

Regional heritage is all around us – not just museums



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INCREASINGLY, we stress that children should have a wide and encompassing view of the world in which they live.

They should also understand their own regional heritage. Often, our regional heritage is related to sites, buildings and landscapes that are perceived to be valuable. It is also the history, stories and customs that are constantly recreated and transferred from generation to generation, creating a sense of identity and continuity.

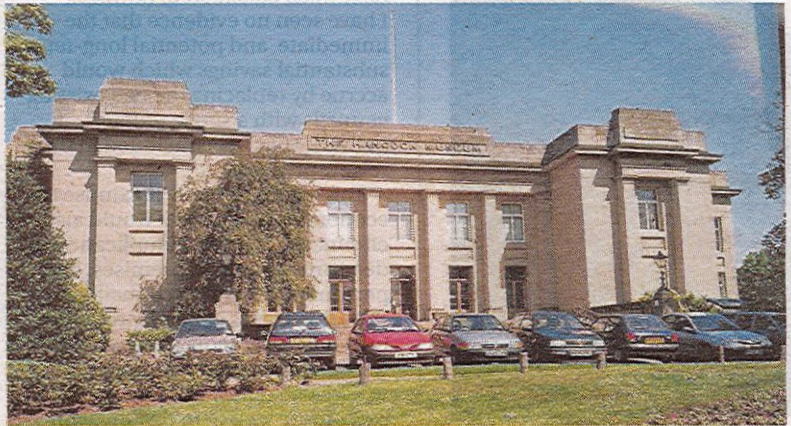
Regional heritage value can be found in a museum, a national park, a street or a family home. Our North East heritage is one of the richest in the world, yet in schools it is increasingly neglected.

In 1966, as a young history teacher, I was handed a priceless treasure. In my classroom was displayed a Bronze Age beaker. Bronze Age Britain spanned from c2500 until c800 BC. The pot had been discovered by school boys in 1930, concealed in a stone burial chamber. Every September, I would hold a ceremony in which all the new 11-year-old pupils would hold the pot for a few seconds, always safely protected by my own hands. The children were thrilled.

I also developed a local history and industrial archaeology programme for the older children. My classroom 'museum' contained another important, though possibly less valuable, item: a Cowen brick. The brick had been made in the Blaydon Joseph Cowen brick works nearly a century earlier. Sir Joseph Cowen was a leading advocate of parliamentary reform and became a Member of Parliament for Newcastle in the 1860s.

Sir Joseph's son, Joe 'The Brick' Cowen, took an active role in the family business and devoted much of his time to politics and improving the social conditions of workmen in the region. As chairman of the 'Northumbrian Education League', he helped push for greater availability and higher standards of schooling for all. Geordie party-goers in Newcastle will often walk by his statue in Fenkle Street.

Joe Cowen was also associated with reformist movements abroad. When Giuseppe Garibaldi, the Ital-



➤ **The Great North Museum: Hancock Museum, Newcastle – home to the Summerhill Blaydon beaker**

ian general and politician, visited Tyneside, he and Joe became firm friends. It was rumoured Joe sent radical pamphlets and leaflets abroad, smuggled in brick consignments. In my classroom, I told the children that the Cowen brick could contain a secret message for Garibaldi. Every year, I asked the children to decide on what we should do with the brick. Break it open and possibly find a message to Garibaldi, or leave it intact? There always followed a heated debate. In the end, the children always decided to leave the brick alone.

Over the last couple of years, the 'Cowen brick' and the 'Blaydon beaker' have become talking points with my family.

Many years ago, when I first took my children to Rome, we walked around the Circus Maximus, the ancient Roman chariot racing stadium. During the visit, I discovered a brick sticking out of the ground. I also noticed it had the word Cowen imprinted on the side. Unfortunately, I did not have the time to investigate further, always intending to go back and look for it.

A couple of years ago, one of my grandchildren, because her mother is Italian, had to attend a hospital in Rome. While there, I mentioned the brick to my son. Between hospital visiting times, my son and I wandered around the Circus Maximus looking for the Cowen brick. I never really expected to find the brick, partly because I was increasingly unsure whether I had seen it in the first place.

Unfortunately, we didn't find the brick. Imagine if we had – proof at last that there was a link between Italy and Tyneside's Joseph Cowen!

However, not all searches end in failure. A couple of weeks ago, I picked up my granddaughter after school. She told me she had been learning about the Bronze Age. I told her about THE POT. I also told her that, in 1971, a new headteacher came to my school and insisted that the pot was handed over to the Han-

cock Museum, now the Great North Museum. He claimed that more people would have a chance to view the pot there.

At the time, I was very upset. I argued with the headteacher that, if the pot entered the museum, it would disappear into a store cupboard, after being labelled by an antiquarian. As headteachers normally do, he won the argument. A rather grandiose ceremony was held and the pot was ceremoniously handed over to the Mayor of Newcastle.

My granddaughter immediately empathised with my long-held resentment regarding the removal of the pot. "It would be terrible if the pot were hidden away in a dark cupboard.

"Let's go and find out," announced my granddaughter. It was 3.15pm and there was still time to get to the Museum. For 50 years, I had been wondering what had happened to the pot. For 50 years, I had never tried to find out.

On arrival, I asked to speak to the archivist. I described the pot. It was decorated with horizontal lines, bordered above and below by cross-hatch cuts. There were also cross-hatch cuts on the base. Half an hour later, the archivist returned with the ledger containing details of pots held in the museum.

In section 13.1, the actual 'Summerhill Blaydon beaker' was recorded. I then asked if the pot could be taken out of storage, so my granddaughter could see it.

The archivist then announced that the pot was not stuck in a cupboard but was featuring in a new major display in the museum, lying beside the skeleton that had been found near it and inside the original burial chamber.

Regional identity and continuity are important. Our regional heritage is not necessarily in the past – it is alive in the present and hopefully in the future.

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