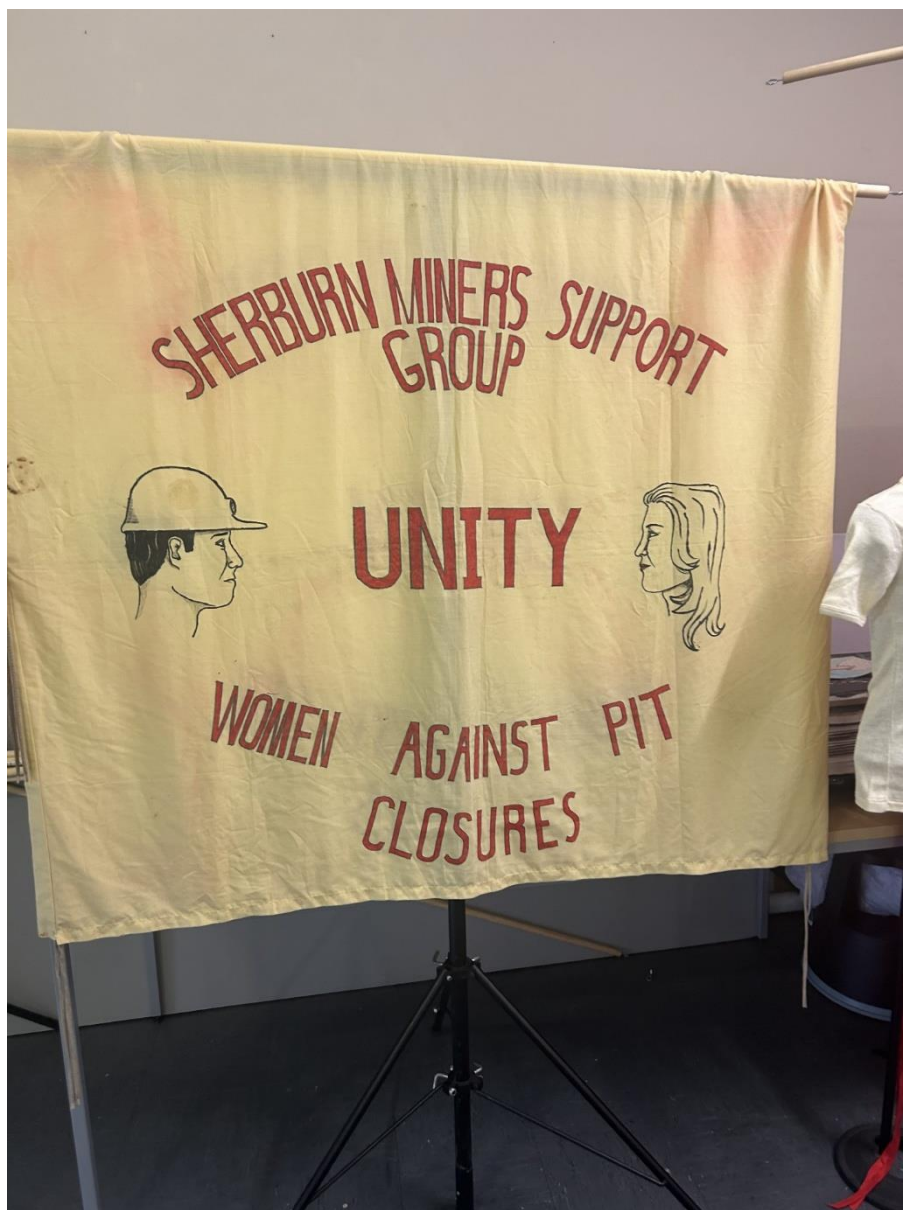
Tony Cragg, *Terris Novalis*, industrial artifact (Consett: 1996). Available at <https://englandsnortheast.co.uk/consett/>.



David Kemp and Tom Leaper, *The Old Transformers: Ironmaster and Coalmaster*, industrial artifacts (Consett: Northern Arts and Sustrans, 1990), images available at <https://fabulousnorth.com/old-transformers/>

## Appendix B

Collection banners and shirts worn in the 1984/1985 Women's Miners Strikes, available and viewed at Consett Heart – Heritage and Arts Centre, Consett.



*Sherburn Miners Support Group, banner, c. 1984/1985, Consett Heart – Heritage and Arts Centre.*



*Sacriston Women Against Pit Closures*, banner, c. 1984/1985, Consett Heart – Heritage and Arts Centre.





*National N.U.M Orgreave Veterans, shirt, c. 1984/1985, Consett Heart – Heritage and Arts Centre.*



*Lancashire Women Against Pit Closures*, shirt, c. 1984/1985, Consett Heart – Heritage and Arts Centre.

## Appendix C



Photo of Hownsgill Viaduct, now part of the C2C route, reclaimed by the environment. Available at <https://fabulousnorth.com/howngill-viaduct/>.



## Appendix D

Workers' Education Association Sources

**Workers' Educational Association**  
NORTHERN DISTRICT

**THE CHANGING FACE OF CONSETT :**  
**AN INTRODUCTION TO ECOLOGY**

Tutor : Jonathan Adams

When : Initially 4 afternoons 4th, 6th, 11th,  
and 13th July at 2.00 - 4.30 p.m.

Where : Trade Union Memorial Club, John Street,  
Consett. ( and field visits)

This short course aims to be an informal introduction to the main issues of ecology. The programme will look at some of the following areas :

- \*Why plants and animals occur where they do. What's peculiar, interesting or different about Derwentside?
- \*Managing our natural resources : the importance of nature reserves.
- \*Pollution and its effects on the community.
- \*Industrial decline and land reclamation : how it effects nature.
- \*Characteristics of different habitats e.g. moorlands, pastures, sea, mountains. How do these change and develop?

\*\*\*\*\*

To reserve a place please return the slip to Simon Henderson,  
WEA, Bank Chambers, 51 Grainger Street, Newcastle 1.  
(Telephone:323957) by Monday 27th June at latest.

This course is \_\_\_\_\_ Confirmation will be sent a few days  
before the course starts.

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**ECOLOGY COURSE**

Please reserve me..... place(s) (if more than one enclose other  
name and addresses)

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_ Tel No. \_\_\_\_\_  
(please print)

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

Organisation: \_\_\_\_\_

Source: Workers' Educational Association, *The Changing Face of Consett: An Introduction to Ecology* (Newcastle: 1983). TWAM E/WEA 1/15/13.

Consett

E/WEA 1/15/13

Mtg of 28 Apr 86

John Kearney: Dementia Unemp Gp developing  
a campaign Summer 86 → Genl Election  
<sup>inevitable emphasis</sup>  
(Govt's failure to do out re unemp)

Consett Munc Project - Benefits - Album tracks  
etc. Thinking poppr: no manufacturing renewal  
but a municipality do a job & get money to  
Hugh Beynon, Ken Cl'some etc essays re regional  
problem. Trust established to absorb funds & employ  
people re campaign. <sup>DCC still chasing</sup> Hi Tech → Tourism →

By Yr 2000  
NO  
mand  
Co. b/w  
Locally directed @ D.C.C. who have acknowledged  
there's to be no manuf. recovery. Local plans - to be in  
ideas of Labor Party - but mechanisms on ground.  
Local & Natl politicians have become sensitised to  
elect.

Re Benas - 500 a so turned out.

Sustained campaign of events + picking up on 't.

Don Robson Took leader of DCC  
Kevin Barron P.P. to

Happening

What NEEDED a model how DCC might respond to  
Countywide. It's about EDUCATION RESEARCH

COMMUNICATION (County not used to that)

Unemployed Gp ideas getting thro!

Dementia Side Special Measures Scheme - 5 f/c County workers  
Yr Commg.

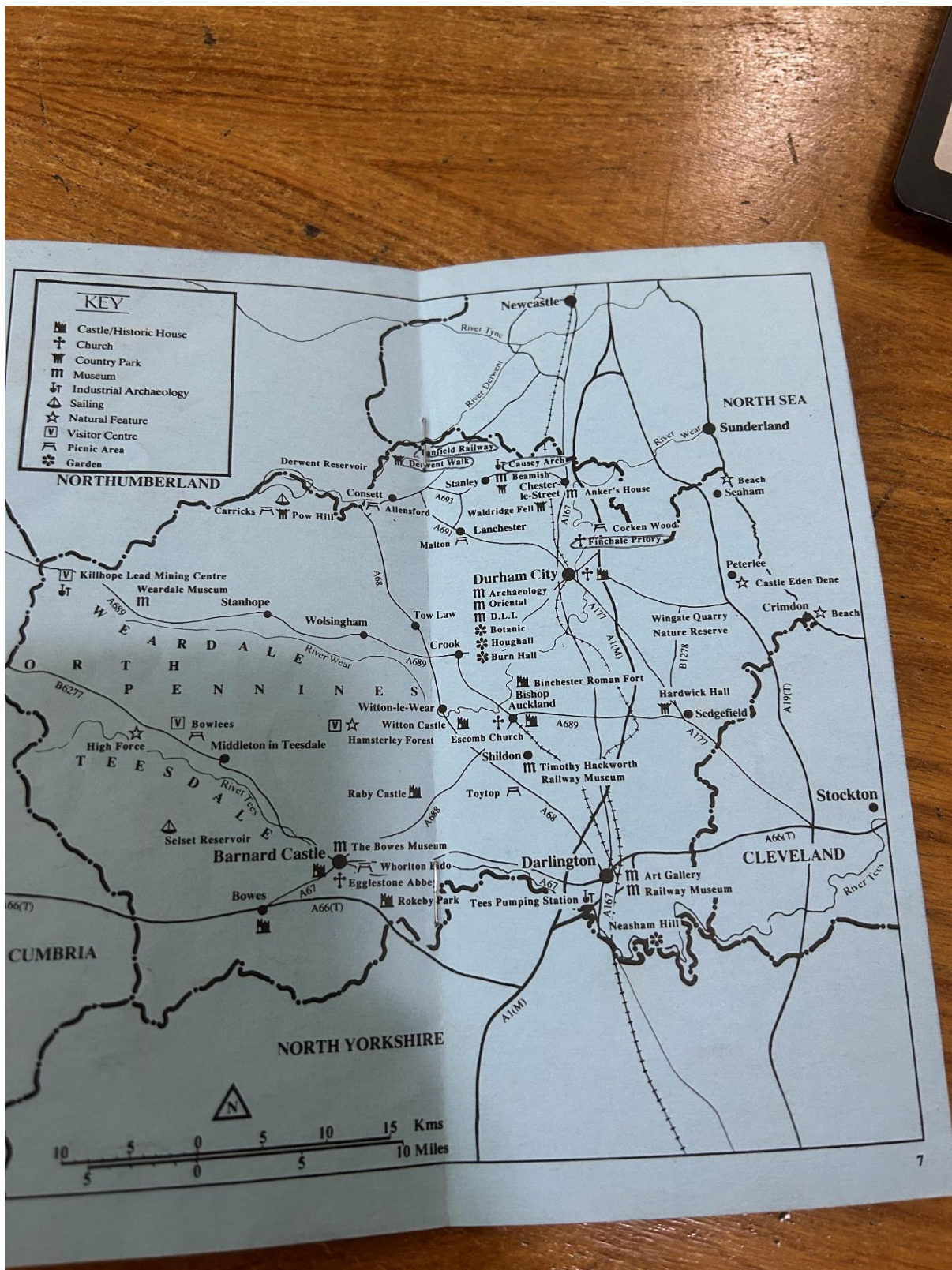
(Permanent)  
Report in 3 months  
re redirection.

"To reinforce social infrastructure of area etc.

pto

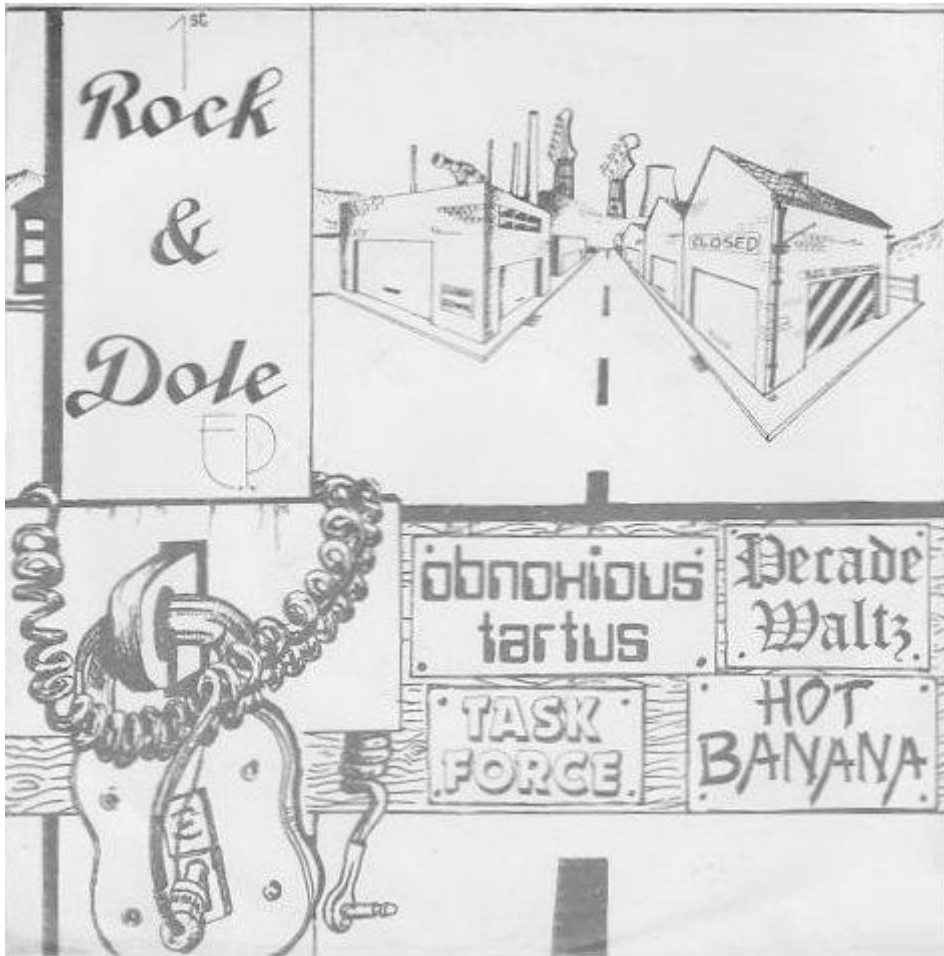
Source: Consett, handwritten notes of a WEA meetings (April 25, 1983). TWAM E/WEA 1/15/13.





Source: County Durham Tourism Board, *Attractions County Durham*, leaflet, 1988. TWAM G.URA/4/3

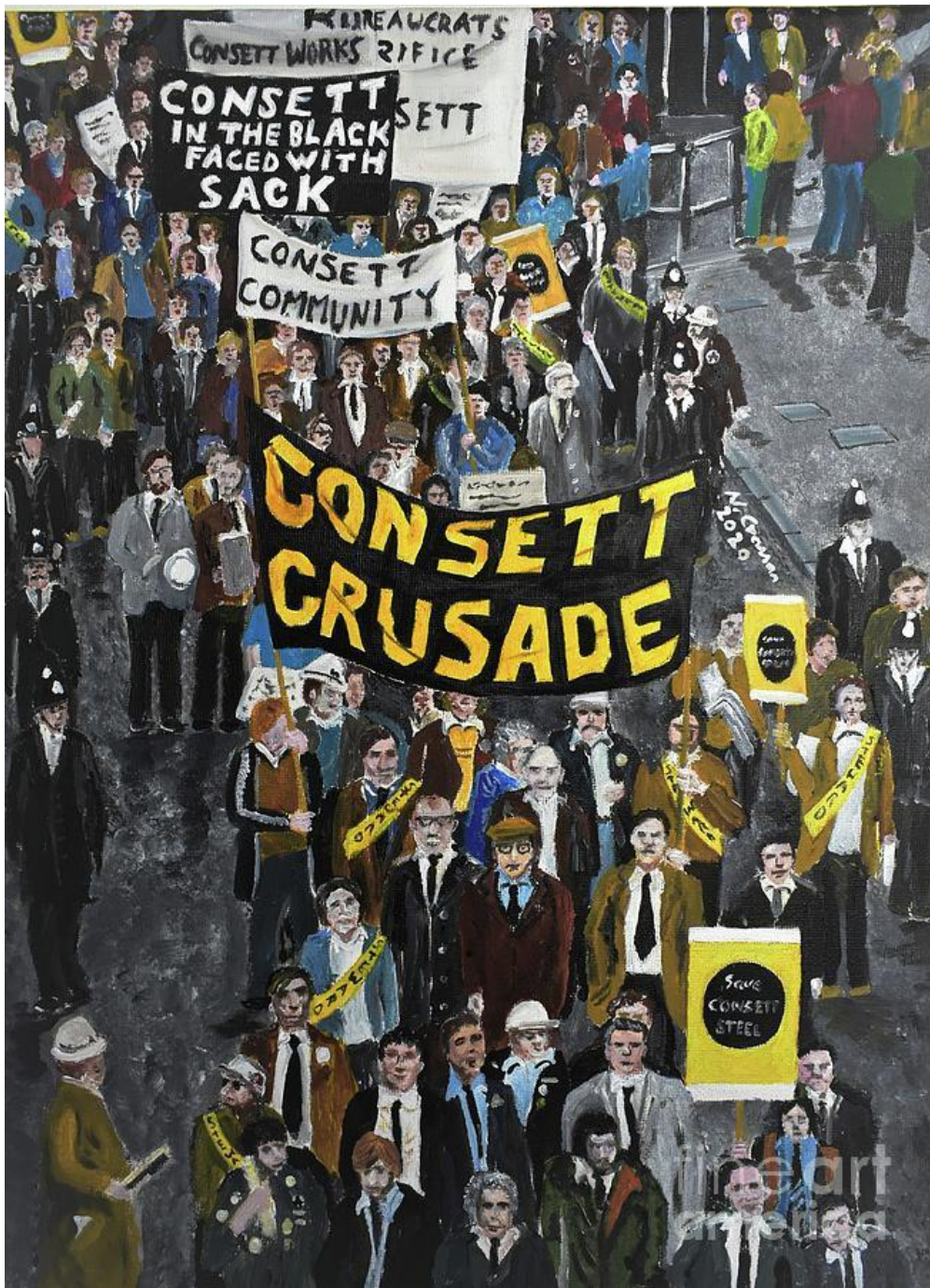
## Appendix E



Source: Decade Waltz, 'Marching Men', *Rock & Dole*, EP 7-inch vinyl, 1983. Available at <https://www.discogs.com/release/3363960-Various-Rock-Dole-EP>



## Appendix F



Neal Crossan, *Consett Steelworks March*, 2020, painting. Available at <https://neal-crossan.pixels.com/featured/consett-steelworks-march-neal-crossan.html>.

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