

I fear centralised education's risk to regional identity



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COLUMNIST

SO often today we talk about a national curriculum and national concerns that should be addressed by schools. In my first secondary school 'The Land of the Three Rivers', the North East, was a core part of the curriculum.

My own north eastern heritage has been a powerful force, which has supported me throughout my life in education.

My father was Charles Walton, a fitter at Derwenthaugh Coke Works. The coking plant on the River Derwent was built in 1928, on the site of the Crowley Iron Works, which for a time was the largest ironworks in Europe.

Over the years the plant took coal from Chopwell Colliery, and in the NCB days from Marley Hill Colliery, via the nearby Clockburn Drift, as well as opencast mines. The coke produced was either sent directly to customers by rail, or shipped from a staithe on the River Tyne.

My mother, Hilda Thompson, eventually became a wages clerk at Vickers Armstrong at the Elswick and Scotswood works on the banks of the Tyne. Ten years earlier in 1935 Vickers-Armstrong was the third-largest manufacturing employer in Britain, behind Unilever and ICI.

My father and mother's families could not have contrasted more. I have always disliked the idea that the 'working class' was some kind of homogenous group.

My father's father and mother were called Geordie and Bella Walton. If you ever come across Andy Cap and Florrie his wife you will know exactly what Geordie and Bella looked like.

Geordie started work at the age of 12 as a latrine cleaner in the pit. He was small and wiry and always wore his cap indoors. He sat by the fire with his hat on "because I didn't want to get it wet wearing it outside".

He usually wore a three-piece suit with watch and chain and a white silk scarf around his neck. He smoked a clay pipe.

Bella had a backside like a kitchen cabinet. She dressed in a fur coat when she went shopping, though underneath she always wore her 'pinny'. They owned their house in Consett. Next to the house 'blind' pit ponies would run around the field.

Jimmy and Annie Thompson, my



► Mines, miners, pit ponies and so much more are ingrained in our region's heritage. But will centralised education see it forgotten?

mother's parents could not have been more different.

Annie was a committed Methodist and Jimmy, a quarryman, an atheist socialist. Jimmy was an incredibly cultured man. He loved music. His tastes ranged from opera to Dusty Springfield. They lived in a council house in Stanhope.

Annie contrasted so much with Bella. She kept a really tidy house and would regularly go to the Wesleyan Chapel. Bella, on the other hand, lived in and owned a chaotic house. In spring I would often see little chickens being incubated in the coal oven and then running around the room.

Bella's furniture was always covered with a fine layer of red dust from Consett iron works. Annie's house was always immaculate. For lunch Bella would make me condensed milk sandwiches, whilst Annie would always serve ham and pease pudding.

There were also many similarities. Both Jimmy and Geordie smoked pipes, though Geordie used throw away clay pipes whilst Jimmy had clamped between his teeth the largest wooden pipe you would ever see. Jimmy always filled his pipe with Warhorse tobacco whilst Geordie smoked Auld Twist. They both drank tea from saucers, after pouring it from the hot cup. They both dipped Jacob's cream crackers in the tea and spat into the coal fire after lighting up.

Geordie and Jimmy also loved going to 'The Club'. On Sunday lunchtimes Geordie would bring jugs of beer back from the club, so he could carry on drinking in the afternoon. What he didn't know was Bella would secretly pour half of it down

the sink and then top the jug up with water.

They both loved their allotments. Jimmy would spend his whole weekend in his allotment, which backed onto the Durham moors.

An abiding memory of Geordie was sitting on a chair throughout the night in his allotment holding an umbrella over his beloved leeks. He did this to stop them splitting just before the annual leek show. Geordie was a champion leek grower and a lot of the furniture in his house had been won in the competitions.

So my memories of my father and mother are often intertwined with my memories of their parents. My father was an outgoing man. He owned motor bikes. My mother, on the other hand, was more quiet and gentle.

When I described this couple of contrasting backgrounds and personalities a good friend of mine reminded me that it was my father who married a quiet church-going lady whilst my mother married the adventurer.

The neighbourhood was called the Villas. All my friends and I had nick names. Mine was 'Chuck'. Chuck is related to Charlie, my father's name. I became Chuck because of the song, "Charlie, Charlie, Chuck, Chuck, Chuck, went to bed with two old ducks. One just died, the other cried." Old friends still continue to call me Chuck. To me such memories are important because they remind me of the many long, deep and close relationships, which are such an important part of the north east environment and family life.

What strikes me when I remember my family background was the power and importance of the industrial base in the north east.

It is so important that our young people understand their history, and culture and are proud of their heritage. The question is with an increasingly centralised education system will we lose our regional identity, our heritage?

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