# Experiences of place and loss at Newcastle West End Foodbank

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'Foodbank Histories' has recorded interviews at the Newcastle West End Foodbank. They have yielded insights into multi-layered memory and highlighted dynamic conceptions of community and identity. This article examines how interviewees narrated two key themes: place and loss.

> Who I am… Hmm. Born in Newcastle, at the General Hospital, within sight of the floodlights at St James's Park, within smell of the breweries, and with the influence of my grandmother – who was a pitman's widow, and who, alongside my parents, who came from widely different backgrounds, taught me the essence of decency, and right and wrong.[1]

Bill C. projects a slightly nostalgic vision of Newcastle as a city of passion and compassion in equal measure, but whose people have been beset by inequalities and the pernicious impacts of deindustrialisation and austerity. For Bill, a Geordie upbringing was synonymous with a sense of 'decency' and comradeship.

A volunteer at the Newcastle United Football Club (NUFC) Supporters' Foodbank, 'a collective of NUFC fans bringing their backing and support to the Newcastle West End Foodbank (NWEF)', Bill is one of the 41 people we have interviewed since 2018 as part of 'Foodbank

Histories'. This is a collaborative research project involving university and community historians from Northern Cultural Projects CIC (NCP), a North East community cultural organisation, and Newcastle University's Oral History Unit & Collective, working in partnership with NWEF. Drawing upon clients' and volunteers' testimonies, we aimed to help improve service provision at the foodbank, inform policy-makers, foster attitudinal shifts, and find creative ways to reach a wider public.

The people we listened to shared similar beliefs in traditional working-class values: respect, consideration, and generosity towards family members, coupled with a commitment to a strong work ethic.[2] In this article, we reflect on themes of place- and class-based solidarity which permeated many of the interviews. These solidarities are interwoven with a sense of loss. Taken together, these testimonies provide a rich and layered social history of Newcastle's West End as a place of both community and conflict.

NWEF is one of the biggest foodbanks in the country. As the name suggests, it was set up to cater for the needs of people in its locality – in this case Newcastle upon Tyne's West End: an area without fixed boundaries, but largely synonymous with the historically poorer, deprived areas of the city's west. While the majority of foodbank clients live here, people come from all over the city and beyond.

Many of those interviewed reflected on the current struggle in this locality, with a strong perception of the impact of decline amid deindustrialisation and more recent austerity.

Volunteer Laurie pithily evoked the shifting social geographies which accompany regeneration:

> We left here… somewhere around there, '87. To be perfectly honest, where we were it was starting to become a wee bit run down, but not to the extent that it is now. I mean, there is parts of the West End does perfectly okay, but there is places where it's very run down. Here you can see the difference, especially since austerity kicked in what, ten years ago? The industry

> around Tyneside has basically gone, all the heavy industry's gone… Tyneside now, parts of it is more like a theme park where it used to be all industry… people have been left behind.[3]

Representations of Geordie togetherness coexist uneasily with invocations of immigration to deprived communities as a symbol of localised decline. Older volunteer Margaret said she would describe Newcastle to a stranger as 'very friendly', yet this was an exclusive framing of place which cast newcomers as problematic: 'People didn't, they're just - not the same, all foreign. And if you've got a hearing problem, you can't understand them. So it's drastic changes… These foreigners, they're just out for themselves.'[4]

The West End's diversity is not new. Until the early twentieth century it had been a popular destination for immigrants hoping to find employment in the area's mines and heavy industries. Major employers like Vickers-Armstrong had chosen to locate their factories in this part of the city, conveniently situated close to the River Tyne. Today, almost every family has at least one migrant grandparent.

Foodbank supporter Monju's family were once some of those 'newcomers'. He explained his commitment to a range of community initiatives through his extensive experience living in the area. This was no nostalgic representation, however: Monju also recalled several harrowing childhood experiences of racism on the streets where he grew up. But his tenacious identity as a Geordie transcended those experiences:

> I'm definitely a Geordie, I was born in Newcastle, I live in the West End of Newcastle… I can absolutely relate to what's going on: I see it, I live it, I live in one of the most deprived areas of Newcastle, where the biggest food bank in the country is set up… Growing up in Elswick, it has changed just a tad in the last thirty years! Have been to a fair few places… lived in some pretty cool places… But my home and heart will always be in the west end of the Toon![5]

Another volunteer, Patricia, spoke of 'two Newcastles': one engaged in social struggle, another – with the affluent suburb of Gosforth used as an example – oblivious to it. For her, the proximity of those two Newcastles rendered a unified social effort all the more imperative. 'I think there's two different separate types of Newcastle. And I wish more people inside the Gosforth bubble were aware of what's happening outside of it.'[6]

The majority of our interviewees had lived in the West End most of their lives. Those who left, for example to pursue a career in the army, did not express any regrets about having returned to the area. James's parents both came from Scotswood and he spent some of his early years in Denton Burn, an area comprising both poor and more affluent areas. He spent more than a year in temporary accommodation, and is now back in supported accommodation: 'When I got the chance to go back there, I said, well, that's great, that's my dream home, Denton Burn.'[7] He still knows people in the area, mainly older people 'from years ago, some of them are still around you know'.

Deborah, whose family briefly lived in Hartlepool, also values her long-term connection with the place: 'I know people round here. I grew up round here and all that'.[8]

Amid socioeconomic transformation and dislocation, collective identities connected to a sense of place offer an anchor point for localised distinctions and pride in an 'imagined community'.[9]

Most people could reflect on several generations who lived in the area. Often, they did not know many details of their parents' and grandparents' life histories, but did have stories about struggles with low pay, often requiring women to supplement the household income through part-time work, most frequently bar work and cleaning jobs. Today, recollections of this employment tend to erase its challenges and instead remark on its attainability. For those who first entered the job market before the economic downturn, employment was easy to find.

> In the past, you could leave one job and go on to another job straight away. But now, you cannot, you need all these forms, certificates and all that. If you haven't got all of them, you cannot get a job. And then, you've got to go on the computer, and if you cannot go on the computer… know what I mean?[10]

Many of the foodbank volunteers belong to this generation, and are now of retirement age. They recognise the different challenges experienced by a younger generation who are their children and grandchildren. For example, Shirley recalls, as a young woman, being sacked from a job:

> I was on my way home to tell my mum I'd lost my job and bumped into a friend who said they were looking for an office junior at her place. I went for the interview, just after lunch and I had the job by four o'clock. It was nothing like today, when you lose a job you can't find another one. It was amazing getting sacked in the morning and still having a job in the evening… I would hate to be a youngster now… I think there's not security for them, no security whatsoever.[11]

A recurring narrative in these women's lives was a strong sense of duty towards their children, particularly in their early years, which often meant that they left training or employment. Deborah, who comes to the foodbank with her daughter and grandson, told us:

> When I was sixteen I was training to be a nanny. I'd done a year and a half at college, I had half a year to finish but I found out I was pregnant with K. so that went through the window. My mum says to us *you can go back to college if you want*, but I went, *no, she's my responsibility*. So that's why I didn't go back… My mum gave up a lot for me and my two brothers, I think I'm just following in her footsteps.[12]

Just as Tracy Shildrick and colleagues did, we found that the experiences of middle and older generations were typified by work, not worklessness.[13] The interviews reflected a strong work ethic, linked to familial duty, that had been passed down through the generations and is still present now in a young generation that has little or no experience of the labour market. James remembered his father saying: '*If you want something, you've got to go out and earn it, get a job and all that* – and we all did that'[14] When Kath's son left school on a Friday in the late 1990s she told him: 'Get a job, £30 a week. No job, £50 a week' [for your board]'. The following Monday he started work for a Chinese food wholesaler.

Most of the younger people we met or heard about were without employment, despite expressing conventional aspirations for work. Their common experience can be summed up with this quote from Linda, whose son left school assuming he would 'get a job anywhere': 'He keeps going online and applying online all the time and you just don't get a reply. *Thank you for your application*. That's all you get.'[15]

What has often been frowned upon as 'low aspirations' and misused by politicians to demonise people working in poverty are in fact longstanding working-class aspirations. When we asked foodbank clients about their hopes for the future, most people of working age wished for a 'steady job'. Apart from that, the motto is 'just to get on with life', ingrained in people's minds through personal and collective experience, nowadays often romanticised as 'resilience'.

Laurie, who came from a working-class background, reflected on his father's attitude:

> When I was struggling with work and with the kids and with this, that and the other and I was down a bit, I remember sitting in the club with him… He says, *you know what, son*. And I said, what? And he says, *just get on with it*… And that's what they did. They went through wars and all the rest

> of it and rationing and all this business and that's just the mentality, just get on with it.[16]

But throughout the good and not so good days, and often in the absence of satisfactory official intervention, many people relied on the help of the immediate neighbourhood. Usually, these are memories of mutual support, of helping and being helped.

> You had to do without things and, you know, things like that. It's not like today where you have ample opportunity to get things, you know. I think then it was a bit more, you had to rely on yourself and your neighbours.[17]

Neighbourly support was most likely to be in kind, but could also be directly financial. For example, Kath recalled door-to-door collections for a neighbour's funeral costs, to avert the shame of a pauper's funeral.

A common story is the sharing of coal, with families who had a worker in the coalmining industry bringing home coal that was made available to others on the street, in exchange for bartered favours.

> Now her husband was a miner… the miners used to get a load of coal and they used to dump it in the back lane and we used to take our buckets over and get coal and Mary would let us get some coal for the fire and mum would do something for Mary in exchange.[18]

Our interviewees' memories may have been nostalgic, but they were also reflective and measured. No pocket money, no holidays, but plenty of freedom and long days outdoor with friends are common recollections of childhood experience for the older and some of the middle generations. But this freedom also meant a lack of protection: 'We were the type of kids that were out, stay out, come back at teatime. You fended for yourself from a very young age.'[19]

Families could be a source of comfort, especially in larger families with relatives supporting one another and mitigating the impacts of poverty. Yet family could also be a source of conflict. We heard many harrowing stories of women having been abused by family members. Kath lives with the consequences of abuse to this day. Her memories exemplify the long-term emotional ambivalence resulting from both positive and negative childhood experiences. When she was pregnant with her third child, she worried about the family's financial situation and considered an abortion, even going so far as making an appointment at the clinic. However, in the end, she chose to go ahead with the pregnancy:

> All I could get in my head was my dad used to say, *there's always a slice of bread for a baby*, meaning that you'll always find some way of feeding it.[20]

The economic struggles of previous generations meant that interviewees had often accumulated personal problems, including mental ill-health, that made stability for families difficult to achieve, and prevented the development and transfer of social and cultural capital. Educational underachievement abounded, with young people leaving school early and quickly entering the labour market with few or no school or post-school qualifications. With the exception of Kath, who praised the assistance she had received from social workers, none of the clients mentioned any form of positive official intervention.

Lawrence, whose mother had 'kept disappearing', spent a lot of his childhood living in care. When we met him, he was sixty years old, living with a long history of depression, but volunteering and hopeful of gaining work as a gardener.

> I don't know why she used to do it or anything, but I think my auntie Irene, she had kids of her own and we just ended up getting put in a children's home… There were a few homes

> when we were all together but we didn't get a really stable school to go to or anything like that, it was just when you were there, there used to be people that used to teach you but it wasn't like a proper school or anything… Schooling is just something I picked up really, just what you pick up of other people.[21]

Close to retirement age, Linda struggles to cope with being on Universal Credit after having worked all her life in a pub and as a kitchen assistant. Linda recalled what had seemed a stable family setting, with her dad earning a decent living as a glassmaker, until he had a mental breakdown and lost his job. Her mother asked for help from a GP:

> So he said, *you married him, so you look after him*.… She tried to commit suicide twice. Like, just a cry for help really… My mum had part-time jobs and we just tried to do it that way. She wasn't as strong as I am. It's made me that way though, having a life like that… It's a terrible thing your mind though. It is different to physical. Even the doctors cannot cure it but they just give you medication to calm you down.[22]

Jacqueline's mother had also worked in a pub, but left the family without explanation when Jacqueline was 'six or seven'. 'I thought she'd been, like, you know, like the Orient Express, murder on a train and [laughs], I thought some bad man had got her or she'd fell off the train.' Her father Derik, then a railway worker, now in his eighties and also a client at the foodbank but unable to talk to us because of a previous stroke, was left behind heart-broken, desperate to keep the children.

> Hard, he fought hard for we, very hard… I'd hear him crying at night, very sad… Took we into care at one point and my dad had said to us, *when you get there, be naughty. Because if you're good, they'll want to keep you*. So we were, we were

> really naughty, me and my brother, really naughty. Trashed the bathroom [laughs].[23]

They returned home, but 'he couldn't work after that, he went on social'. Once the children were old enough to be left to their own, Derik started cleaning windows in the neighbourhood. 'I was about nine years old when he learned to use the washing machine, and then I was eleven and he taught us finances in the house. Wash, you know, bills and shopping and then I learned to cook.'

Jacqueline's life didn't get any easier. Extreme abuse from her first partner caused severe mental-health issues. Except for one, all her pregnancies were the results of rape, and of a relationship with a man who wouldn't commit to her. She had various cleaning jobs, until chronic obstructive pulmonary disease (COPD) forced her to quit work. Jacqueline now shares caring for Derik with her brother: 'I just keep his mind going, me, and my brother does his body.' She still speaks of her father in high regard. 'He's been an independent person, hasn't he? Doesn't talk very deep. Doesn't judge people. *If you've got nowt nice to say, say nowt at all*, that's what my dad told us. *If you've got nowt nice, don't say nowt.*'

Most of the clients we met had led a precarious existence for most or all of their lives. Without a strong safety net, negative events such as job loss or a health issue easily triggered a crisis and often a prolonged downward spiral. In our interviews, health problems were central to the loss of opportunity – and often of autonomy. From the vantage point of visiting the foodbank, clients' memories of injuries and diagnoses forcing the loss of earnings appeared as threshold moments in their life course. K., in her twenties, began her testimony by explaining the turning point early in her working life:

> I was working in a pub, a very busy pub in town. And then I obviously had an accident, so I wasn't able to go back … You are better off when you working, and now, my money is just

> less than half now, so I'm living on next to nowt really, and that's why I come here.[24]

Client and volunteer Jess recalled escalating health challenges preventing her from working, compounded by the withdrawal of disability living allowances costing her family household some £400 per month, with devastating effects that saw her and her two children in hostel accommodation. She was unable to make use of her usual strategies to manage money, such as using a chest freezer to store food in bulk, making it impossible to weather the financial storm without access to the foodbank.[25]

Elisabeth C. was visibly in pain when we met her.

> I've been three times, cause me benefits have been mucked up at the moment. I live on £140 a fortnight. I'm not able to work. I wished. I was working seven years ago. But I've got loads of things on. I rarely leave the house. I'm on a lot of medication. I've got COPD in me lungs, kidney failure, microscopic colitis in me small bowel, me spine's narrow and it's knocking the discs out on the top, and depression, and now they think there's a tumour behind me eye. I'm waiting for an appeal hearing. A year I've had to wait for the hearing.[26]

The findings of our Foodbank Histories research are similar to those of an earlier research project by Jane Perry and colleagues, which found that most people making use of Trussell Trust foodbanks did so because of some kind of serious 'life shock'.[27] A life-changing event rarely leaves hope for recovery in a neoliberal landscape. Moments of tragedy, acute loss, and shock punctuated many foodbank clients', especially men's, testimonies.

Lee was at the foodbank shortly after the sudden death of his long-term partner:

> I met me girlfriend when I was nineteen, and she just died a couple of year ago. And this is how I'm in this predicament, where I am, at this foodbank. I was with her for twenty years, and I've got two children with her … She'd only just turned thirty-six. We'd just been for a meal for her birthday.[28]

The involvement of authorities and support agencies often proved to be ineffective, or even counterproductive. Dean, who visits the foodbank regularly with his mother Denise, told us how he went from earning 'enough to be able to do everything I really wanted to do, to pretty much nothing':

> A couple of years ago, I became very poorly because I have a heart condition so I was admitted into hospital on the day that I had an interview for a job search… They actually sent an advisor out to the hospital to check that I was actually in the place where... It was I think probably about a couple of hours after the advisor had seen me in the hospital to me being sanctioned for not attending a work focussed interview…
>
> I came out of hospital. I had intensive physiotherapy and was made to actively seek work. They put me on a training course and unfortunately I collapsed again and became very poorly to end up being back in the coronary care unit at one of the local hospitals again. And, again I was placed onto a sanction for not actively turning up to my work focussed training.[29]

Laurence battled depression after the death of his mother and the separation from his partner.

> I used to sit with the blinds shut all day and it's just horrible, I wouldn't wish it on anybody… I got help from the doctors and stuff like that, they used to give us tablets to help us sleep… I think finding work was just the furthest thing from my mind but you had to look for work anyway, otherwise you would get your benefits stopped.[30]

Frustrations with the welfare system and obstacles preventing a return to work were a significant grievance for unemployed clients seeking to reverse the loss of employment. K. explained her sense of disillusionment after a visit to the Job Centre in 2016.

> I said look I really wanna go to work, is there any help, any courses you can put us on? She went, if I'm going to put you on a course, I'm going to have to take you off income support and put you on jobseekers' [allowance] and then you would have to work full time. I said, well I can't work full time, I've got a son to look after. She said, well my best advice to you is just to stay on income support. I don't want to be on income support, I want to work! [31]

But despite multiple challenges many clients, unless suffering from progressive health conditions, represented past losses as temporary setbacks. From circumstances which were often highly difficult, clients frequently spoke determinedly about the future. Even Lee, still seriously struggling with the loss of his long-term partner, spoke of how he had undertaken short-term employment, and of his determination to return to work.

> I did get a job for a few months over Christmas time, and then, that's why I stopped coming [to the foodbank], but that was only like seasonal work, so I'm hopefully being back to work for the summer holidays, hopefully.[32]

While we listened to many frustrations and worries in relation to the area's troubles, such as crime, drugs, and racism, the testimonies did not allow any straightforward portrayal of the West End as a site of togetherness and mutual support declining over time.

People still cling on to traditional working-class values, especially concerning mutual support within the family There is still great attachment to strong family ties. Deborah is 'always' at her daughter's house: 'If I don't go over, the bairn goes to the window and shouts, 'nana, nana'! It's about ten minutes down the road.'[33] We saw little evidence of working-class identity's erasure, despite the advance of neoliberalism. Self-conscious distinction and conceptions of a particular identity, connected to place and class in the west end, had not been subsumed by a contemporary consumer culture. Our findings supported Anoop Nayak's argument that deindustrialisation, while part of a global process, can cast regional and local identities and solidarities in sharper relief.[34]

Keith spoke despairingly of destitution, famine, and poverty worldwide, and framed his own struggles as comparatively mild and part of a normative, perennial cycle:

> There's always been rich and poor and it'll always be the same… I dinna want loads of money, as long as I've got enough to pay me bills, keep me cats happy, that's it… I was born poor and I'll die poor, and I'm quite happy. That's it.[35]

When she reflected on mutual aid in the community she had grown up in, Linda summarised her conclusion in a brief but beautiful way: 'I know that they always say it was better then. But it was'.[36]

The majority of clients expressed an interest in becoming involved in volunteering at the foodbank, often to 'give something back'. Solidarity remained a core value: the much-quoted 'community spirit', often said to have received its final blow under Thatcher, was certainly still alive. When we asked James if he thought mutual aid in the West End has ceased to

exist, he immediately replied:

> No, I don't think it has, to be honest. I really don't think it has… I've heard people here helping out each other in the foodbank. You know, doing favours for each other. I don't think it's really changed, to be honest.[37]

In almost every interview, there are small mentions that bear out James's view. Jim goes every week to do housework for his ex-partner who is disabled; Denise carries dog treats to give to rough sleepers with pets; Stan mentions that he is about to leave the foodbank to check on a friend who is drug-dependent, Keith is too old to take on heavy digging work at the foodbank garden, but shares his expertise with Laurie and the younger volunteers. And should he ever have lots of money, he says: 'I'd probably give it away to charity, simple as that – you might not believe it, but that's what I'd do.'[38]

The West End still has plenty of positive stories to tell.

Let's make sure they get heard.

*About the authors:*
**Northern Cultural** Projects is a Community Interest Company based in Newcastle upon Tyne, UK. We champion transformative, diverse and inclusive community history and heritage practice in the North East.
**The Oral History Unit & Collective** at Newcastle University includes academic and community oral historians. Our work explores the role of oral history in communicating the past in the present. Alongside our Community Partners, we produce globally significant research while attending to regional and civic responsibilities.

## Notes

1 Jack Hepworth interview with Bill Corcoran, 26 June 2018.
2 Gillian Evans, *Educational failure and working class white children in Britain* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), pp. 38-40.
3 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Laurie, 12 February 2020.
4 Jack Hepworth interview with Margaret, 15 October 2018.
5 Jack Hepworth interview with Monju Meah, 19 October 2018; Silvie Fisch correspondence with Monju, 13 April 2020.
6 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Patricia,14 August 2018.
7 Silvie Fisch interview with James Briggs,10 March 2020.
8 Silvie Fisch interviews with Deborah H., 25 February 2020.
9 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London: Verso, 1983).
10 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with James, 17 September 2018.
11 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Shirley, 1 October 2018.
12 Silvie Fisch interview with Deborah H., 19 June 2018.
13 Tracy Shildrick et al, 'Are 'cultures of worklessness' passed down the generations?', Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 13 December 2012. Available at: https://www.jrf.org.uk/report/are-cultures-worklessness-passed-down-generations (accessed 8 April 2020).
14 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with James, 17 September 2018.
15 Silvie Fisch interview with Linda, 18 February 2020.
16 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Laurie, 12 February 2020.
17 Silvie Fisch interview with James Briggs, 10 March 2020.
18 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Shirley, 1 October 2018.
19 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Kathleen, 19 February 2020.
20 Interview with Kath, as note above.
21 Silvie Fisch interview with Lawrence Best, 2 February 2020.
22 Silvie Fisch interview with Linda,18 February 2020.
23 Silvie Fisch interview with Jacqueline B. Redhead, 3 March 2020.
24 Silvie Fisch interview with K.,19 June 2018.
25 Alison Atkinson-Phillips interview with Jess, 19 October 2018 .
26 Silvie Fisch interview with Elisabeth C., 4 September 2018.
27 Jane Perry, Martin Williams, Tom Sefton and Moussa Haddad, *Emergency use only: understanding and reducing the use of food banks in the UK* (Child Poverty Action Group, Church of England, Oxfam GB, and The Trussell Trust, 2014).
28 Silvie Fisch interview with Lee Crawford, 7 July 2018.
29 Silvie Fisch interview with Denise and Dean Hunter, 11 February 2020.
30 Silvie Fisch interview with Lawrence Best, 25 February 2020.
31 Silvie Fisch interview with K., 19 June 2018.
32 Silvie Fisch interview with Lee Crawford, 7 July 2018.
33 Silvie Fisch interview with Deborah H., 25. February 2020.
34 Anoop Nayak, 'Last of the 'real Geordies'? White masculinities and the subcultural

response to deindustrialisation', *Environment & Planning*, 21 (2003), p. 7.

35 Silvie Fisch interview with Keith Hutchinson, 4 September 2018.

36 Silvie Fisch interview with Linda, 18 February 2020.

37 Silvie Fisch interview with James Briggs,10 March 2020.

38 Silvie Fisch interview with Keith Hutchinson, 4 September 2018.