

Making Work for Ourselves

by Richard Benson

These days if you see the North East of England on television, or if you search for information about it online, you are confronted with certain stock images and themes. Lindisfarne, Bamburgh Castle, the Bigg Market. Whole families in red- or black-and-white stripes, the Angel of the North, a photograph of the Sage framed by the under-structure of the Tyne Bridge. Terraces of back-to-back, shoulder-to-shoulder working-class communities; derelict sites of long-lost heavy industry; a TV presenter, probably from London, talking about a warm, proud and defiant people and then scooting off to catch the teatime train back down south.

These are mostly frontier images, comprising a vision of the north curated in a southern capital. They say: it is far away, it is wild and different and grittily exotic, it is a place where exposure to the uncivilised has stripped away sophistication and guile, and the people live by more authentic, fundamental values. They say: it is a hard place where people are honest and down to earth and nice to each other, because if you're not what the hell have you got, I mean Christ, do they even have IKEAs? They say: put a picture of that modern silver building in so we don't seem patronising, use that one with the bridge in it because then it's like old and new together isn't it, brilliant, really sort of warm and proud and defiant, did Matt manage to get his train?

The North East is not above playing up to these stereotypes and mugging for the camera, but these well-intentioned, if platitudinous, views almost certainly do more harm than good. I grew up a couple of hours drive from the Tyne in rural East Yorkshire, and this was never how the region and the people seemed to me at all. For us, Newcastle and Sunderland were where people went to university or to get Good Jobs in engineering. The towns and cities seemed distinctive and interesting compared with the more homogenous sprawls along the M62. The people, daytripping or holidaying in

Scarborough, Whitby or York, tended to be waspishly, annoyingly witty, quick off the mark like Scousers and thus the subject of envy disguised as baleful Yorkshire derision. Geordie smart-arses, we said, knowing how it annoyed the ones not actually from Newcastle. Loud-mouthed North-East gits. Who do they think they are?

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Who do they think they are? It was a surprise for me to find out, as I got older, that on its own patch, the North East can seem quite doubtful as to its identity, and bloody-mindedly reticent about its achievements. Perhaps because they've been subjected to so much platitude and canting cliché, they hate being pinned down. Compliment the region on having more or less invented the industrial revolution, and they'll tell you well, yes, but they need to look forward now, there's been too much living in the past. Acknowledge the new industrial and cultural achievements of the last 20 years and they say maybe, but it needs to be spread across the region better. Admit you always secretly liked that smart-arsed patter, and they laugh and say yes you might say that, but we're not really a confident people, we're not as good at blowing our own trumpets as the Mancunians and the Liverpoolians and the Yorkshire people seem to be.

You can understand the slightly gruff, sceptical equivocation when you consider how often in the last half century or so 'identity' and 'vision' have been imposed on the area, rather than chosen by its people. It has been the Brasilia of the North, the Dorchester of the North (that was last year), a part of the Northern Powerhouse and for much of the 1980s it felt like a testing ground for a new way of managing – or rather, not managing – economic decline. Years of hearing similar prophecies from politicians has instilled a strong scepticism about big plans and promises of help, and a sense that if someone comes at you with a vision, it's really going to involve them telling you how you should think and act and talk in order to fit into it. Radical visions are all very well in affluent areas near centres of political power, because in those places, change carries less risk. In the North East, people know how dangerous ill-considered change can be.

However, in the places in the North East where people talk about such things, they talk about other cities in the North reinventing themselves: about Manctopia, about Liverpool somehow becoming a living museum of itself, about Leeds – Leeds! – becoming an international financial services centre with fashionably asymmetric buildings and a football ground where the fans – Leeds fans! - sing songs in Spanish. These places have become modern versions of themselves without losing their integrity, and now, here in the North East of England in the early 21st century, there is a sense of having the potential to do not just the same, but better.

‘I’ll let you say the stuff about the once-in-a-generation opportunity,’ one history-conscious local business owner said to me when I asked him what he thought about North-Eastern identity in 2020. ‘The trouble with us is, we have a once-in-a generation opportunity two or three times every generation. No-one wants to say it anymore because it feels like tempting fate.’

He had in mind not only the Conservative Party’s post-2019 election promise of a levelling-up agenda and fairer funding for the region, but also a set of other developments that that promise had pulled into focus: the growth of the area’s higher education institutions, and the shiny new steel-and-glass national innovation centres for data, ageing and the rural economy being built in Newcastle; the clusters of specialised century industries, building-design software, robotics and paint technology that have flourished in the last ten years; the local boom in offshore wind energy; the notion that in a service-based economy, having a reputation as England’s most trustworthy region might be an extremely valuable asset; the post-COVID19 sense that in the brave new world of Zoom and homeworking, we might be freer to relocate and work where we like; the area’s well-known liveability and quality of life.

Because commentators still feel obliged to view the region in the shade and shadows of its past industrial decline, there is south of Durham, far too little awareness of its contemporary industrial prowess. Consider, as for just one example, offshore renewable energy. When the country’s first offshore wind farm was built in Blyth in 2000,

it ought to have been seen as a bold statement about the future, a building on the invention of power-generating technology in the North East, and a new phase of the industrial revolution in which this great centre of creativity and problem-solving would remedy the problems of the past. Instead it was met with mockery, and predictions that wind power would be an expensive flop.

Twenty years later, renewable energy is cheaper than that generated from fossil fuels, and the North East is one of the recognised global centres of excellence for manufacturing and servicing turbines and other equipment.

Partly because of that reputation, the world's largest wind farm is being built out on the Dogger Bank, and will be serviced from a base in the Newcastle docks. Up the coast at Blyth at the National Offshore Renewable Energy Centre, marine engineers develop the equipment of 2030 and 2040 and beyond with the biggest power-generating companies and equipment manufacturers in the world. At the testing facility, one of the biggest on earth, those engineers identify problems and communicate them to local, smaller-scale suppliers who use their inventiveness to solve the problems. Their knowledge and ability has been handed down: every other man and woman you meet in this industry seems to have had parents and grandparents who got their knowledge of the sea and machines from shipbuilding. Many of them worked in the oil and gas industries when the shipyards were repurposed in the 1980s and 1990s, and now here they are.

Thanks to them, this whole area is an international centre for subsea equipment like cable-laying machines and underwater maintenance robots. It is expected that the maintenance robots being designed now will soon be able to repair blades and cells, thereby allowing humans to avoid the dangers of climbing along turbine blades hundreds of feet above the sea to fix salt-spray-bitten edges. As that happens, it is hoped at least, the North East will become the world centre for maintaining this vital source of energy and carbon reduction. Given that Aberdeen built its fortune on the servicing of oil rigs rather than oil itself, and given that there is said to be enough wind in

the North Sea to power all of Europe, then this servicing alone should represent a potentially vast economic benefit.

You have to feel that some places would make more of this, but as we know, this place doesn't brag.

'Maybe it's because it's a relatively contented place,' I was told by someone who had moved here from Oxford 20 years ago. 'There's a genuinely strong sense of community, and that might mean a lot of people don't like to stand out. You know, you get people so respectful of their past, their parents, their home, that they will almost apologise for having been the first in the family to go to university, or to have a job seen as a bit fancy.'

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In those places in the North East where people talk about such things, they sometimes wonder if this otherwise rather attractive modesty and sociability might be an obstacle to the potential reinvention. The Mancnapias and the L££dses have had a big, simple idea, and worked away at it until it set in. What big idea might work here, in a place where people are justly sceptical of big ideas, and where they might prefer acting together rather going it alone and sticking out?

My suggestion would be that they start by thinking about work. One legacy of the North East's unique and world-famous industrial history is the intertwining of regional identity with ideas about work – what people do, how, where and why they do it, how they find purpose and improvement. The communities and social relationships that developed in industrial towns and cities have been widely studied by academics, and depicted by artists; local language, culture and lifestyle are still strongly influenced by workplaces that now employ only tiny percentages of the workforce, or may even have closed. In turn, the nature of the community and the character of the people may determine the kind of work that gets done.

It scarcely needs repeating that of all the country's regions, the North East played the most illustrious role in Britain's Industrial Revolution of the 18th and 19th centuries. The coal and the steel, the ships and the railways, the electric and the power generation, the engineering and the manufacturing, the new philosophies of science and society; to list and analyse of the area's achievements in these respects are beyond the scope of this piece. The question is rather, does this past have continuity with the present, and can that continuity be helpfully adapted as a foundation for the future?

There are plenty of reasons why the answer might be no, get over it. The famous achievements of the past are associated with individuals, operating at a time when it was possible for an individual entrepreneur to influence industries in ways they do not in the 21st century. There is always in the North East a nagging sense that the past carries a risk of self-deceiving sentimentalism, an after-image of the cloth cap, whippet and pinny. And it means we are distilling a spirit of place from the characters of the entrepreneurs, the inventors, the businesspeople, the wealthy and the mavericks, and not the mass of people, many of whom are perfectly happy not to be any of those things.

The last point has to be conceded, but on the other hand the North East has had an extraordinary number of ordinary, working-class people who have taken those roles, and in fact those people have had a strong influence on the region's culture. It is also true that the industries and achievements of the past relied on workforces who showed a great deal of invention in organising, policing and taking care of themselves: welfare traditions from the cooperative societies, Aged Mineworkers Homes and the Methodist pastoralism, to the Cree Projects, women's centres and the Sage music centre, have supported the workforce and made their own contribution to the economy.

This inventiveness could be called a heritage of innovation. Indeed, it often has been, usually by government ministers visiting the region to urge the locals to reconnect with their inner George Stephensons. It's fair enough, but somehow it always feels a bit

wrong for the North East. 'Innovation' these days has become a bit of marketeer's word, a favourite to go with 'vision' and 'disruption of the market.' It has its place, but it's an abstract, Latin word; it's a concept, not an action or a thing, which is why it appeals to marketers. The North East is, if nothing else, a place of action and things. Its heritage is that of a making place, of a product place, an inventing place, and if you actually make and invent things, you know it's not *really* about concepts. As every biography of George Stephenson points out, invention is rarely about Eureka moments; they're for the marketers and storytellers. Making something, improving something, is about tinkering and tweaking, modding and bodging, ducking and diving and making most of it up as you go along because really, who, apart from silver-tongued spivs, does anything else?

Somehow it feels more native and natural in the North East to talk about problem solving. It doesn't sound as fancy as 'creativity' or 'innovation', but most of the time it comes to the same thing. The notion of problem solving is of a piece with the engineering mindset, and it suits the practical self-image of the North East, but it isn't less interesting than 'innovation'; there are myriad different methods and paradigms, some of them as idiosyncratic as any art. Think of the great mathematician Lady Byron, née Anne Milbanke of County Durham, schooling her daughter Ada in science and maths in the 19th century, and Ada developing her unique way of integrating science, mathematics and poetry. That idiosyncratic approach helped Ada, now commonly referred to as Ada Lovelace, publish the first algorithm, and become the first human to see that the computer had applications beyond mere calculation.

Problem solving? Practical creativity? Everyday innovation? It is relatively easy to imagine this as a common approach for work and entrepreneurs in the North East, but does it have a distinct, regional version of problem-solving? That can be hard to define, but you could begin with these four descriptions.

1 It's empiricist

Perhaps because of the influence of the empirical disciplines of science and engineering, the North East tends to put an emphasis on actual experience, and things

that have actually been seen to happen, as a guide to what might happen in the future. That means it is suspicious of authority, theory, and imaginative conjecture; it's what gives the North East its distinctive down-to-earth perspective. It can, particularly to people who are fond of theory and imaginative conjecture, appear as recalcitrance, cynicism, and dullness, but to see it like that is a mistake. It has a useful application in separating out hype from reality, conjecture from the achievable, words from actions.

2 It's iterative

As mentioned above; the North Eastern school is comfortable trying out, looking for improvements, trying out again. Lovelace and the algorithm, Stephenson and the miner's safety lamp, Bobby Robson's pragmatism. It's not, by and large, as at ease with having the idea and shaping reality to fit it.

3 It likes an antagonist

Maybe it's an element of romanticism in the region's character, but nothing seems to energise its people quite like having something to struggle against: Stephenson against Davy, Gazza against the Germans. Exposing the complacent vested interest to the possibilities of contemporary thought and technology is a tradition that runs through the history of the area; those sympathetic to the controversial Dominic Cummings will see that tradition in him. It raises an interesting question for people who want to encourage more self-confidence and entrepreneurialism here: is there a sense of opposition to something, somewhere, that might motivate people?

4 It's emotional

The North East may love the self-image of practicality, common sense and hardiness, but outsiders are often struck by the sheer emotion of the place. It isn't dour like Yorkshire, nor swaggering like Liverpool but rather, it has a kind of emotion that steers just inside the border of sentimentality. Dan Jackson might talk about the martial spirit and the proclivity for fighting, but it is emotional people who fight, not calm, rational ones.

At its very best, this corner of the north can pull off a beautiful alloy: feeling, the authenticity and controlling reason. What other region could ever have given us Bobby Robson *and* Paul Gascoigne together? Or the Unthanks? What other region could be represented by an iron angel with its feet on the ground?

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'Problem solving' would not be the most glamorous-sounding phrase scrawled on the flipchart at the brainstorming meeting, but it depends how you look at it. 'Everyone thinks there's some sort of creative ladder with artists at the top of it,' the artist Ryan Gander once said. 'But they're not, because the highest form of creative ingenuity by far is problem-solving. Being creative is waking up every day and starting with a really difficult problem that needs solving, with a budget and health and safety requirements restricting you.'

That sort of ingenuity begins to look highly desirable set in the context of our new post-industrial revolution. As Tony Quinn, son of a Tyneside ship's engineer, with 30 years' experience in power generation, told me in the summer of 2020, 'The changes we went through in 18th and 19th centuries pales into insignificance compared with what we need to do to decarbonise by 2050. The innovation and technological advances we need in the next 30 years is mind blowing. And we're just starting.'

When you also factor in current and future challenges in healthcare, social cohesion and economics, you can begin to see how creative problem solving really could be something on which you could build a reputation. I suspect the problem would be to make the North East believe, in its diffident heart, that it's really, really good at it. That sort of change, as we have seen in other cities, takes time, and it takes stories. Stories that show, and make people feel, what people like them can do and have done. Stories told with the verve of loud-mouthed North East gits at York Races. Stories that are bit more interesting than warm, proud and defiant people and the Sage seen from under the Tyne Bridge.

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