

The Lost World of Peter Lee

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County Durham emerged as a Labour heartland in the period between the First and Second World Wars. It has remained one since, but the origins of this hegemony are poorly understood today. Labour's rise was hard fought and by no means inevitable. One person, more than any other, symbolises this struggle, Peter Lee (1864–1935). He was a political colossus who, during the 1920s and 1930s, held the leading positions in both the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) and Durham County Council and acted as the moral conscience of the local Labour Party. Few Labour notables, before or since, have exercised as much local political power as Peter Lee. Today, his life and work is largely forgotten in the region he did so much to transform, albeit he is commemorated in the New Town which bears his name. Yet, his life bears scrutiny for the light it sheds on how Labour won and used power in Durham, the strengths and limits of this politics and its relevance for today.

The foundation of Labour's power was the DMA, the trade union that emerged from the epic industrial struggles of the nineteenth century. But local Labour politics was not simply a product of the dominance of coal. The Durham miners came relatively late to Labour. In the early twentieth century, under its leader, John Wilson (1837-1915), the DMA was aligned with the Liberals. The Miners' Federation of Great Britain affiliated to Labour in 1910, the DMA not until 1919. During the 1920s and 1930s, though, Labour captured control of local government in the county and began to use it to address the neglected basic needs of working people. In his 1946 novel, *Charity Main*, a lightly fictionalised account of his time in the Durham coalfield, Mark Benney attributes Labour's ascendancy to the need to tackle the legacy of the "coalowners' complete severance of industrial from social responsibilities"². Peter Lee was the central figure in this story.

Peter Lee was born in Duff Heap Row, Fivehouses, Trimdon Grange in 1864, the son of a miner. At the age of ten, Peter went down Littleton Colliery, near Durham. His first pit job was as a pony driver. He progressed to become a putter, shifting tubs and, by sixteen, he was working alongside his father and brother as a hewer, getting coal from the face. It was a hard job and Peter Lee was a hard man. In his youth, he was a drinker and fighter. He was saved by a love of books, a belated commitment to self-improvement and, above all, marriage to his childhood sweetheart, Alice Thompson. Under her influence, Peter gave up drink and became a Methodist preacher. He travelled to the United States and South Africa where he worked in mines. Finally, he and Alice settled in Wheatley Hill where he took the role of checkweighman at the colliery, the trusted representative of the workforce in the management of piece earnings.

Peter Lee began his long march through the institutions of local government in 1903, when he was elected to Wheatley Hill Parish Council. In 1907, he was elected to Easington Rural District Council. According to the historian of Easington, W A Moyes, during this time, Peter Lee developed "a consuming interest in the provision of water and improving sanitation", by providing more standpipes and better drainage channels³. He argued for these improvements in the face of ratepayer opposition, which called his plans reckless and un-costed. His enemy was the high levels of

¹ Thanks to Ross Forbes, Jonathan Renouf and Kate Tomaney for comments on an earlier draft.

² Mark Benney, *Charity Main: a coalfield chronicle*. (George Allen and Unwin, 1946)

³ W A Moyes. *Mostly mining: a study of the development of Easington Rural District from the earliest times*. (Frank Graham, 1969)

diphtheria in Wheatley Hill which the Medical Officer of Health attributed to poor sanitation. He was prodigiously hard working and noted for his attention to detail. He led the effort to build Thorpe Hospital, which served the District until 1996. In 1909, he was elected to Durham County Council. When Labour won control of Durham County Council in 1919, Peter Lee was offered the role of Chairman. After returning to Wheatley Hill to discuss the offer with Alice and the DMA Lodge, he agreed to accept the role. A misspent youth and wandering life meant he had come late to power: he was 55 years old. The victory, however, was unexpected and Labour was unprepared for power. It lost control of the council in 1922, but regained it in 1925 and has held it since.

The primary source for the life of Peter Lee is Jack Lawson reverential 1946 biography. Himself a significant Labour figure, Lawson, like Lee, was a Durham miner, a Methodist, and served as MP for Chester-le-Street from 1919 to 1949. According to Lawson, Peter Lee, assumed the role of “chief of the civic life of Durham and leader of its people”⁴. A household name in the region, he could fill any hall. Although a quiet man, he was physically imposing, over six feet tall. Sid Chaplin recalled stepping aside to allow Peter Lee stride past in his way to preach at a Methodist chapel in Ferryhill⁵. Clement Attlee recounts a similar experience⁶. But Lawson attests to his lack of social ambition and how “he was almost medieval in his monk-like passion for withdrawing from the world”⁷.

Peter Lee personified Morgan Phillips’ proposition that the Labour Party owed more to Methodism than Marx. Politics was a sacred duty. He believed in the moral superiority of his local socialism, confronted with the corruption and inequity of capitalism. But he sought accommodation with capitalism rather than its overthrow. In his role as a union leader he always wanted to settle rather than prolong strikes. According to Lawson he was driven by an intense sense of social injustice rather than any ideology. He practised a demotic socialism focused on practical solutions to everyday problems. One of his greatest legacies arose from his obsession with the provision of clean and reliable water supplies and improved sanitation. A crisis occurred in 1914 when water supplies to Consett were disrupted for several weeks. As water was supplied by private companies this represented a massive failure of “free enterprise” to meet basic human needs. Under Peter Lee’s leadership, in 1919, the existing private companies were wound up and replaced by a new publicly-owned Durham County Water Board. Inevitably, Peter Lee became its chairman. An early task was the building of Burnhope Reservoir in Upper Weardale. Peter Lee proselytised for it, sought central government funding and used the rates to pay for its construction. The building of the reservoir was a massive engineering challenge, completed in 1937, two years after the death of its originator. The provision of clean water contributed to the decline of infant mortality rates – hitherto the highest in the country – at a faster rate than anywhere else during this time.

The direct efforts of the County Council were part of a broader and far-reaching transformation of social conditions. Housing conditions in County Durham were the worst in England and Wales, with massive overcrowding. Much of the housing stock was provided by coal owners who showed little interest in improving conditions. The DMA had developed its own prefigurative solution to these problems in the form of the Durham Aged Mineworkers Homes, established in 1898, by Joseph Hopper, miners’ leader and Methodist preacher. It provided homes for miners evicted from their colliery-owned houses upon retirement. Miners contributed a weekly levy from their wages to fund housebuilding. This approach built on the earlier forms of workplace social insurance that miners

⁴ Jack Lawson, *Peter Lee* (The Epworth Press, 1946), p130.

⁵ Sid Chaplin, “Durham mining villages”, in M. Bulmer (Ed.) *Mining and social change. Durham County in the twentieth century* (Croom Helm, 1978)

⁶ Clement Attlee. “Foreword” in Jack Lawson, *Peter Lee* (The Epworth Press, 1946).

⁷ Lawson, op cit, p105.

created themselves. After 1919, District Councils in County Durham used national legislation and subsidies to maximum effect, to acquire land and build housing at a rate 50 per cent above the national average. Ellis Thorpe, in his account of “Coalport”, a thinly veiled Seaham, shows how council housebuilding accelerated after Labour gained control of the District Council in 1930, wresting the town from the baleful political control of the Londonderry dynasty⁸. By the outbreak of the Second World War, council houses accounted for a sixth of the total stock in County Durham, compared with less than a tenth in England and Wales. The new housing was of the highest standard and represented a huge improvement in the quality of life of thousands of working class people⁹.

In 1934, JB Priestley painted a memorably grim portrait of life in Shotton, a half hour walk from Peter Lee’s Wheatley Hill¹⁰. Henry Mess catalogued the desperate social conditions on Tyneside in the 1920s, while John Newsom did the same for the Durham villages¹¹. But what such accounts typically overlooked were the traditions of self-organisation that shaped these communities. Mark Benney noted, “Wherever, by chance, the eye rests upon some building more attractive than its neighbours, one almost invariably finds that it owes its existence to the organised efforts of the miners themselves. Their clubs, welfare institutes, co-op stores are outstanding institutional buildings”¹². Each village, according to Sid Chaplin, was “a sort of self-constructed, do it yourself counter-environment”, which the people had built themselves. Chaplin acknowledged their imperfections, such as the gendered nature of the opportunities they offered and admitted that his greatest ambition as a youth had been to escape. But he insisted, “their achievements cry out for celebration”¹³. These were the traditions and values upon which Peter Lee and other Labour leaders drew, but to which they added the power of the nascent local state. The historian Jerry White has shown how the interwar period was the heyday of local government in England, during which “whole spheres of public life were owned and managed locally that are now seen as entirely the province of national government or the private sector”¹⁴. The objections to use of state intervention for social advancement were the same then as now; Peter Lee was a “Red” and the costs were too great. He confronted his critics and debated with his opponents in business and the Church of England in uncompromising fashion, telling his audience, “while you think of high rates, think also of better conditions”¹⁵. The idea that the local state should be put at the service of working people was advanced through practical action, such as when the Labour-dominated Chester-le-Street Poor Law Guardians came into conflict with the Conservative government over relief payments to miners during the 1926 Miners’ Lockout.

This was localism *avant la lettre* and Peter Lee was deeply localist: “Many times he was invited to stand for Parliament. But instinctively he knew his own unique value in the North, so he stayed there”¹⁶. An inveterate walker and cyclist, he had a deep knowledge of the northern landscape:

⁸ Ellis Thorpe, “Politics and housing in a Durham mining town”, in M. Bulmer (Ed.) *Mining and social change. Durham County in the twentieth century* (Croom Helm, 1978)

⁹ Robert Ryder, “Council housebuilding in County Durham, 1900-39”, in M.J. Daunton (Ed.) *Councillors and tenants: local authority housing in English cities 1919-1939*. (Leicester University Press, 1984).

¹⁰ J.B. Priestley, *An English Journey* (William Heinemann/Victor Gollancz, 1934)

¹¹ Henry Mess, *Industrial Tyneside. A social survey*. (Ernest Benn, 1928); John Newsom, *Out of the pit. A challenge to the comfortable*. (Basil Blackwell, 1936)

¹² Benney, op cit, p51

¹³ Chaplin, op cit, pp81, 71

¹⁴ Jerry White, “From Herbert Morrison to Command and Control: the decline of local democracy and its effect on public services”, *History Workshop Journal*, 59 (1) 2005, pages 73–82,

¹⁵ Quoted in Huw Beynon and Terry Austrin, *Masters and servants. The Durham miners and the English political tradition*. (Rivers Oram Press, 1994) p271

¹⁶ Lawson, op cit, p157.

“Local history and legend were probed for his purpose. An ancient lead mine, a farm, or church built of stones from old Roman ramparts told a story”¹⁷. He loved Durham Cathedral deeply and its associations with St Cuthbert and St Bede, despite his Methodist faith. He belonged profoundly to Durham. As Lawson puts it, “John Wesley said the world was his parish, but the subject of our story reversed the saying by making the parish his world”¹⁸. His parochialism was shared more widely. The historian Hester Barron, notes that school history books in Durham eschewed a concern with kings and queens for a syllabus rooted in the experience of their class and place: “at a school in Shotton, teachers were instructed that, for every age group, local and county connections were to be emphasized in history lessons, while, in geography lessons, the landscape and environment of County Durham were to be studied using local maps”¹⁹. Industrial power was critical and the miners’ Lodge remained the key political institution. But a politics of community and belonging was forged alongside workplace struggles. Its key expression was the Big Meeting, “the spontaneous expression of communal life”²⁰.

Peter Lee’s biographer offers only modest criticism of his subject. His hagiography echoes Bede’s *Life of St Cuthbert*, but even Lawson admits his governing style amounted to “benevolent despotism”. Peter Lee had the DMA build him a well-proportioned house – Bede’s Rest – overlooking Durham Cathedral, befitting his status in the new establishment. This was a source of controversy and at odds with an otherwise ascetic life, which Lawson glosses over. The gap between leaders and people existed from an early stage. Moreover, the Methodist world which had formed Peter Lee was already dying. Speaking to the Stanley Brotherhood in January 1922 he complained that the world was “wrapped in the power of materialism”²¹. A more secular age brought forth a new generation of political leaders, equally pragmatic, but less obviously driven by religious and ethical values.

Of course, we cannot recreate the world of Peter Lee. The industrial power of the miners has gone. Social and cultural values have been transformed. Moreover, strong levers of local power no longer exist. In 1947 the mines were nationalised, but so too was the locally-controlled water industry and hospitals which Peter Lee and others had created so assiduously. The post-war story of local government is the story of central encroachment and diminished autonomy even as its responsibilities grew. The post-war welfare state underpinned rising living standards but at the cost of a widening gap between its centralised mode of operation and the local rhythms of everyday life. Labour turned its back on insurgent democratic localism for a centralised, technocratic politics.

County Durham remains a Labour heartland, in part, because it still draws on the diminishing moral and physical capital accumulated during the era of Peter Lee. The lesson that emerges from this story is how local state power was used relentlessly to address the basic needs of local communities in the face of neglect and opposition from the privileged. Today, the region abounds in unmet human needs and there is a yearning for community and belonging and a space for a politics that recognises this. The extraordinary contemporary revival of the Miners’ Gala, with its modern pageant of bands and banners, is one powerful testament to this. The history of Labour in the North East of England is tale of forgotten leaders and abandoned courses, but the lessons they leave have contemporary resonance.

¹⁷ Lawson, op cit, p111

¹⁸ Lawson, op cit, p95

¹⁹ Hester Barron, *The 1926 Miners’ Lockout. Meanings of Community in the Durham Coalfield*. (Oxford University Press, 2010), p 212.

²⁰ Lawson, op cit, p168

²¹ Quoted in Beynon and Austrin, op cit, p275