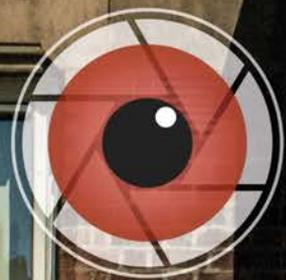


ISSUE NO. 2
SPRING 2025

ST. HELENS
HERITAGE

GLASS EYE



FREE



- MAUDS AT WORK
- LOVERS TOWN REVISITED
- PERFORMANCE POETRY
IN THE EARLY 80S
- REMEMBERING - THE ST. HELENS SHOW



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Creative Underground
Exploring the Heritage of our Arts and Culture



NOTICE-BOARD

NOTICED
THIS IN
ST. HELENS?

WHERE IS
IT?

SECOND HELPINGS

Welcome to the second “Glass Eye”

If we’re doing our job with this ‘zine then we will be listening as well as telling. We said that “Glass Eye” was

“for people who are keen on heritage, but heritage as the sediment of the past and the building materials for the future.... a bit cheeky, a bit eccentric and to raise as many questions as it answers.”

You may notice more words in Issue 2, but just as many pictures – magic eh?

One question our Issue 1 raised was, where are all the women? (See Page 23, our noticeboard page) And it did seem that we were suggesting that in St Helens back in the not-so-distant day the boys had had it all their own way – which of course they didn’t. So we’re pleased to offer as our leading feature in Issue 2 the story of an all-female theatre company, Mauds at Work, and to accompany it with a photo-essay of pictures taken from the St Helens Archive of women at work in the town through the decades.

And for anybody who concluded that we were only about music on the basis of Barry Gore’s fine array of music-scene pictures here we are giving the spotlight to not only a theatre company but one of those ground-breaking performance poets The Howitzer Brothers. Don’t worry, the music will be back in Issue 3.

Heritage isn’t only about remembering – it can and should be about the future – but in what is becoming a regular feature, “Remembering...”, this time we will be recalling St Helens Show courtesy of an interview from the Creative Underground archive. Will something like the Show ever return? That probably depends on how it’s managed and how much it costs, and our interviewee offers some salutary recollections from the 1980’s.

Anyway, it’s over to you – what we need for Issue 3 are some of your memories of the Show and any pictures you have to offer. All kinds of views will be welcome.

Watch out also for some views on St Helens’ sometimes murky industrial past.

We now have a working group for producing “Glass Eye” and it needs more members to join in the fun. If you’re interested or just have something you’d like to contribute – ideas for features, criticisms, accolades, news and comment – mail us on

glasseyemag@gmail.com

Thanks for picking up on us. The ‘zine is free so hand a few copies around, won’t you?

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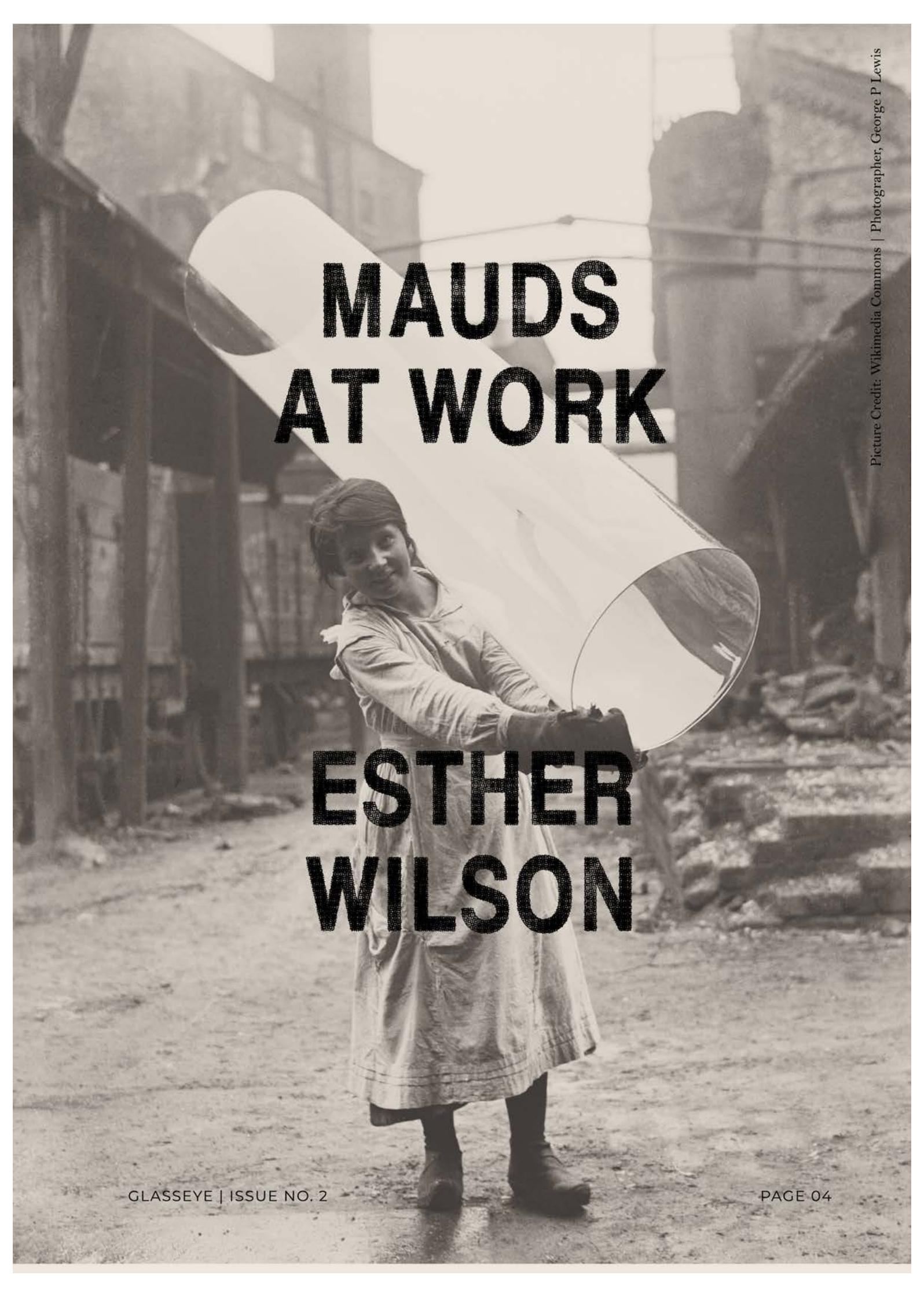


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MAUDS AT WORK

ESTHER WILSON

“Creativity is what got us here....”

Writer Esther Wilson recalls the life and times of her theatre company Mauds At Work

Around the late 80's and the early 90's I started a theatre company called Mauds at Work. I can't be more specific than that because my memory is atrocious, and I've never been one for keeping a diary or posters of projects that I've been involved in. Well, I do have one giant poster in my bedroom advertising the Almagro Classical Theatre Festival from 1992 where I'd played Goneril in Kaboodle's much lauded King Lear, but my name isn't on that. I just know I was there.

So, forgive me if the timeline is skew whiff and I've romanticised some of it, but I can assure you, it happened. More or less.

So, Mauds at Work. Obviously, I didn't start this company on my own, two other creatives - Susan McGuire and Francean Doyle - were my fellow conquistadors on that journey. Susan and I did the writing/acting bit and Francean did the producing, managing, driving us around bit. We all did the lifting, shifting, painting and arguing bit.

We'd met in St Helens at a time when the town was going through a kind of cultural renaissance. Youth theatre was our gateway (Outcast, 1984) to possibilities beyond what were expected of three working class women in a 1980's industrial Northern town. I could try to wax lyrical about how our creative and artistic sensibilities were aligned but, basically, we were just three females drawn to each through laughter and loving the life we were living at the time we met. I was married with two young children; Susan had just come out of a pretty heavy relationship, and Francean was in the process of coming out as gay in a place that 'didn't take kindly to strangers'. Even though I was the elder by 10 years we all had fire in our bellies about women's rights and human rights, so we were off.

Coming from the back of a lot of politically explosive cultural shifts - Toxeth riots, Northern Irish Hunger Strikes, Greenham Common protests, and the Miners' Strike - it was apparent that women were at the centre of these life changing protests. Clearly, having a female PM (Margaret Thatcher - spit three times make the sign of the cross or that funny thing Mr Spock does with his fingers, after saying her name aloud), hadn't done much for the likes of us women. So, a lot of working-class

female artists had started to use the performing arts as part of an ongoing struggle to be heard (no less important in 2024, unfortunately).

We wanted in on the action, so we used the most powerful tools we had, the ones that connected us, friendship, creativity, humour.

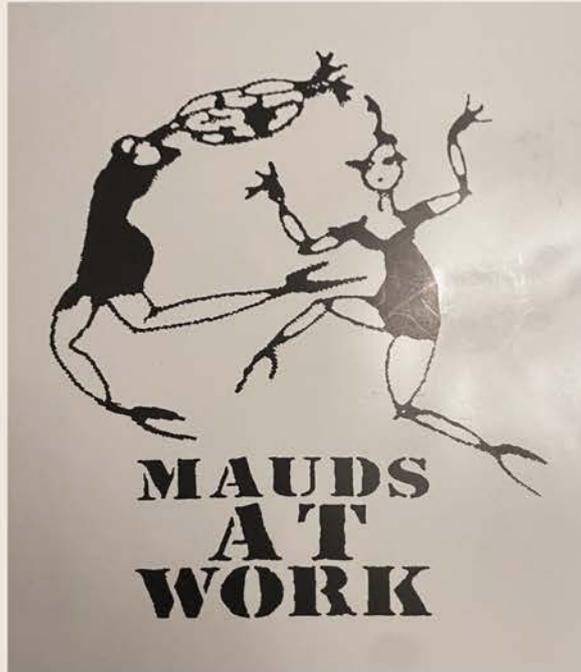
Becoming Witches

Why called the company Mauds At Work? In Liverpool scouse men often used a generic term when talking about wives or girlfriends - 'Judy'. i.e. "Me Judy's at home." In St Helens we had 'Maud'. i.e. "Me Maud's minding the kids." Us 'Mauds' wanted to show not only that we were individuals with actual names, ambitions, and interior lives but that we were also perfectly capable of making life better for ourselves.

We wanted to create small-scale theatre that was accessible to young people (all those prospective 'Mauds' out there), while also being politically challenging and fun. As we'd all just discovered feminism, it was an opportunity to shine.

We took it with gusto, courage, and flair.

Of course, we knew nothing about starting a theatre company, but it was a learning curve. What we didn't know we blagged which we were very good at. We had plenty of bold ideas and we weren't afraid of asking for help. For some reason people seemed happy to oblige, generously sharing time and funding advice until, eventually, we were successful with our first Arts Council grant. Oh, how times have changed! A Doctorate in Data Modelling Projections wasn't a requirement back then, so it was much easier for grass root companies to get help with making work. We even got help with start-up costs. Apart from being over the moon with our initial success it felt like the 'important people' were taking our ideas seriously. I can't stress how important this was for us. Not only as women but also as artists. Though we'd never have called ourselves that. This



we were just three females drawn to each through laughter and loving the life we were living at the time we met

"come on in, the people are friendly" attitude was, I believe, the real start of a journey into making good work. Surprise, surprise the unexpected really did hit us

between the eyes. We were worthy! We were confident! We were an actual Theatre Company! Momentum grew with mentorship from great people, and lots of support from St Helens Council. We were given free rehearsal space, a van to tour in, and help with publicity through internal mail systems. We performed in Youth Clubs, small theatres, conferences, Libraries, and schools. We covered subjects such as unemployment, 'Time Goes Slow (When You're A Nothing On The Dole)', the effects of male dominated town planning on women's safety, 'Sprint through the Subway', young people and alcohol, (I can't remember the title of that one) and the deaf culture, 'See What I Say'.

Meeting others in the wider artistic community offered up opportunities to expand further afield. We collaborated with another all-female, Liverpool based, theatre company 'Dreamticket', to create a piece called 'Stuff and Nonsense'. Directed by Claire Binyon the show was a madcap, physical theatre piece about women and superstition touring throughout the Northwest. We were women, we were witches, we were scary people. So superstitious stories were invented as warnings. Every character was called Sylvia.

Reaching Into The Community

Under Mauds at Work we also found time to do our own, individual stuff. Apart from delivering drama workshops at Peter Street Women and Girls Centre, I worked on a street theatre show with Claire Binyon

superstitious stories were invented as warnings.
Every character was called Sylvia

and Sue performed a one woman show 'Nothing To Write Home About' written by Sid Thomas and directed by Stephanie Simms.

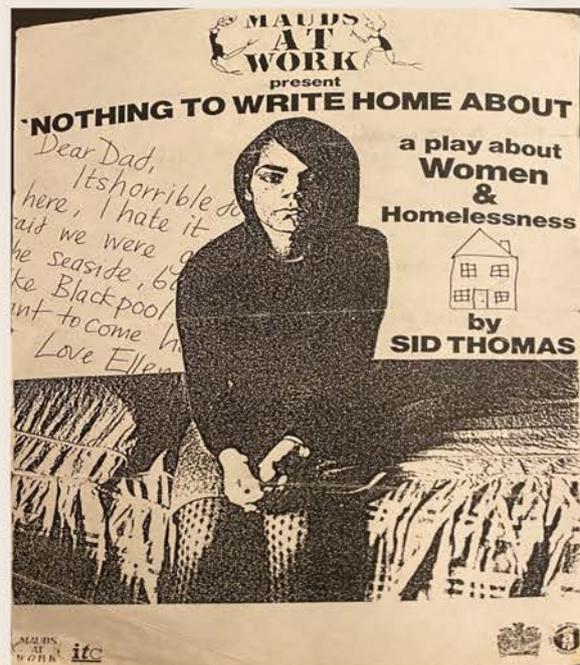
In terms of community arts, we ran a weekly youth theatre for little ones, Yeizal Kiki, at The Citadel, and curated an intergenerational residency project in a primary school. Local pensioners from gardening groups and a sewing circle helped to create the set and costumes for an end of project show. That was a particularly valuable residency as it became a springboard for future intergenerational projects led by the local community themselves.

One particular project which had a huge effect on us was a Summer drama scheme at a community centre in an area with specific problems. High unemployment, a lot of alcohol and drug abuse, and a constant police presence. People there were poor. One little girl and her sister shared a pair of shoes, kids would often turn up without lunch. It felt entirely inadequate to play games and make up stories with them for eight hours a day but, for what it was worth, they seemed to enjoy it. Needless to say, there was a lot of soul searching about the benefit of running drama schemes for a short period only to wave goodbye and



trundle off to our cosier lives where we never went without lunch and my kids had their own shoes. But the experience made us think carefully about the work we wanted to create and the direction we wanted to go in.

Pieces we created specifically for Mauds at Work were, generally, serious subjects to tackle, but we had unwritten rules to help us slip topics under the radar. Shows ran around the hour and 10 minutes mark, they were visually engaging, funny, we used music, and had Q&A's after the show. Obviously, everything was done on a budget, so it was very rough and ready, but I like to think of it as part of the Mauds' charm





THE COMPANY

Mauds at Work are **Esther Wilson** and **Sue McGuire**. Meeting five years ago at Outcast! St.Helen's first Youth Theatre, they involved themselves in every project - devising, directing, performing and providing workshops. They have also represented Outcast at general meetings of the National Association of Youth Theatres, and are committed to Youth Theatre and its objectives.

In 1988 they were approached by the local authority to create a piece about unemployment, performed at a weekend seminar, for an invited audience. This was well received and gave them confidence to form their own independent theatre company. As women artistes they regard such independence essential to enable them to have full control over their work.

A major aim of the company is to provide high quality, thought provoking accessible theatre, touring venues not usually associated with the arts.

(cough). Doing a 'get-in' with a gang of kids trying to rob the equipment or telling us that they weren't going to watch our "shit show" could be depressing but at least it gave us the opportunity to talk about their expectations of what theatre was. Or not. Depending on how tired or threatened we felt.

Sometimes the biggest vocal protestors would end up being the ones most engaged with the show, so we grabbed the odd win whenever it reared its glorious head. The lack of audience, broken or badly made sets, props going missing, turning up at the wrong venue or on the wrong date only made us more determined to get it right. Plus, we didn't know what else to do. But to quote Count Arthur Strong, "Through it all I've always laughed". We really did do some laughing.

And we learned to use the cockups as opportunities to talk about issues raised in our shows.

Uncovering the Issues

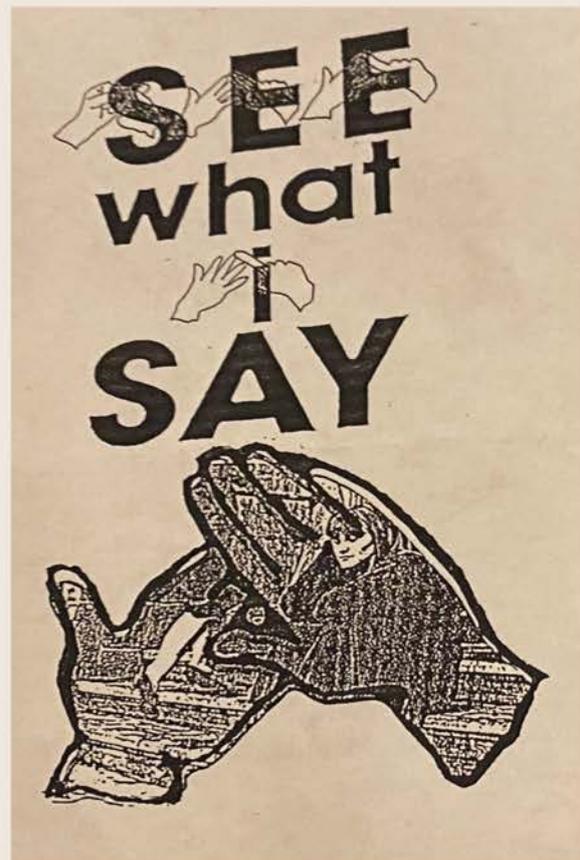
While setting up for a show about young people and alcohol we littered the playing space with empty cans and bottles of booze. One of the young people in the youth club had some kind of learning disability so she kept tidying the set up before/during the show. We had to give up in the end, but the audience just accepted that the cleared space was an untidy living room with the remnants of a boozy night invisibly scattered across the floor. The magic of theatre, eh? Peter Brook had nothing on us.

'See What I Say' explored the consequences of 'solving the problem' of deafness. What would be gained, or lost, through the eradication of a whole

culture. Sue grew up in a house with profoundly deaf parents but as she and her two siblings were hearing, she was able to bring an important but complex insight to the R&D process. We devised/wrote the piece with Roger Hill as director. It was hard work, so many conflicting opinions around the subject but, as with all good theatre, it ended up being about more than societal problems for deaf people. A collective, creative process always incorporates the essence of its 'collective'. How can it not? 'See What I Say' had Roger, Sue, and I at its heart. Our own human complexities informing the finished piece. It came to be about not having a voice, ignorance, loneliness, exclusion, independence and making one's own choices, irrespective of cultural norms and expectations. I played a scientist who used her research work into eradicating deafness as an excuse for her own fears of the world. Sue played a deaf woman who wanted to engage fully in the world despite societal restrictions on deaf people.

The problems of science taking precedence over basic humanity was not just a philosophical issue...it also became a theatrical one for us! The basic premise was the relationship between a socially awkward, but brilliant research scientist who blamed her deaf

They didn't have to wait for permission to express themselves. They had voices, imaginations, and courage.



parents for her loneliness and fear of relationships. And a happy, music loving, deaf woman who was a skilled lip reader but wanted to know more about the dominant culture.

A meeting between them gave us many interesting dramatic possibilities.

Sue's character was capable of surviving in both the hearing and deaf culture. But she had a desire to hear, for once, the sound of nature. Despite the scene where that happens being quite moving a technical problem highlighted the complexity of our premise.

The scene in question involved the deaf character in an isolation room in a lab. The scientist played her a noise. "This is the sound of the rain." Cue sound guy playing the sound of a rain and the deaf character's moving reaction. "This is the sound of thunder." and so on. Until.... "this is the sound of a bird". Wrong sound cue played the sound of a train. What could I do? "This is the sound of a bird on a train." Everyone laughed...including us. A great example of technology/science versus the unpredictability and fallible nature of humans. When the deaf character realises that in order to enter the hearing world, she'd have to deny the beautiful, physically expressive side of herself she

I wonder if there is the equivalent of a young 'Maud' out there now?

decides against going along with the experiment. Instead, she gives the scientist an opportunity to experience her culture – which means engaging with people close-up and personal in a world outside of the lab.

The final outing for Mauds at Work was 'Sprint Through The Subway'. Directed by Diane Hancock the piece looked at what a journey through a busy night-time city was like for a lone female, someone in a wheelchair, or a mother pushing a pram. By then we'd gained a bit of a reputation, so we were playing more theatre spaces. Our audiences included regular theatre goers and people working in theatre. We were getting more ambitious, so we started to think about long term



planning.

International theatre director, Lee Beagley, ran a company called Kaboodle. He'd seen one of our shows and invited me to audition for a Kaboodle show. I didn't get the part but I was on his radar, so opportunities began to open up. Which was just as well because Sue was contemplating moving to Newcastle to pursue a career in occupational therapy and be with her new fella.

Moving On

While I was taking workshops with other artists (including a week's long residency with the amazing movement specialist Monika Pagneux) and thinking about how to use my new skills in the next show, Sue was fretting about telling me that Mauds at Work was over for her. There was no way I wanted to continue without her. It had been a labour of love grounded in a shared experience of a time and place. I was disappointed but I knew that we were moving in different directions.

It was sad - end of eras are always filled with nostalgic regret - but it had served its purpose in many ways. We were proud to have made good work that challenged patriarchal norms. The project we did with sexually abused young women is some of the work Sue and I are most proud of. The weekly sessions (always in the presence of a social worker) focused on power and status. Most of the group were there under duress.



Despite all the “Drama is shit”, “Fuck off, I’m not doing that”, “She made me come” etc, we persevered. At the end of each session, we’d sit in the pub to dissect. We decided to work on trust issues. But we were so bloody serious and tense about it that we had ended up ditching the planning schedule to work on the fly. Being the butt of their jokes was the one thing that connected us to them. So, we went with that. Without noticing it happen they started to engage. It sounds obvious now but the expectation that community arts had to make everything right had been the problem. We weren’t enjoying the sessions. Once we got over that the girls started to engage in their own time and at their own pace. Just by turning up we were living proof that it wasn’t just top-down systems making culture, it was people everywhere. They didn’t have to wait for permission to express themselves. They had voices, imaginations, and courage. After that those girls rocked up with amazing ideas and creative energy every time. They were inspirational to us.

Writing this evokes gorgeous feelings of three young idealists. Susan, Fran and I. Ghosts I’ve conjured to help me remember a wonderful, creative time that filled us in so many ways. A time for experimentation, radicalism, unity, and artistic pursuits. And fun! Lots and lots of fun.

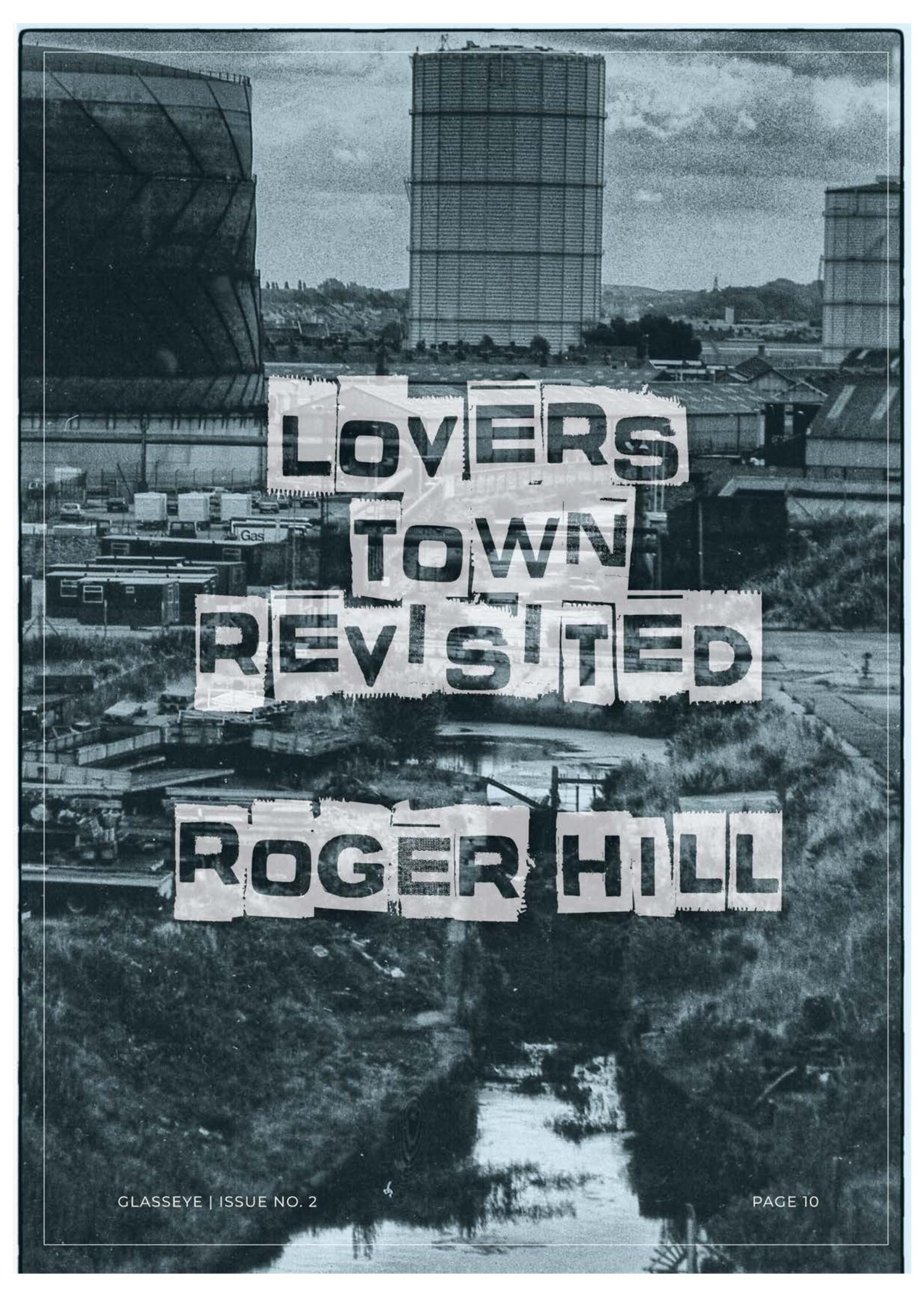


In our current political climate, with cuts to the arts, digital surveillance, screens, and social media capturing so much of our time and energy I’m not sure it would be so easy to start a theatre company that could change the course of one’s life. Maybe I’m wrong. I hope I am.

Or maybe I’m just remembering it all being so easy? Memory is good at sweeping under carpets and making faded furniture shine. Either way remembering has been lovely. Thank God for my Maud in crime, Sue Barker-Maguire, who’s taken much better care at keeping all the evidence.

I wonder if there is the equivalent of a young ‘Maud’ out there now? If there is I hope she has fire in her belly and the courage to buck the trends. With all the madness going on above us...it’s important to remember that ‘Mauds’ can make a difference. Creativity is what got us here and creativity is what we need to keep us going. Apart from nature everything we see around us has been imagined into being. It’s down to young Mauds to imagine things better.





**LOVERS
TOWN
REVISITED**

ROGER HILL

Lovers Town Revisited

“There's something born tomorrow
That I lost when I was out for a drink
How many gangs is it gonna take
To change the way I think?”

Billy Bragg

I have been re-reading a book I first read 40 years ago, and, if I'm honest, haven't read since. It was an enthralling read then, and I hoped it would be as enthralling now – no, it's not, it's even more enthralling. Held up to the light you might not think much of it. Even in 1984 it was an old book – first published in 1954 – now in this copy from LJMU library, red-bound, without dust cover, Dewey number

the sheer bloody momentum of money, commerce, trade, work – all those overachieving businessmen and labouring and grafting workers.

sellotaped to the spine, - 330.94272 BAR – name embossed likewise – “A Merseyside Town In The Industrial Revolution: St Helens 1750-1900 – Baker & Harris.”

Alright, so it's not “A Game Of Thrones”, or “Roots” or whatever, and if you don't think you're a “history” person, you probably won't be plucking it from the shelves of your local library (assuming they can find a copy), but, believe me, it's a great read – I would even now say that it's a crucial read. What Theodore Cardwell Barker (sic) and John Raymond Harris did was tell the story of the birth of a town using as much information they could find, in a period when file-cards and indexing ruled and web-searches were a thing of the future. That means lots of footnotes and statistics, academic references and few pictures, but it also means that truths emerge from their strict accounting all the cleaner and truer for the research achieved. And, yes, there's a lot of glass, and coal and canals and chemicals – and money. What I'm trying to say, in a way, it's that not so much how the book does its telling as the sheer momentum of the story-telling and, above all, what it's about.

When I first read it I was looking to understand how we had arrived here. I had just started work in St Helens and I needed to find out where all this had come from. Thanks to Barker and Harris I was able to look around, walk Church Street, discover Milk Street, get the measure of Westfield Street, get off the train at Thatto Heath or Shaw Street, perambulate Parr and see it all in perspective, recognize what forces of history had shaped them, established them, laid out these lines on the map. All of which helped me to get the measure of the present.

In a way the St Helens of 1984 was a sedate ghost of its industrial past. A big works up the hill, of course, chimneys

still spouting smoke, a brick cone, a stretch of canal, but there was more shopping being done on Church Street than business, and a lot of abandoned factory space was scattered about amongst the new estates. In the early 80's the town still exuded a kind of prosperity, but the jobs which sustained that prosperity were starting to disappear. The coal would soon be gone and the glass-making reduced. It was, if I'm honest, a lack-lustre town-scape – not the sprawling, brawling nexus of trade which emerges from Barker and Harris's book, and not the sparsely populated but deeply rural heath and peat mosses of the period before 1750. In fact the perennial landscape, the dips and rises of Hardshaw Bank and Cowley Hill, Sutton Grange and the Sankey Valley felt more poetic than the Hardshaw Centre shopping and what was left of the canal.

There's a lot of history out there – but it's what you make of it that counts. Barker and Harris set us up for the weight of history, the chastening tide of events. In 1984 I had not been ready for, and in 2024 I'd forgotten, the sheer bloody momentum of money, commerce, trade, work – all those overachieving businessmen and labouring and grafting workers. The story proceeds with relentless acceleration for 150 years with barely a pause for strikes, recessions, depressions and global slumps (though the last does overshadow the end of this telling). It's hard to say whether the flows of humanity in these pages are moving history or being moved by it. New buildings, new holes in the ground, new processes, new housing, new deals, new sales, new institutions – it leaves me breathless, but it keeps me reading. How long can this expansion continue?

At the same time as the work is carrying on the initiatives continue – Bills are presented in Parliament for new schemes, records are kept, strict accounting enforced, trade routes established, while safety is neglected and poverty ignored. This is the first high surge of industrial capitalism. As Barker and Harris say, late on into the story, “Everyone was on the move, either up or out.” And plenty of folks were ready to replace them. What struck me so forcibly was the density of it all – a town centre now quite compact with surrounding districts easy to walk to all then crammed with works, factories, pits, housing, rail and canal and offices, not

I think of waste sulphuric acid being poured into the native brooks,....

a formal Manhattan kind of density but a thick, bricky, crowded, uneven, often thronged semi-chaos reaching to the sky with plumes of smoke and noise. It would be a long travel today to find urban intensity of the kind a visitor would have encountered in St Helens in the later 19th Century.

Brace yourself likewise for the destruction which goes with all this expansion. It was, of course, Karl Marx who readied the world for the ruin that inevitably accompanies a revolution, -



“All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.”

In the St Helens of this history there may seem to be more commercial vigour than philosophical rigor, but there's plenty of melting, enough profanation, and inordinate realism at work. Everything is succeeding to fail to succeed again. The bankruptcies, oh, the business collapses, the restless markets, the unsustainable enterprises, the accidents, the tragedies, - you would need an expressionist artist of quite extraordinary boldness to capture the flux of it all. And the health-endangering casualness of the industrial processes - maybe Zola did the job of telling. Our man was Dickens, about whom more in a minute, but could even his rhetoric do justice to the sufferation which so often went unreported, the landscape of accumulation and debris and discarded efforts?

We are feeling history enveloping us.
This is a dangerous decade.

Barker and Harris's pages swarm with proto-Dickensian images. I think of waste sulphuric acid being poured into the native brooks, of Bridgid Gallagher, 40 years old, an Irish widow with four young children in retreat from the Irish

famine in 1850 who died in a rainstorm on the road at Bold while looking for somewhere to settle, of the roast beef served at Christmas in 1856 in the workhouse for the first time in many years, of the buying off of voters with alcohol on Election day, of the great crowds of people wending their way on foot from the country to the town for the funeral in 1845 of Peter Greenall who had led the town so ably for 30 years.

Such a torrent of events needs facts to slow it all down a bit. And facts were, as we know, something Dickens latched on to.

'NOW, what I want is, Facts. Teach these boys and girls nothing but Facts. Facts alone are wanted in life. Plant nothing else, and root out everything else. You can only form the minds of reasoning animals upon Facts: nothing else will ever be of any service to them. This is the principle on which I bring up my own children, and this is the principle on which I bring up these children. Stick to Facts, sir!'

The Times were Hard, and Mr Gradgrind set the agenda, but nowadays we are starved of facts - opinions have replaced them or the "facts" are Trumpian assertions which have nothing to do with the historical record. For that reason I thank Barker and Harris for grounding all of this teeming life in facts. We need their research and I doubt that "A Merseyside Town In The Industrial Revolution: St Helens 1750-1900" has met its match yet as an account of those times. And why I was even more enthralled at a renewed

reading is a simple matter. Where before it was for me about how we got here, now it is about the state we're in.

We are feeling history enveloping us. This is a dangerous decade. As W H Auden put it in another dangerous decade,-

"And all sway forward on the dangerous flood, Of history, that never sleeps or dies, And, held one moment, burns the hand"

Or as Billy Bragg said in "Lovers Town Revisited",-

*"I wish myself was back at home.
But there's nothing safe in watching
TV*

*Sometimes it makes me turn away
Sometimes it makes me stop and think
But most times it makes me run
away"*

What the indigent nailer, the Poor Law administrator, the shareholder, the exhausted glass-worker, the uncertain market-trader and shop-keeper of 19th Century St Helens all felt was what we feel today, real vertigo, real peripeteia, real uncertainty, the dubiously exhilarating danger of history. And we are not alone.

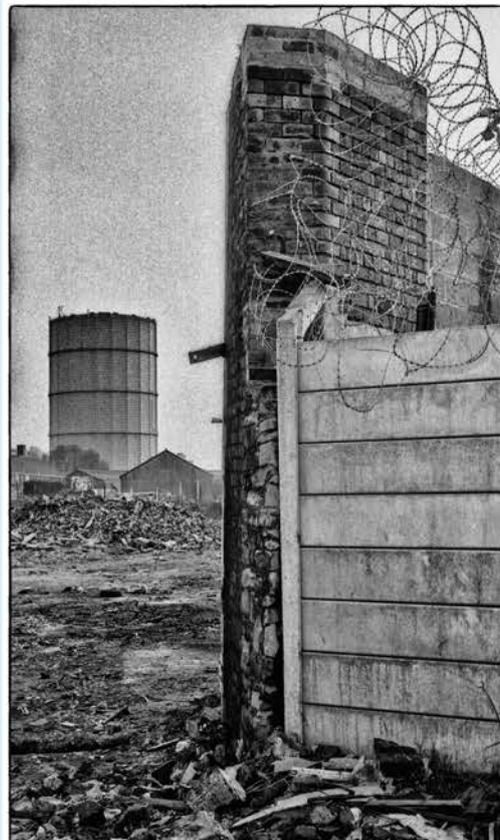
So what use is history to us? Take this from Walter Benjamin,-

"This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress."

Are we then doomed? Potentially so. The first task, Benjamin (and Marx) would assert, is to acknowledge the present, the "real conditions of life". What follows may be a better future. For the people of St



With progress came a sense of duty, the need for information and ideas, an emphasis on order and public safety,....



Helens in the period of their formation as a community what followed was the emergence of values. With progress came a sense of duty, the need for information and ideas, an emphasis on order and public safety, and, as Barker and Harris put it, -

"This was the age of continuous economic growth and modest requirement, an age when individual effort could be exerted with greatest effect."

Out of the clashes between social disturbance and public gentility came a kind of accommodation of change. St Helens wasn't just another Northern town. It made its own history. Overlaid onto the perennial landscape of heath and moss a young town grew up with lucky and distinctive features. Hard times were less hard in the town than elsewhere in the North, and it had the benefits of many strong and principled leaders and representatives. Although there was much privation in the lives of its inhabitants there was a lot of spirit too and it may be that the presence of many Irish settlers lent a certain raw poetry to their social existence.

We now know a lot more about our world, not all of it welcome, as 2024, this year of elections, comes to an end. But to acknowl-

edge the state of things is to experience history as redemption. Much seems ominously familiar and cyclical, but the least we know is that something happened before...and something different will happen next. This book ends thus,-

"Progress there was indeed to be. But it was not continuous nor was it along the lines mapped out by the leaders of the nineteenth century."

We will be freed from the cycle even as we can embrace history, can free ourselves from the shadow of the past. As the man said,-

*"There's something born tomorrow,
That I lost when I was out for a drink,
How many gangs is it gonna take
To change the way I think"*



MY ST HELENS

The Howitzer Brothers were performance poets current on the St Helens gig scene in the late 1970's and 1980's. The Brothers were John Chell and Bronek Kram and together they contributed a lot to the development of the scene in those years. Here John Chell fondly recalls the scene and his part in it, and we also include here an excerpt from one of the Howitzer Brothers' poems with a link for you to listen to the whole poem as recorded for the album "Elegance Charm and Deadly Danger" which we featured in Issue no 1 of "Glass Eye". And following that we're pleased to feature poetry written by one of today's poets from St Helens.

There are no such things as cultural deserts; it's just that there are places where there's nowhere for people to share the cultures that are inescapable parts of their lives. It's like saying that because a town has no restaurants, people who live there don't eat.

But of course, that didn't stop people from Liverpool and Manchester happily telling people from St Helens in the 1980s that their town was a cultural desert, and making them feel that that probably meant that there was something wrong with them. What I was doing for about seven years was always about trying to change that.

I was one of the Howitzer Brothers and we did perform a couple of times at the Lamb, but that wasn't what I did most of. I used to love gigs at the Lamb – anybody's gigs. Yes, it was upstairs and it wasn't accessible, but turn the house light off so that the light from the little bar at the back spilled out, cram it full of 60 young people dressed in black clutching half pints of lager and lime and put some raucous and inspired young musicians at the front performing like – no, not like, – because their lives depended on it, and the walls used to sweat intense joy and excitement.

My job was to bring people together and help them do whatever it was they wanted to do. And to make sure that the whole town knew about it. That's how we got the Citadel. St Helens Musicians Collective, Redcar, Doug Batley, Caught on the Hop, Footsteps Dance, Glazed Expressions, Socialist Arts Group and lots of visiting bands were the talent. Me and Bronek Kram and Sara McGrail and Morag Hird and Andrew Dunsmore at the

Fringe Office (and yes, it was upstairs and wasn't accessible) did the helping. Bronek did a weekly one sheet gig guide using the Fringe photocopier, Letraset and a scalpel and made it look crowded. Which it usually was. I mixed a bucket full of wallpaper paste on a Monday night in my kitchen and went out at 2am (to dodge the police because it was technically illegal) to paste the guide on lampposts and hoardings and telephone boxes and boarded up shops all over town. I remember how freezing cold that paste used to get. Sara had gone into every pub in the town centre to talk them into letting us use their meeting rooms for gigs. Morag supported all the non-music events practically single handedly using the Fringe office phone. And Andrew tidied up the hundred loose ends left by dozens of people. Andrew and me and the rest of us used to collect the stage from the Unemployed Resource Centre on College Street, carry it bit by bit about a hundred yards round the corner to the pavement outside the Lamb, and then two of us used to go up to open the upstairs window and the other two used to lift the stage up – it was heavy – section by section and feed it into the outstretched hands of the upstairs pair, hoping that it didn't slip and fall and flatten us. We carried the lighting rig, that Bronek had made out of baked bean cans and plugs from Woolworths and painted black, from the Fringe office, up the stairs at the Lamb, and plug it in and there you were. Now make some interesting noise.

We had to do it this way because there was no-one but us to do it. The town had no arts professional, apart from the overworked Slim Ingram at the Theatre Royal. Thank God for Peter Booth who was Director of Merseyside Arts. He didn't believe in the cultural desert thing and he commissioned the Roger Hill report and that led to the Youth Drama Development Officer at the Council and that led to Community Arts St Helens and that fitted neatly into the Citadel.

Final thing. It wasn't just the Lamb. There were lots of other shows at lots of other places. Some of the best nights were the theatre shows at Clock Face Miners Welfare Club, sponsored by Merseyside Arts and organised by Brian Batson and the Socialist Arts Group. Not only were they some of the best shows I've ever seen, they were also the best audiences. Exactly the sort of people you want to see theatre when you set about making it. My St Helens.

Real Man

Real Men don't read poems
I'm a Real Man and this isn't a poem because
Poems are signs of weakness
and I don't have a single weakness
so I've written a Real Man's poem

I'm a Real Man, and when I feel bad
I have fifteen pints and hit myself over the head with a motorway
I like having fun, so I go to fun pubs
Where the beer's twice as expensive
And I drink fifteen pints and I glare at people,
I like fun, so I go to discos
And I don't dance coz only bloody xxxxers dance,

I'm a Real Man, and when I feel bad
I have fifteen pints and hit myself over the head with a motorway

I go in my bowling jacket
I don't like bowling,
I just like being associated with big heavy spherical objects like
Bums, I like bums, I'm a Real Man, all to do with bums
I like having a crap, and constipation, eat lots of health food,

I'm a Real Man, and when I feel bad
I have fifteen pints and hit myself over the head with a motorway

I eat lots of yoghurts, and muesli, and orange juice and red meat,
I got piles because I'm a young man – and beer, I love beer
I drink fifteen pints, because I have to drink fifteen pints
before I can feel something and then I feel something,
I feel like throwing up, (!*@) and diarrhoea, coz I'm a Real Man,
I must be, I weigh nearly fifteen bloody stone –

I'm a Real Man, and when I feel bad
I have fifteen pints and hit myself over the head with a motorway

The Howitzer Brothers



In the Chapel of Ease

**“Now that you've wasted your life here, in this
small corner,
you've destroyed it everywhere in the world.”
– Cavafy**

**There is a wood splinter buried deep
beneath Elyn's town, like a tomb
accepted into the body.
Those who live here were born in the marsh,
babies of the bog.**

**They say a land is not a land until it's named –
but there is a piece of you from the pits
of Elyn's womb that remains
uncharted.
Know: this is a gift.**

**With the cotton of your clothes, she sows;
for the coal that blackens, she crows;
in the glass that fires, she blows.**

**Her body, old and sore, greyed and green,
exists only because it was left
behind.
Sealed inside her abandoned crucible, with
a single challis and a lytle bell –
she calls her canaries home.**

**Use your hands. Use your teeth.
Etch your unknowns into her dust
and the saint in a bottle
will lay down your roads.**

Lee Knapper

REMEMBERING THE ST. HELENS SHOW

LES BELLMON



St Helens Show, otherwise known as Sherdley Show, was a yearly event in the St Helens calendar from the 1940's until 2006. It was often billed as the biggest free event in Europe. We're keen to know what you remember about it, so get in touch with pictures and stories. Meanwhile we have,-

“The Man Who Ruined St Helens Show” tells all.

Les Bellmon was employed by St Helens Metropolitan Borough Council, within the Leisure Department Marketing in the late 1980's. Here he uncovers some lesser-known aspects of the event.

“My role was to help publicize and manage operations of the so called well-meaning good work of the Borough Council. It wasn't an easy job at the time. I'm from Liverpool originally. I worked in St Helens for that period, so I used to travel. At the time I was there, I was engaged in reorganizing the St Helens show, which had become basically a massive three day event in July.

St Helens was - to use an analogy- it was a pit village with a pit village mentality and basically it was very insular. People never really made any effort to connect with the outside world, shall we say. So its ideas and the way it went about things were pretty straight and stuck in the mud. At the time we had Maggie Thatcher on the horizon and the pits were getting closed down. The glass industry was being modernized, so there were jobs being lost. It was all in a pretty poor state and, physically and mentally,

a lot of people were getting stressed and looking for other outlets for their capacities.

We did have a budget - which was astounding at the time - to do things and it was like, how do we engage with the local community and then connect with the community outside? You know, we were 11 miles from Liverpool. We could have been, you know, 111 miles, the distance of things.

We had young people that had been bypassed. So we did concentrate on things like golf, - “let's improve the golf course,” - but young people didn't use a golf course, I don't think they even use a golf course now. The local authority didn't connect because it didn't service young people. It was all about those who were voting, those who were paying the taxes. I think it was down to the original director that I had, Ken Robinson. He was a Liverpool lad

....how do we engage with the local community and then connect with the community outside?

and he turned round when, when he employed me, he just said like, we need to start moving things along, let's do things differently.

We then had a new director, John Davies with a further three deputy directors. This created an environment where they each wanted to outshine each other. It was literally, you know, right across the board, - you looked at things very, very differently and it frightened the

life out of the councillors, the presentations we did, right? It's sort of like, whoa! And they were like, no, we know we've got to fight. And we said, You don't have to fight that because you're not gonna change. But what you need to do with it is to approach it from a different direction. And that was our job, to come at the problems that people face from a different direction.

I think it was down to young people. Youth workers were coming in and saying, We've got young people who want to know why they can't do things, - which was brilliant. We didn't have to do an awful lot of market research because they were knocking on the door. So it was that sort of scenario, toing and froing and it was like it created a little bit of energy and that little bit of energy, that spark, was there and your report threw petrol on it and I thought that was brilliant.

The energy started from the youth - the young people were getting on to the older people who were then coming into the local authority and saying, sorry, we have to do something different. That was amazing for me because it was like that was what St Helens needed. St Helens had had that long, long period of feeling sorry for itself, and it was like, well, no, we have to do something now. You know, you can sit, wallow in that self-pity for as long as you want, but it ain't going to get things done.

I said, we haven't got anyone that's facilitating needs,



Fred Dibnah was a regular visitor to the show, bringing his steam traction engine with him.

somebody that turns round a resource. A person who can

We didn't have to do an awful lot of market research because they were knocking on the door...

say, right, we've got this, I can find this for you, - because I was doing stuff at the St Helens show, which was all about resource and things, and I was trying to change things. I ended up being called The Man who Ruined the St Helens Show, I made the headlines in the St Helens Reporter which I'm quite proud of actually.

The director said, I'm going to change your title. You are now a Resource Manager, he said, you facilitate what they need. So I was basically going round literally just making connections with people. I'd be going to the youth groups and saying, Well, what is it you need? What you need, not what you want, because wants and needs are very, very different. If you need to move forward on this we can make a link with the guys in graphic design who could help with posters and things like that - but it was often little things like equipment. Well, actually, I would say, there's a place down here that's got a generator and it's just something you could use to do this outside. And we would do things for libraries which I enjoyed more than anything, because I could see things happening then so my job realm did change immensely. and for the good.

My life was made a lot easier when Dave Palmer Jones came on board and he really didn't give a monkey's. We formed a brilliant tag team, and people didn't know how to handle this.

The St Helens show, basically. I mean I'll give you some numbers. When I first went in and when I was looking at the St Helens Show, it was costing over £200,000 a year to put on as it was. When I started looking at it, I couldn't believe that,- the brewery, it was like four massive beer tents on the site, stalls sold food, there was a fairground, and no-one really policed it. So when I looked at it, the breweries never paid to be there. They went, well, we're providing a service, when they were making a shedload of money. And by the way, we were providing the tent for them - all they did was bring in a bar and beer.

So I told them, You want a tent, you bring your tent, you pay for the space. You can have as big as you want, as long as it's policed. You've got to contribute to the police. They just looked at me with a blank stare going, Well, how long are you going to be in a job? And I was like, I'm in charge. That's what's happening. Yeah, do it or I'll go find people to do it, not a problem. And literally, before we got out the door, they had all agreed - that was that much money involved in it.

The next one was the local newspapers. We were giving them a huge tent capacity of over 2000. We put in the chairs and we were doing the stage, the P.A. everything and then gave it to the local papers to promote themselves. And there was Miss St Helens which was a little bit contentious, but I was like, no, you know, I'm missing

something but can't you have a Mister? or, better still, don't have any. So we had a Mister St Helens and that was a strange one.

And we gave the army and the services a big arena – it was a fantastic show they put on but it was a massive recruitment exercise for them and it was like preaching. It was like, you know, preaching to the converted. It was like a

way out of prison. People couldn't get away from the idea at the time because, socially and economically, St Helens was in a bit of a hole. It was a way out for people. And the thought of, you know, joining the military services was phenomenal at that time, something that paid, and the Show that was like this opportunity to do all that, you know.

So I gradually brought them back down to sort of like, No, you're not having all of this. It's going to be multi-use. It's not just you. We want this. And then, I just told them to shut down the fairground – awfully sorry, you've got to pay. And the guy who ran it, John, he was dead straight, he said fine. Not a problem. I said, you know, we'll start off easy, but it will get bigger as we go along. And then the market, I just reduced it by 10% of every year for three years - the biggest job was organizer, working so you didn't have three umbrella sellers next to each other. I was organizing and it was like getting the puzzle with the square tiles in your cracker and you're trying to make a name out of it and you move them around. And that's what it was like trying to keep similar stalls away from

The first one we put on was Beautiful South, yeah, and ...oh my God, we sold tickets, for the show

each other, so in the end I said, we'll just have one of each, actually. We ended up with an area right at the top, near the main entrance where you saw it first, - we had things like that, you know, the tents, the stalls, the veggie show and St Helens Biggest Marrow. With all these changes I got called the biggest threat to the Show or whatever it was.

You had a big, big laugh and then it was like, we will put bands on. So with the Citadel going strong, we went, Yeah, come on. And the connections that we had, well, the first one we put on was Beautiful South, yeah, and this is, this is like, oh my God, we sold tickets, for the show, it was sold out and it's like, yeah, go on. I got the expenditure down to £105,000 and then the second year I've got it down to £93,000 but, what it was, it was like, simple things. Every year we would dig up the whole field, to lay cables. And then dig them up when it all ended, Well, I said, leave in the ground, - it's disconnected so basically we don't have permanent electrical field and things, - so it



was all little things like that.

Initially it was all about cost, but then bit by bit it was let's make it a little bit more leaning towards the actual public. We paid people, so people were getting paid to perform, the local people. One thing that I quite wanted to do was, go after a producer. Let's go to someone and

say, right, we'll give you so much money, but you have to book performances in St Helens Show. We had the budget to do something to create outlets for people - it was like I was laughing because one of the things was Morris dancing.

There were loads of girls Morris dancing around, but we wanted proper traditional Morris dancing. There were three groups in St Helens. who didn't speak to each other,

...one of my claims to fame was gonging Johnny Vegas off The Gong Show...



- they were rivals. But I said, I want you to do something where you all come together. We had a field where the horses normally run around. We had three months to just do a lot of dancing. And they all came together and we basically overlaid traditional stuff on what they did. It was brilliant, I mean, I got into accordion music after that!

You need to give people the incentive to actually make money doing what they like to do to rather than doing what they have to do, like work in a factory, whatever. But we had musicians, dancers, writers like Esther Wilson who came out of all that and Johnny Vegas. It's bizarre that one of my claims to fame was gonging Johnny Vegas off The Gong Show. When he walked on, he didn't even get to perform, and he was like,.... ooh, I can't repeat what he told me, but it was amazing. It was like quite funny because everybody remembered it afterwards. In the end the Show promoted little things like that, to encourage people to do things differently and get paid for it.

(Taken from a recorded interview which is in the "Creative Underground 1982-95" section of the St Helens Archive. Thanks to the Archive and Les for permission to use it.)

NOTICEBOARD

ANOTHER COUNTRY

"extremely interesting"
"a great film and document"
"Very informative and interesting throughout. The K's seem like nice lads..."

In the last Issue we alerted the world to the film "Another Country" which is now available to watch on-line. It wasn't, due to a printing glitch, clear that scanning the QR code will take you to the film, so we have included the code again to make sure you know how to access it. And, one more time, here's what the film is about,-

"Another Country" tells the story of a not-so-quiet revolution. It is a documentary account of a particularly memorable period of music and culture in St Helens, a township among the many which sprang up across Northern England in the Industrial Revolution. In the 1980's and 1990's an exciting, unexpected and uniquely wonderful scene developed in the town, apparently from nowhere, and here it is in all its wayward spontaneity, as told by the surviving "actors" in that scene, with material from the period, and brought into the present with an optimistic glance into the future. Can culture make history? And then make it again? "Another Country" says Yes."

Let us know what you think about it. Use the QR code to view the film.
glasseyemag@gmail.com

LETTER

"Glass Eye" has been receiving a warm welcome across the Borough and this mail amongst others gave us something to think about,-

Hi Glass Eye people,

(Sorry I can't name names, but I'm not sure who's producing the mag). Anyway I'm glad to have found a copy around town and enjoyed the read a lot. It's very well produced and a bit of an eye-catcher, so I hope a lot of others find copies too. When I went back to the Book-stop for another they had run out. Just a couple of comments – it seems to be all about music heritage, is that the plan? I'm not complaining but there have been a lot of other arts-type activities in the town, even if I don't remember them myself. Also there's not many females featured. I know most of the bands of the 80's were lads bands, but not all surely?

Anyway I hope there will be an "Issue 2" – these are early days, I guess. Good that it's free.

Good luck,
Jamie

Thanks, Jamie,

We hope you find Issue 2 around town OK. You make some fair points and we have tried to respond to some of them in our Page 3 editorial. Issue 2 has many more females in it, as I hope people will notice, and a wider variety of cultural activities (although that doesn't mean we won't be featuring music and musicians in future). We want to be as varied as possible.

As to finding copies we were caught out by the interest "Glass Eye" has generated so stocks ran out prematurely but they are back in the libraries now, and the usual places round town, as is Issue 2. If anybody really can't easily find copies Email us please glasseyemag@gmail.com and we'll direct you to your nearest stockist.

Sorry we're a bit anonymous at the moment – we'll be publishing a list of the team who produce the 'zine very soon.

The Glass Eye Team

PS - we have lots of space for further help and support, if you want to get involved.

LET'S CELEBRATE...

...is an entertaining afternoon of poetry, song and flash fiction written and presented by the Len Saunders Writing Room Project and covers a wide range of subjects from nature to love. It is at the Central Library, the World of Glass on Tuesday 11th March from 1.30 to 3.30 and is free, with refreshments provided. Booking is essential and this can be done by calling at in the library or ringing 01744 676954 or emailing sthelenslibrary@sthelens.go.uk

THANKS

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In the Next Issue of Glass Eye:



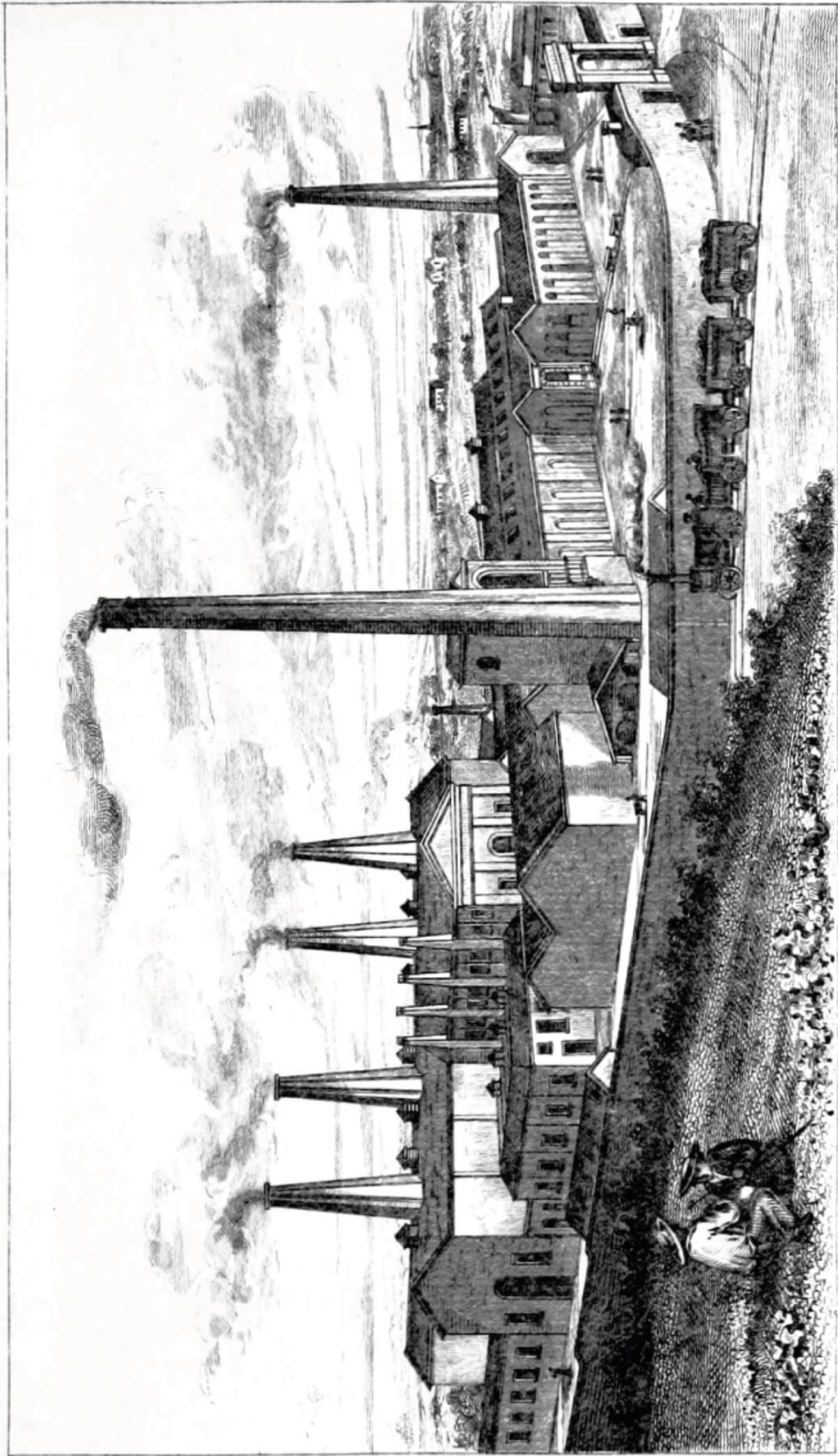
- The Art of Darts
- My Heritage - from the St Helens Heritage Officer
- Remembering...Gnarl

feels like
summer

FIND OUT
MORE SCAN
THE QR CODE



Any Eye-deas you have or, just feedback or offers of support get in touch at,
glasseymag@gmail.com



UNION PLATE GLASS WORKS ST HELENS.