

What Was all the Fuss About?

It is the year 2050, and the NewcastleGateshead Quayside has become the major tourist attraction in the country. The new museum of Northumbrian life, outlining the rich history and great achievements of the people of North-east England, sited along the southern bank of the Tyne, between the old Baltic Art Gallery and the Gateshead International Stadium has become a model for many other cities. To be fair, some people are voicing concerns over the inexorably rising river, as the temperatures worldwide continue to rise and to children the Arctic ice becomes something that is seen on film from the old days. But otherwise Tyneside is doing fine.

Indeed it is doing so well that people look back at the past with some amazement. Was it really so hard in the old days forty or so years ago?

Many prefer to look further back, to the 19th century. They remember how North-east England had been at the forefront of so much that was new, that was exciting. They remember how a great monument was built to commemorate the start of the drive towards Britain being a democracy, how people had worked together to build networks of mutual support and solidarity through their trade unions, through their cooperatives, through their chapels. They remembered the great scientific achievements too; the invention of the railways, the invention of the lifeboat, the world's first turbine-driven ship and how Mosley Street in Newcastle was the first street in the world to be lit by electricity. They remember how the *Mauretania* held the Blue Riband as the fastest cruise liner across the Atlantic Ocean for nigh on 20 years; even if the rest of the world still only seems to remember the ill-fated Titanic.



People today are not so keen to remember the bad times. The terrible struggles of the time between the two world wars, the sufferings that led to the *General Strike*, the unemployment in the coalmines and the shipyards, the *Jarrow March* all seemed like a bad dream. The same is said of the 1980's when *Consett steelworks* were closed, as pits closed and then eventually in the early years of the 21st century, even the

mighty Swan Hunters shipyard sold off its cranes and an end came to centuries of shipbuilding on the Tyne.



Yet even these hard times are seen by some as a source of inspiration. No more can the North-east be pushed around, be at the whims of national or global economic priorities. The cold winds of economic recession can still blow over the North-east, but no longer can they blow the economy off course. The resourcefulness of the people has made sure of that.

What people really look back in amazement at, is the furore about immigration in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. The children do a course in schools as part of their history lessons looking at bias in the press and how we should always have a press which tells the truth. Freedom of the press is still seen in 2050 as vitally important, but now the press and media, which these days is mostly online, have to tell the truth and present balanced stories. Children are sometimes amazed at how it used to be, how some newspapers used to be so bigoted and used to tell so many lies. They are even more amazed at how so many people used to believe them.

The great turning point had come with the Leveson Inquiry in the early 2010's. The corruption and bad practices of some sections of the media were exposed and the industry, in association with the National Union of Journalists, began to clean up its act. The Hillsborough Report, back in 2012, which showed how one particular newspaper had lied appallingly in 1989, reinforced the feeling that things had to change. Many ordinary journalists were delighted that their honest reporting was now being represented properly by those who owned and managed the newspapers.

The stories which people now look back at with such disbelief were the stories about immigration and asylum seekers. It is hard for people now to imagine why they were written and even more why they were read. It looks like such a brutal, savage time, when some people seemed so afraid of those coming to live amongst them.

Some had indeed been racists. These were people who couldn't understand how people who looked a little different, or whose cultures were slightly different still shared most of the same human characteristics. They still needed to feed themselves and still needed to look after their families, which they loved. They still bled when they were cut, they still cried with joy or sadness depending on the circumstances. Hard-core racists couldn't understand any of this. But the real racists were on the margins of society ignored by most.

Then there was another group. These weren't really racist, but could act in racist ways. They were just a little worried about what was going on. They seemed to see more people around who weren't quite like them. Then a mosque was built and it looked different to the familiar churches, the minaret somehow alien compared to the reassuring church steeples or towers, although all pointed upwards to a vision beyond the clouds. Then somebody said that there was going to be an Islamic Centre in the neighbourhood and some people had visions of terrorist cells working there. The truth was that nobody really knew what it was and that bred uncertainty and fear.

There were those who looked back to their youth with nostalgia, just as older people do now. They remembered years like 1953, huddling round a neighbour's television to watch the Coronation, or to watch Stanley Matthews at the age of 38, causing the Bolton Wanderers defence so many problems that Blackpool could come back from 3-1 down to win the F.A. Cup Final 4-3. They remembered the pride in Britain when Everest was conquered, although in reality it had been scaled by a man from Nepal and another from New Zealand. That's O.K isn't it? Don't we all look back wistfully to the days of our youth, when the sun always seemed to be shining and our lives were ahead of us full of hope and promise and sometimes want to turn the clock back?



With people worried about immigration and fed exaggerated and one-sided stories by much of the media at the time, it is perhaps no wonder that there were those who would try and manipulate people's genuine fears for their own ends, to make money or for political gains. But it still looks strange looking back from now, in 2050.

It was perhaps in the schools that the real change took place. There young people became friends and if you liked someone that was enough. If your friend could make you laugh and help you through all those changes, which still seem to come thick and fast when you are in your teens, then what did it matter what colour they were or what their surname was?



The fear of terrorism subsided as well. It was interesting how that happened. The governments of the world, for all their fine talk in the end had little or nothing to do with it. It was ordinary people who made friendships with those around them and started talking to each other about what they had in common; love of their families, their hopes and fears for the future, the joy and sadness at the heart of all our lives. They got sick of all the extremists on all sides and those who peddled hate soon melted away like springtime snow.

In the end it all settled down. People remembered that the history of Tyneside, indeed the history of Britain was a history of immigration. People started to recognise just how much incomers could add to our economy, to our culture, to our lives. Even by the late 20th century, over 50 years ago, it was said that the British national dish was no longer fish and chips, but chicken balti. Even the much maligned asylum

seekers, many of whom had come here to escape war or persecution showed that they had much to offer. It was even whispered that many of them held degrees and had skills we needed and that many had had to flee their homes because they were clever and talented and seen as a threat to the regimes where they lived.

Now in 2050 so many fears have gone. Some of our children might have Asian or Eastern European surnames. But they all speak with Geordie accents and many proudly wear the black and white shirts of Newcastle United. The mosques are now hidden by new housing and people walking past them notice them no more than they would a Roman Catholic church. After all it is still the traditional church steeples and towers which dominate the skyline. It is so hard looking back to the early 21st century, to understand just what all the fuss was about.

A Living Tradition