

COAL IN THE NORTH-EAST
THEN AND NOW:
A CABINET OF CURIOSITIES



Introduction

The concept of a Cabinet of Curiosity has a long history originating in 16th century European efforts to expand knowledge and understanding of disparate and superficially unrelated material phenomena.

Initially a cabinet consisted of a room, hence the German translation *kunstkammer* or wonder room. Only later did the term cabinet apply to a specially designed display unit, often constructed from exotic woods. Possession of these cabinets signalled prestige among those who could afford such indulgences. Some were presented as whimsical entertainments. But the cabinets' strongest cultural influences were as precursor to the establishment of museum collections, and the publication of encyclopaedia and catalogues that stimulated scientific discovery and categorisation.

The Cabinet of Curiosities engendered speculation focused on the uniqueness of individual items but equally, and from the outset, invited contemplation about the juxtapositions between items - ranging eclectically across natural science, geology, ethnology archaeology and other emerging disciplines. The German art historian Horst Bredekamp describes how cabinet collections "encouraged comparisons, finding analogies and parallels and favoured cultural change from a world viewed as static to a dynamic view of endlessly transforming natural history and historical perspectives...."



Cabinets were a performance – more show than tell – leaving much open to interpretation. They possessed a theatrical aspect enticing observers into conjecture, exploration and love of the marvellous. It is these characteristics that led to the Cabinet of Curiosity being dusted down and retrieved for its contemporary power as a communicative device.

In 2021 Bob Frith worked with fellow artists to compile a Cabinet of Curiosities within a 19th century room at the Whitaker Museum and Art Gallery at Rawtenstall, Lancashire as a theatrical showcase for the Whitaker's rarely displayed objects, which are brought together with artist-made objects. The aim is "to explore the fascinating overlap and mash-up of collectors, the wealth created in the textile industry by exploiting enslaved African people, taxidermy, child labour and Empire." It is accompanied by showings of a related animated film by Kain Leo "Requiem for Stuffed Animals". The cabinet project dovetails with the Whitaker's ambitions to connect people, heritage and ideas with the past, the present and the future.

These sorts of ambitions inform the motivation behind this "digital pamphlet" modelled on the idea that assorted elements connected – more or less directly – to north-east heritage could be assembled and presented as a collection for information, contemplation and delectation.



The contributors were recruited from an interdisciplinary group of academics and parties who gathered for a two day workshop in May 2024 entitled After the Coal Has Gone including field trips to Deerness Valley, the coastal neighbourhoods of Murton and Seaham and Beamish Museum. In studying the post-coal landscape and contemporary life in county Durham the group are particularly interested in how thinking about the past in the light of the present can unravel threads that lead to better futures. Following the tradition of cabinets interpretation as to how the contributions relate one to another and what can be traced through their accumulation is left to the beholder.

Each reader will make their own observations, which we would be very interested to learn about, as we hope to use this exercise as the basis for a later exhibition.

So please spare a moment to send us comments.

Sandra Bell

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OBJECT NO. 1

No dancing allowed in heavy boots sign by Jessi Lehman



This is a photo of a notice board in the 1950s community centre in Beamish. It calls to mind a set of social norms that governed the relationship between work and sociality, concerning gender, health and social hygiene, and the governance of public space.

It also highlights both the conflict and comingling of work and leisure, masculinity and femininity, domesticity and industry – the heaviness of hard labour and the lightness of the dance.

OBJECT NO. 2

Tees Transporter Bridge



In this photo the Tees Transporter Bridge is visible from a vacant lot in Middlesbrough, a short walk from the city centre. Middlesbrough's old town hall is also present. This photo, taken in early spring 2022, shows the juxtaposition of neglect, erasure, regrowth, and endurance.

OBJECT NO. 3 Durham Mining Museum By Lynn Gibson

The Durham Mining Museum is located in the Town Hall in Spennymoor, County Durham, England. It's dedicated to preserving and showcasing the history of coal mining in the Durham area, which was the major industry in the region for centuries.

The museum contains exhibits and artifacts related to the mining industry, including tools, equipment, photographs, and documents. It aims to educate visitors about the lives of miners, the technical aspects of coal extraction, and the social and cultural impact of mining on local communities. There is also a makeshift mineshaft in the cellar of the museum where children [and adults should they wish] can experience what it was like to crawl down a low seam and children can also undertake a treasure hunt in the museum. The free museum is ran by a pool of volunteers who are all former coal miners, with the exception of Lynn and Mary who are from mining families.



One story we like to tell children visiting the museum is where the saying 'not worth a light' comes from. Prior to the Mines Act 1842 which forbade women and girls of any age to work underground and introduced a minimum age of ten for boys employed in underground work, young boys as young as three years old have been documented a working underground. When young boys first worked at the pit, their job would have been as a trapper boy. These young boys simply sat for 18 hours a day opening and closing the trap door which acted as ventilation to the mine. These boys were so poorly paid that they couldn't afford a candle, so worked in complete darkness - this is where the saying 'not worth a light' comes

from. We then show them the candle holder which would have been used prior to safety lamps and the Davy lamp which came later.

OBJECT NO. 4 Newbottle Workingmen's Club by Adrian Green



Newbottle Workingmen's clubhouse occupies a Georgian house on Newbottle village green. The village green would originally have been surrounded by farmhouses, later rebuilt into handsome Georgian houses. Because the village sits on a hill it was not a mining village in the eighteenth century, when this grand Georgian house was built for a family prospering from the profits of coal mining. Only in the nineteenth century was it possible to sink deep mine shafts and Newbottle became a working pit village.

The Workingmen's club remains active – testimony to the Georgian prosperity of Newbottle and its working class heritage.

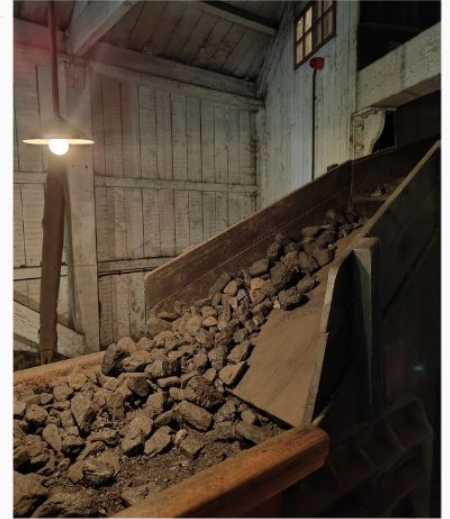
Adrian Green, 'Houses and Landscape in Early Industrial County Durham', in *Northern Landscapes: Representations and Realities of North-East England*, edited by Tom Faulkner, Helen Berry and Jeremy Gregory (Boydell, 2010), pp. 125-140.



OBJECT NO. 5

Coal on the picking belt at Beamish by Natasha Anson

Coal on the picking belt at Beamish, in the Heapstead building. Though separated from the drift mine itself, this area is still popular with visitors, who will dwell here and speak to the engager in the next room. It provides a more open space for discussion about coal mining heritage than the underground space of the drift.



OBJECT NO. 6

Mahogany Drift coal-themed sweets in the Gift Shop at Beamish by Natasha Anson



The commodification of coal: Mahogany Drift coal-themed sweets in the Gift Shop at Beamish. Not pictured is the coal-flavoured ice cream which has featured on the museum's social media. One examiner shared that he would rather not be reminded of the dust that has affected him and his colleagues by eating these.



[Watch a video about Mahogany Drift Mine in Beamish Museum](#)

OBJECT NO. 7 Cornsay Colliery by Lucy Grimshaw



The legacy of coalmining is not always visible in the north east. Here in the village of Cornsay Colliery, situated about seven miles west of Durham, the name is an immediate reminder of the industrial past. The coalmine opened in 1868 and a brickworks highlighted on the map was closely associated with the mine. The information board maps, displays, memorialises and educates about coal in the past and how the decline has given way to the present environment, bio-diversity, nature and wildlife.



The board is situated in front of play space for children, at the start of a pathway and on the edge of a large, wild green field to the right (and pictured below). What is the information board for? Who is it for? Perhaps embedding the history into the present, displaying the north east heritage for locals and tourists alike, developing a sense of place through heritage and the environment, through play and leisure and the hope that it will be taken into the future and protected.



Read more about urban heritage and children's sense of place

Local poet Cynthia Fuller writes about the local countryside and its mining heritage, at a community event she read one of her poems aloud and I noted only fragments 'there should be something to show', "a scar" perhaps and instead time and nature is "folding the land right over". Only echoes remain. The land, green and time reclaiming territory, making way for new forms of cleaner energy via the windmills in the distance.





This idyllic country landscape hides the history of industry, scarring, demolition. Cornsay Colliery was a Category D village, demolished when no longer deemed useful. We are left wondering about the lives of those forced to leave and of those who remain living in the final row of terraces. We are glad the pub still survives.



[Read more and watch a film about Category D villages](#)

Where once waggonways and tramways ran through these green fields and woodlands across the north east, transporting workers, coal and bricks, out to sea, across the country and globe, we now breathe in the air, replacing black in the lungs to move and actively travel for leisurely pursuits, taking a circular route, we breathe and pause and enhance our health and wellbeing in nature.





OBJECT NO. 8 Women's banner group by Lynn Gibson



The Women's Banner Group were formed in 2017 with a view to gaining recognition for the women of the Durham Coalfield who have historically been forgotten about. In 2018 we paraded our first community banner in the Durham Big Meeting and it was blessed in the cathedral.

In 2019, following the completion of 6 months engagement with women from all over County Durham an open consultation was undertaken to identify which women and campaigns would appear on our newly commissioned traditional

silk banner that would highlight the achievements of previously invisible women, past and present, and symbolise their local and national achievements to be marched annually in the Durham Miners' Gala.

In 2019, 150 years of the Durham Miners' Association (DMA) was celebrated. Redhills, home to the DMA was selected by Historic England as one of 100 places that bring to life the country's "rich and extraordinary history". As evidenced in the open consultation WBG members felt that the contribution of women during this 150 year period is unrecognised, especially within the traditional art form of silk banners. Silk Miners' Lodge banners are paraded each year at community events, heritage days and most visibly at the Miners' Gala. Women of note are represented on less than five out of the 185 recorded Lodge banners in existence.



Through the medium of the Silk Banner WBG expanded young people's knowledge of their past and showed them how they can effect positive change both as individuals and through working together, and how this can impact future decision making. In attending the Miners' Gala with the silk banner we increased the sense of unity and community engagement that the event creates and contributed to the sustainability of the event by encouraging young people to walk and carry their communities' Lodge banner.



The WBG is the first all women banner group to be recognised by the DMA, the first and only all women's banner group to be affiliated to the County Durham Banner Groups and the silk banner was also was blessed in Durham Cathedral.

Scan the QR code to read more information on the women and the campaigns depicted on the banner as well as a timeline of the WBG activity so far:



OBJECT
NO. 9
Mural in East Durham
by Simone Abram

The coal is gone, but it also remains. As do – at least some of – the miners. This powerful image, painted by Cosmo Sarson as recently as 2020 indicates just how live the memory of mining remains in East Durham today. Many of those miners also know that there is more coal underground, where it is and what the geography of the enduring coal workings were when they left. There was another universe underground, with many miles of workings stretching from one colliery to another and for miles out under the sea.

Adam Cooper's recent commission 'Ancestral Reverberations' documents recollections of mineworkers and their families. As part of that work, Jacob Polley's commissioned text repeats the familiar phrase about the darkness underground when the lights were off: 'you couldn't see your hand in front of your face'. When we visited Seaham in 2024, we met a former mineworker manning the desk at the East Durham Artists Network gallery.



OBJECT NO. 10

Above Below Beyond Art Trail by Simone Abram

Bill recalled not the light but the sounds of the seams. Working as a fitter, he was often on his own far out under the North Sea. He would sometimes switch off his light while he stopped for his bait (took his break), and feel the pressure of the rocks both above and below, hearing the creaks and sighs of the geology all around him. Above, Below and Beyond.



Learn more about East Durham Artists' Network

As visitors, none of us had been underground here. We have not felt the damp air of the coal face or the pressure of hundreds of meters of rock above our heads. But we began to see the remains of the colliery life all around us, in the memorials, the remains, and the artworks that commemorate generations of coal communities in this 'post-coalonial' landscape.



Read more about the Anthropology of Post-Coalonialism

OBJECT
NO. 11
Tommy Ramsay statue
by Sandra Bell

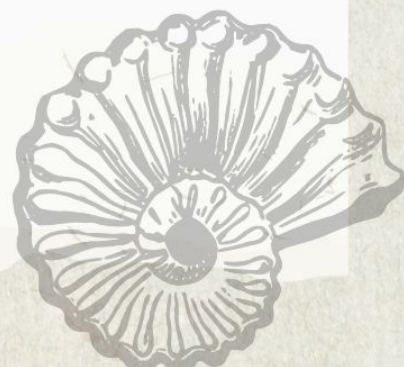
This statue of Thomas (Tommy) Ramsay stands above his grave in Blaydon Cemetery near Newcastle. He died in 1873 aged 61 after a lifetime spent campaigning for radical causes, particularly the long fight to establish an enduring miners' union in County Durham. Something he lived to see achieved four years before his death.

The statue by Newcastle sculptor George Burns was paid for by subscriptions from the 40,000 newly recruited members of the Durham County Miners' Association (DMA), who heralded him as a local hero. An inscription on the base of the statue reads:



Photo: Statue of Thomas Ramsay
by George Burns in Blaydon Cemetery.
Copyright of Mr Edmund Martin.
Source: Historic England Archive

Erected by the miners of Durham
as a tribute to his long and self sacrificing
labours in the cause of human progress.
He was a zealous worker. A faithful friend
A Christian patriot



So highly regarded was Tommy Ramsay that in addition to the statue the DMA commissioned a full-length portrait in oils to hang in their first purpose-built headquarters in North Road, Durham City which was opened in 1875.

The portrait was produced by city artist George Newton from an earlier studio photograph. Ramsay carries the signature items of an itinerant missionary for the union. He clasps the wooden crake used to summon meetings that identified him as "Craiky Tommy". Clinched beneath his other arm is a bundle of handbills. His hand grasps a sturdy walking stick and a red paisley kerchief, which is the one splash of colour in the entire painting.



Photo: Portrait of Thomas Ramsay
by George Newton.
By permission of Redhills Durham

His image also appeared on many miners' banners including the Haswell Colliery banner that now hangs in Durham Cathedral. Beamish Museum records the latest, but possibly not the final, depiction of Tommy on the Main Forth Lodge banner created in 1921, more than a hundred years after his birth in 1812. But despite the rich iconography very little detail was known about his life. I recently tried to remedy this through research that uncovered new material, but gaps remain. Much of Tommy's story depends on a contextual account of the turbulent events in which he played a part and the companions he came to rely on, particularly his younger brother Robert.

The most revealing discovery is the range of his activities ideologically linked to the struggle for unionism that was so close to his heart. Tommy never married, leaving him free to dedicate all his energies to radical causes. He was involved with promoting working class education through his support of the Mechanics Institutes and with the establishment of Co-operative Societies.



Over many years he engaged with the several movements for electoral reform that occurred during his lifetime. This tireless work was accomplished alongside long hours in the mines where his working life reportedly began at the age of six.

Tommy Ramsay's folk image is that of a grizzled warrior of the people, leader of strikes and peripatetic recruiter for the union. One commentator likens him to a Charlie Chaplin figure, but this is misleading. His career was long and much of it spent in youth and vigorous middle age. He was literate and self-educated, knowledgeable about contemporary politics, highly articulate and witty. The latter quality is liberally displayed in his speeches.

One of the reasons behind his becoming a household name across the coalfield was through his ability to dose serious critiques of Victorian capitalism with a brand of humour carefully attuned to his audiences.

A newspaper with little sympathy for the miners reporting Tommy's contribution to an outdoor meeting in support of a strike in 1863 opines: 'The chairman, however, had the most singular style of all. His voice was of wonderful power; he had a flow of language, such as seldom possessed even by men in public life, and he addressed those present in the simplest words, and in that rich dialect peculiar to the pitmen of the north.' (Newcastle Journal 16.11.1863)

It matters to keep the memory of the likes of Tommy Ramsay alive. It is due to the struggle they endured in the teeth of often brutal opposition that we live in a democracy with the benefits of a welfare state. People like Tommy are a reminder of how hard won these institutions were to bring to fruition and why we should never take them for granted. Like Tommy's statue they should never be neglect but continually valued and renewed.

OBJECT
NO. 12
The word: Marra
by Michael Pearce

Marrow, which the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'a companion, a friend; a fellow worker, a partner' is a curious and - in North East England - very significant word.

Its origins are uncertain.

Its forms, meanings and usages are complex and various. We can only skim the surface here.

When and where does it first appear in the written record? In the earliest English to Latin dictionary ever published, Promptorium Parvulorum (c. 1440) the headword Marwe is glossed as 'felawe yn trauayle' and given as the English equivalent of socius, compar. It is also found in The Second Shepherds' Play (Alia Eorundem or Secunda Pastorum) in the Towneley Cycle of Mystery Plays, written in Yorkshire dialect in the mid fifteenth century: 'Com coll and his maroo, / Thay will nyp vs full naroo' ('If Coll and his marrow come they'll nip us very hard').

The historical record for marrow reveals a long northern pedigree. Indeed, it appears in a list of words 'proper to the Northern ... Counties' in what is widely regarded as the foundational work of English regional lexicography: John Ray's Collection of English Words Not Generally Used (second edition, 1691).

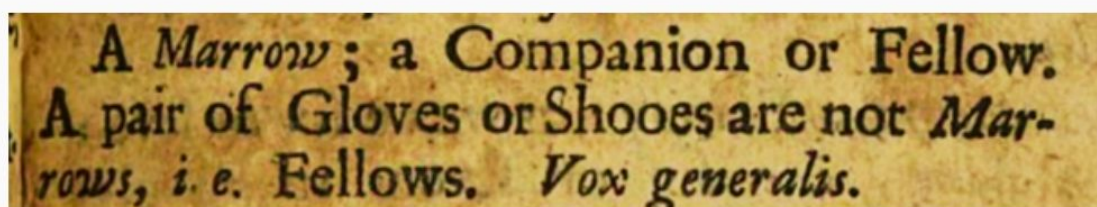


Image: From Ray (1691)

Later lexicographical works which remark on its northern associations include Nathan Bailey's Universal Etymological Dictionary (1712) and Francis Grose's Provincial Glossary (1787), though both entries closely follow Ray's definition and attempt no serious etymology. It is also widely attested in Scots from the fifteenth century onwards, and indeed the earliest published etymological claims are found in a Scottish source. In 1710, a new edition of Gavin Douglas's Aeneis was published in Edinburgh. It was edited by Thomas Ruddiman and incorporated 'A large Glossary, Explaining the Difficult Words: Which may serve for a Dictionary to the Old Scottish Language'. Widely regarded as the first major work of Scots lexicography, the glossary consists of 3000 Older Scots headwords, amongst which can be found this entry.

Marrow, 183, 3. *an equal, fellow, associate, accomplice, companion, camrad.* The word is often used for things of the same kind, and of which there are two, as of shoes, gloves, stockings,; also eyes, hands, feet, &c. Either from the F. Camrade, Ang. Camrad, socius, sodalis, by an Aphæresis; or from the F. mari, a husband, Lat. maritus; in which sense the word is also taken: Thus Scot. a husband or wife is called half marrow, and such birds as keep chaft to one another, are called marrows: Hence the verb marrow, to equal, and marrowless, that cannot be equalled, incomparable. It is not a little surprizing, that the ingenious Dr. Skinner (to whose learned works we must own our selves vastly indebted,) should fall foul on the Author of the Dict. Anglic. for rendering the word Marrow, Lat. socius, i. e. fellow, as above: And that he (Skin.) should positively affirm, that the word (which only occurs to him in that Author, as he writes,) is no where used in that sense; whereas it is not only a common word of that signification through all Scotland, but also, if we may believe Mr. Ray, through the most of England, and perhaps is now no where used in any other sense.

Image: From Ruddiman (1710))

Ruddiman evokes 'Aphæresis' [apheresis] – the loss of sound elements at the start of a word – as the mechanism by which marrow is derived from camerade, an earlier variant form of comrade (though this is etymologically and phonologically unlikely). He also suggests a derivation from French mari (husband), which Samuel Johnson favours in the fourth edition of his dictionary. Other etymological speculations to be found in eighteenth and early nineteenth-century sources include a derivation from maraut (a variant of the French dialect word maraud, meaning 'rogue') and in John Jamieson's groundbreaking Etymological Dictionary

of the Scottish Language (1808), a tentative link is proposed with Old Swedish mager, which Jamieson defines as 'affinis, a relation'.



The current position of the Oxford English Dictionary is 'origin uncertain', but like Jamieson it favours an early Scandinavian source: margr - an Old Norse word meaning 'many', which developed the figurative meaning of 'friendly, communicative'. This is plausible, given the distribution of marrow in areas of Scandinavian settlement in the north of England and Scotland.

The spelling with which we are most familiar today, and which reflects the pronunciation of the word in the region - marra - is first attested in the 1800s.

Towards the end of that century, Joseph Wright's monumental English Dialect Dictionary recorded that the word was in 'general dialect use' in Durham and Northumberland (as we might expect) but also in Cumberland and Westmoreland (now Cumbria), Yorkshire, Lancashire, Scotland and Ireland. But like many traditional dialect words in England, during the twentieth century its geographical range shrank, so that by the time of the Survey of English Dialects (carried out in the 1950s and 60s) marrow (as the local equivalent of Standard English 'workmate') was only recorded for County Durham, Northumberland and Cumberland.

It is firmly established in the vernacular English of the region, as these examples taken from Ready to Go (an online message board for supporters of Sunderland A.F.C.) testify.

1. He used to be one of our drinking marras
2. one of me old marras was doing some graft in his gaff
3. Just been speaking with a marra from Southwick
4. Morning marra, good luck today.
5. If I still lived in Fulwell I would have printed them for you marra.





While marrow does occur as a noun in North East England, as in examples 1-3, it is perhaps more widely used as a vocative familiariser (4,5), evoking solidarity, comradeship, and marradharma. This compound coined by the County Durham poet William (Bill) Martin describes the unique spiritual force animating North East life and culture (Marra Familia is the title of a 1993 collection of Martin's verse). In the words of fellow North East poet Jake Morris-Campbell:

A portmanteau of 'marra', a North-East dialect term for comrade, friend or equal and 'dharma', broadly interpreted in Eastern spiritual traditions such as Buddhism as meaning 'the way'. 'Marradharma' was for Bill the unwritten rule and guiding principles of the marras: his fellow miners, shipbuilders, farmers, family and friends from Sunderland and Durham who helped each other to help each other.



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