



ALL WRITE

UP NORTH 2020

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#AllWriteUpNorth

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additional art work by Graham Roberts.

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and Uncle Joe's Mint Balls for their
support.



ALL *Write* UP NORTH



Short Story Anthology 2020

Introduction

The All Write Up North Short Story Anthology is now available to download and read at www.wigan.gov.uk/libraries. The Anthology includes all of the stories and winning cover art work entered into the All Write Up North writing competition 2020. The competition theme was all things Up North and all winners were announced on Saturday 8th February at the All Write Up North networking and workshop event at Wigan Library.

Congratulations to; Ian McLoughlin and 1st place winning short story 'The Woman Behind the Bar' which was published in The Writers and Readers magazine. Natasha Tingle with runner-up short story '#Homeless but Still Human'. Elaine Phipps, front cover art competition winner and Graham Roberts, front cover art runner up.

All winners received prizes courtesy of Uncle Joe's Mint Balls.

The Wigan Libraries team would like to thank everyone who took the time to put pen to paper and write these wonderful stories.

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The Woman Behind the Bar
Ian McLoughlin
(All Write Up North 1st Place Short Story)

The woman behind the bar paused in her absent-minded polishing and re-polishing of the same glass, and stared incredulously at the customer sat on the tall stool gulping his beer nervously.

"What?" she asked.

"You heard," he replied, taking a hefty swig and draining his pint. "And I'll have the same again while you're at it."

"But Joe," she began, placing the shining glass under the tap and pulling the tall wooden handle towards her in a smooth practiced movement without taking her eyes off him.

"What's the matter?" he interrupted. "You gone off the idea? You were keen enough last night!"

"Well, I'd had a couple last night, hadn't I?"

He scowled. "So, in the cold light of day you don't fancy it anymore – is that it?"

Oh God, she thought, why didn't she learn to keep her mouth shut and her urges under control? It's not that Joe was a bad bloke – a good bit older than her and out of shape but he'd probably be okay with a bit of direction – probably do it better than he did with his wife, anyway!

"No Joe, it's not that at all – it's just, well, I'd be sort of mixing business with pleasure, y'know, and that's never a good thing, is it now?"

He raised himself up from the barstool like a jockey about to leap Beecher's Brook, nearly upsetting his newly poured pint in the process. "I can pay if you like – I've got the cash!" "The only thing I want you to pay for," she said, pushing him back firmly onto his stool, "is that pint of best you've just nearly tipped over me! Besides, I can't see His Nibs being too pleased if I started plying my trade in here, can you?" she smiled in an effort to diffuse the situation but she could tell from Joe's surly demeanour that he hadn't given up.

He took a few more thoughtful sips and then began again. "Y'see, the wife has never really been that hot on it – not with me, anyhow, not anymore ... When we first met she was as keen as mustard, couldn't get enough; every chance we got ... But I think, to be honest, it wasn't ever the best, y'know, I think my

technique was, I dunno, lacking ... I mean, I tried it on my own a lot, in my bedroom and that, but it's not the same is it?"

Kirsty looked at him and tried to imagine what it would be like with Joe. He was older than her dad; maybe even nearly as old as her grandpa but then again that didn't necessarily mean ... No, she'd certainly found out that there was still many a good tune to be played on an old fiddle; in fact there were some of the older ones she'd had who could certainly teach these young lads a trick or two; a certain courtesy, a gentleness – she liked that. Joe was still watching her, like a faithful dog waiting to find out if it was time for his walk. His blue eyes, now somewhat rheumy, would have been quite startling at one time; his hands were strong and masculine and looked as though they could certainly handle her properly.

"So, say we did," she began, cautiously. "Where do you think we could do it?"

His eyes lit up. "What about your place?" he asked eagerly. "Mine'd be no good – the wife'd know straight away!"

"And we don't want that, do we?" asked Kirsty cheerily, once more returned to her polishing activity.

"Good God, no!" said Joe vehemently. "I'd never hear the end of it! Thought I'd just surprise her one night when I've warmed up with you!" He laughed wheezily.

"My place is more or less out too," Kirsty said thoughtfully. "Lisa's there pretty much all the time since she lost her job at Dino's – she'd probably just be in the way, or try to join in!"

"I don't mind," said Joe eagerly, "the more the merrier as far as I'm concerned."

"Joe, love," said Kirsty, placing her hand over his, "let's not try to run before we can walk, eh?"

"No, I s'pose you're right," he said. "So, what's the plan then?"

"Well, you could always hang about here after closing or, better still, leave as normal then come round the back after everyone's gone and we can have a quick one as a try out?"

Joe grinned broadly and rubbed his hands together in glee. "Kirsty, you've made an old man very happy and, who knows, once I've mastered it a bit, y'know, made sure as I measure up and everything, I might splash the cash for me and the Missus to come together and pay you for your services. You still at that club near the station?"

Kirsty smiled warmly. "Yeah, but I just do the two nights a week now: six 'til seven I do beginners; seven 'til nine intermediates and advanced, then from nine on it's a free for all!"

Joe sipped his pint thoughtfully. "It's a funny old-world Kirst. Who'd've ever thought a man of my age would be considering taking up salsa, eh! I'll have another half too when you're ready love." The woman behind the bar smiled and pulled the tall wooden handle towards her in a smooth practiced movement once more.

#Homeless but Still Human
Natasha Tingle
(2nd Place Short Story)

I left the office crying, which was better than the uncontrolled sobbing. A little more unburdened, but still contemplating how trapped I was. "Take some time," the counsellor said. "Have a coffee somewhere." I decided to walk it off, couldn't really afford coffee and it was a good health day. Pushing my wheelchair like a Zimmer, I blundered blindly up Portland Street. Tears traced a tributary down my cheeks. In the drizzle no one noticed another wet face. The cool rain on my hot eyelids helped. Thoughts kept circling my head like a Harris hawk sensing weak prey. I tried to fluff myself big, bolstered my defences.

To be fair to him, to us, my ex was incredibly accommodating. Legally still a family, I couldn't move until I had means-tested benefits, couldn't get those until I was living elsewhere. He and I were managing, but we worried about the kids. They could sense the friction as we all adjusted and would take defensive positions between us. We didn't want them to be fighting my corner or his, coming up with fair sleeping arrangements. We just wanted them to play Minecraft and sing the Portal song, be carefree kids. If I could get some distance, they wouldn't be in this situation. There were no decent solutions. As I turned towards Manchester Victoria, I was slammed outside of my head when my footplates bit into a man's ankles.

I winced, "Sorry mate." "You lost someone, love?" He winked, glancing back at the empty chair. I winced again. "Say something different!" I shouted sub-vocally.

My tiredness suddenly hit me. Glancing about for a place to park up, I noticed a placard, '#homeless but still human'. Clever. We've nearly stopped remembering they are us on a bad day. He was a poet. I'm always willing to chat with a fellow writer. He was glad to have someone hear his voice. Turns out; Jamie was a man who was truly trapped.

"Got what I deserved; I really messed that bloke up. Being bladdered weren't no excuse. While I were in't joint, the wife got evicted, so I came out onto't streets. Both o'us are." "That's harsh. How long have you been living rough?" "Couple year."

There was a build-up of grime on his teeth I couldn't stop seeing. "They get't kids off street first. That's as't should be. They adjust better than us old'uns." His watch was wound to street time. He didn't look 40, but that was life's eleventh hour out here.

"Even for't kids it's rough. Government thinks, put a roof over our heads, job's a good-un. Out here you gotta fight for't live clean. Else, you join a gang, get deep into crime. Gotta teach `em kids how t'be a neighbour, how t'save money for't rent, not just for't eat everything in sight. Else they just get kicked back out here." He shook his head, resigned to his fate. "No, get `em off t'streets quick and young."

He wouldn't take charity from me. I bought a poem. Three months and three counselling trips later, I found him again. This day he hadn't been moved on for selling his poetry without permit.

"My writing group, Pemberton Pens, took up a collection when they heard your poem. Here are your earnings." I put £7 into his outstretched hand, him pretending, for his dignity, that this wasn't charity. I was just a conduit, a facilitator. It wasn't even my money I was giving away.

"You inspired one person to write to their MP and another to write a poem in response to yours."

Suddenly, he was three inches taller, with a glimmer in his eye. The trap might be sprung upon us, but we would prevail. He was truly a poet today, respected by other writers, earning a payday. As he closed his hand around that money, we both had hope. I left him, beaming like a rainbow.

You Always Loved to Dance
Linda Downs
(Highly Commended)

I worked at Dixon's, you came in every Saturday for four weeks, before you slid your number across the counter and said, "Ring me if you fancy a dance." Mum was impressed, "They have a house phone? oh very posh."

My best friend Tracey Bennett walked the half mile up the hill to the phone box and pressed her face against the glass trying to make me laugh while I called you. We met outside Hindley Town hall and got the packed bus up to the Casino dance club, our bodies pressed together in the crowd, somehow no longer strangers. The club was heaving, Jimmy Radcliffe played "Long after tonight is all over" you made me laugh, you had two left feet, but what you lacked in skill you made up in for in enthusiasm, I knew then we would find our own rhythm.

A year later you had finished your course in Electronics, a bright alien world to your dad who foraged a living in the dark tunnels of Wigan's mines. To celebrate you proposed in Mesnes Park, when I said yes, you waltzed me, all the way down to the lake.

We made our first home together in Ince, you carried me over the threshold, my belly already swollen with our first baby while you played "Three steps to heaven" by Showaddywaddy on your newly built stereo system. We were the first family I knew to buy a computer; you ruffled our Nathan's hair and said "One day son, everyone will have one of these in their house." I laughed and thought as if.

I was helping you put the MFI wardrobe up, it lay scattered over the bedroom floor like a gigantic puzzle, when I went into labour with Marie. It laid there discarded three months later like a wooden tombstone, for the baby we never brought home. I fancied a cream donut from 'Galloways' with Piccalilli the cravings were back. I said I think I'm pregnant and you started to cry. We needn't have worried a few months later, Katy came in a hurry, feet first "Ready to dance" you said.

Music always filled the house, Queen and Meat loaf one day, Buddy Holly and Oasis the next, you didn't care, you just loved to dance and there were always two pairs of tiny feet dancing along with you. Time flies by so quickly school runs, work commitments, mum's funeral, then your dad's, I think we grew distant, busy doing the everyday things. We ferried the kids back and forth their feet growing faster than our wages, always the need for new shoes.

Your stroke came as a shock, I was devastated it was the year the Grand Arcade shopping centre opened in Wigan, where the Casino had once stood, where we had our first dance. I felt like a thief had broken in and robbed me of everything. Weeks of intensive care, physio, still you came home in a chair, the sparkle gone from your eyes, your arm loose by your side.

Katy struggled to get up often, she was dancing in the West End. Nathan came most nights; he was teaching music at the college but for the most part the house was silent. I admit, I struggled, I got a little down myself, your recovery was slow I forgot who we were. Then one weekend Katy came up with James, all excited, a small diamond ring on her finger she showed it you, "Dad will you walk me down the aisle?" you mumbled "Not like this". I thought Katy would get really upset but instead she just looked a little sad.

The next weekend she came again with Nathan this time, a box under his arm. Both of them like small excited kids again. "What this house needs is music" he announced, he took out the Alexa and set it up by the TV "This will play any song you want" Nathan helped you up and Katy took his place sliding close. "We have a wedding to go too" she laughed "Alexa Play Luther Vandross Dance with my father" and she began to sway taking you with her. And I cried at your two left feet and the children who wanted to give them back their Rhythm.

The Northern Lines

Ryan Boyer

I marched like a trooper down the ramp towards Euston's platform nine. Equipped, with an extra-shot latte in one hand, and an Italian prosciutto baguette in the other. To my left, a curly haired footman, clad in a khaki blazer, was gaining ground. He manoeuvred himself deftly around an oncoming pram; a fine display, but in vain. To our right, a tall lady, shod in heels, was charging forward, and had taken the lead. The sound of her footfalls on the tiled floor united with a cry from the wheels of her carry-on; It was a music of urgent triumph which accompanied her as she reached the train first. She stopped, and with her head held high she stood proud, waiting for the doors of the carriage to open. On her face was the smuggest of expressions. I avoided any eye contact.

Whilst standing on the platform, sipping from my cup, my whole body tensed when a frail voice asked, "Where is this one going?" My clenched jaw slackened a little when I saw that the elderly man was wearing tinted glasses; they allowed me to avoid eye contact. Frustrated, I raised my baguette like a baton and pointed it towards the train's destination – 'Wigan North Western' – clearly written on the side of the nearest carriage. 'No need to speak!' I thought, as I turned and walked back towards my own personal space.

On the table in front of me lay the remnants of lunch, a mayonnaise smeared wrapper, a dusting of crumbs, and an inch of harsh liquid. Through the window I saw the glacier of London, melting into a lake of green silt, which rolled into the distance, underneath a grey blanket sky. For a time, we seemed to move forward on a breeze. I sat, mesmerized by two travel companions who entertained with their slow and synchronous dance. They moved alongside like streamers of ribbon, which I imagined to be tailing some great kite, which flew ahead, pulling us towards our destination. But when the train slowed, the wind died, and I became wise to the reality; they were prisoners, laying rigid along the ground. Restrained by rolled steel, it was the cold sleepers who had been bound to escort us north.

Beyond the tracks, an escaped jumper had fallen, still contorted in the position it had come to rest, among shrapnels of litter. The wet scar of an old wound ran dirty across the earth. Cut straight from east to west, it lay sunken in its own entrenchment. A casualty floated there, in the midst of another, now drowned, with its stiff limbs reaching helplessly for air. On a rusted hull, almost hidden behind a tangle of barbed-wire branches, her bold name could be seen – 'AMBUSH'. Cattle grazed pasture razed to brownfield. Long grass began to fold under its own weight; unsupported by the tired land from which it stemmed, it lay down to sleep, among relics of brick and stone.

In the distance I saw a great red cannon with its sights set skyward. It towered above the sloping slate bonnets of motionless sentries, packed tightly in their formations. They watched the streets with flat expressions on square faces and appeared weary from their charge. The train took a pounding as we neared our destination. Passengers staggered towards the doors, and raised their hands in unison, to steady themselves as we leaned to a halt. As we readied to disembark, I felt an unease move around us like nervous gas. Somewhere, a whistle was blown, and the doors opened. The North was waiting, and we rushed in.

My skull was splitting from the thump. It must have been the shots which had gone to my head. Beyond the din of repetitive drumbeats, I heard the unsteady notes of an unusual harmony - a voice; it was the voice of a Northerner. "You alrite thur pal?" I had expected to see muddied creepers, emerging in all directions from their sink holes, and crawling towards the rims of their craters. Instead I made out the sparkling brown patterns of twin kaleidoscopes; intricate and fascinating. When I realised that I was looking into the eyes of a stranger, my shock was surpassed only by a fear of reprisal. "Is blind drunk" said a second man, walking towards me. He was better equipped, with an extra-smooth bitter in one hand, and a steak-an-kidney int tother. "elp `im up".

In a foreign embrace, I limped down Wallgate. I was a fragile package being delivered from the chaos of battle. Layers of cloud rolled across the moonlit sky like old smoke. The backdrop had a soothing glow, which contrasted the harshness of blue lights which raced up the street. I saw the curly haired man from Euston. He had lost his footing, as well as his blazer, and his shirt. He lay on the ground and was repeatedly failing to manoeuvre his head away from an oncoming pram, which was being wielded by a skilled pair of orange hands.

Whilst sitting in the taxi, slurring at my words, the driver turned and asked me, in a most delicate voice, "Wars da goin lad?" It was then, during my mumbling, that I became aware of my own humbling. 'why can't I speak?' I thought as I tried to tame my lazy jaw. "Da con point?" asked the driver. I looked out through the window, trying to gather my bearings. In the road ahead I saw a pair of long legs. Grazed and shoeless, the tall woman from Euston sat on a kerb. She scratched her heels restlessly along tarmac, as she waited for a ride. We shared a knowing smile before my taxi pulled away. Her pride she then let shrink, with the lowering of her head. Her once-smug face she buried, in a large meet-an-tater.

It's not about the Destination **Emma Hilton**

Eleanor didn't know why the first train from London Euston to Glasgow was particularly empty that day; it was the first Friday in April, a week before Good Friday and the weather had been particularly breezy in Southern England. But Eleanor, a fifty-three-year-old lawyer living in the heart of the city, didn't really care whether the train was bustling or not; all she knew was that she didn't want to board this train. The table seat that she had reserved had not been cleaned down since the previous journey the night before. Eleanor had to bat away the coffee stirrers and dirty napkins onto the floor that had been left on her window seat before sitting down and became disheartened when she saw the crisp crumbs strewn around the table.

Eleanor sighed and tucked the grey whisper of cropped hair behind her ear, pulling down her tight-fitting black designer suit jacket and took a subtle glance out of the window to check that her lipstick hadn't smudged. She hadn't always cared about her appearance, in fact quite the opposite Eleanor had dug out her favourite power suit, the one that made her look as successful as she actually was, and the bits of makeup that she had found in the odd Christmas gift set had come in handy to make her face as presentable as it could be.

Eleanor's table wasn't empty for long, as a young man of around mid-thirties sidled up to her, glanced at his ticket, and scooted along the opposite seat. 'Morning! All reet?' he bellowed, a clear Northern accent, although Eleanor had no idea where he was from. Clearly not London, where you would need to be suffering from a pulmonary embolism before anyone would approach you, let alone speak to you. Eleanor, however, had manners, and even though she would rather endure the five hour journey in utter silence, than engage with people. "I'm well, thanks." A polite nod, and she felt satisfied that there wouldn't be a need for any other communication. "Where you off to?" Perhaps not.

Eleanor couldn't believe her lack of luck that on what seemed like the world's emptiest train, a very loud stranger would sit so close to her that she could smell exactly what he had for his breakfast from his breath. "Glasgow". She reluctantly answered. The city was even difficult to say out loud. "I'm going Wigan, me. From there." As if on cue, another passenger shuffled on board with commotion, like the previous man but much older, wearing a business suit.

A stench of acrid, cheap wood scent swooped through the air as he placed himself on the seat next to the Wigan man. Slapping his briefcase on the dirty table, he grunted, stared angrily from Eleanor to the Wigan man and crossed his arms. Clearly, he was not happy with the seating arrangements.

"Where you off to?" Wigan man started back up again. "Carlisle" Carlisle man grunted as he shuffled back in his chair. As the train departed, Wigan man piped up again, this time aiming it at Eleanor.

"Business or pleasure?" "Er, business. I'm a lawyer." "Ooh, very interesting. You must be raking it in." "It's alright." Eleanor didn't want to go into any more detail.

She felt sick as it was. "Ah, to have money. Don't have a lot myself, but I wouldn't give my wife and girls up for any kind of money." "You have daughters?" "Yes, two. They're my world. You?" "Yes. A daughter." She could feel her cheeks burn. Eleanor couldn't believe how difficult it was to confess this. "She must be spoilt rotten then!"

Eleanor didn't reply, instead turned to the window and gazed at the endless green whirring past like she was fast forwarding 'Homes in the Country' on her widescreen. The stops were coming thick and fast, and it was time for Wigan man to depart. As he shuffled past Carlisle man, he stopped to look at Eleanor.

"Hope you enjoy the north!" A nod and he had gone. Departing Wigan, Carlisle man, seemingly dozing for most of the journey, straightened up in his seat. He glared at Eleanor, with a "I'd get off the train if I were you." "Sorry, pardon?" "Just get off the next stop. Get off with me. No one will miss you."

"And what the hell do you know about me?" "I can just tell. You're just like me. Spent all your life drowning in work and not much else. You're lonely. Well it doesn't get any better. Go back to London, you'll not regret it."

As they approached his stop, Carlisle man hunched up with a start, grabbed his briefcase and turned to Eleanor. He hesitated at first but held out his hair-spattered hand. She hesitated, but instead turned to the window and focused on the green, fascinated by the thought that someone she loved so dearly got to see this daily.

"Suit your bloody self. Women!" Yes, Eleanor thought. And off to Glasgow she went. It was an unusually sunny afternoon, and Eleanor was thankful that she had brought her designer sunglasses. She placed herself down on the back pew of Mackintosh church in Glasgow and shuffled her power suit down to straighten herself to watch her estranged daughter get married. The invitation had been delivered to the firm a couple of months ago, and Eleanor had not wanted to come. She had felt ashamed, for putting work first for so many years and missing her wonderful daughter bloom into the beautiful bride that walked up the aisle. Eleanor decided there and then that it wasn't too late to make amends, that maybe she could stay in the north for a little longer. It was a one way ticket, after all.

Untitled Christopher Higgins

"What ya doin' here, then?" The pub is crowded. They all are. That's what happens when your train gets into Wigan on the same night the Warriors play the Saints, but I don't care about the Rugby. Not tonight, anyway. It's been a long day, and I just want a quick drink before heading home. There's a man sitting on a barstool next to mine. Mid-fifties, maybe. Loose-fitting clothes. Dried paint or plaster splattered across ripped jeans. Probably a contractor. Probably makes more money in a month than I have in the last year. Not that anyone would know it, me dressed in a suit and tie, complete with expensive-looking cufflinks I got at a charity shop.

"I couldn't help noticing your accent," the man says, turning to me. "Where ya from?" I groan inwardly. I get this question a lot, but today has just been too much. I had applied for a job in Manchester, but was forced to interview at the company recruitment centre in London. The other candidates were all probably ten years younger than me, fresh from university, with ties that cost more than my suit.

Ignorant snobs that disparaged my 'colonial' education to my face, and sniggered about me being a 'convict' when they thought I couldn't hear them. 'Australia.' I hope he leaves it at that. I stare up at the television screen and hope he takes the hint. Wigan are down by two.

"Really? You sound like an American." "I lived in Canada for a long time," I say, eyes fixed to the television. 'Toronto.' I already know what comes next. The same question I had gotten from every cab driver, bartender, and random person on the street since I moved here. "What ya doin' here then?" I open my mouth to reply, but a loud cheer interrupts me. On screen, a player in cherry and white has powered across the try-line, putting Wigan ahead. I look around at all the different people cheering and clapping and staring up at the screen.

Older couples sat with their canes propped up against the table. The young men at the snooker tables who until now had pretended not to care about the match. The clusters of women drinking gin in dresses and full makeup, like they were going somewhere posh but ended up at the pub by mistake. I glance down at my suit. Across at the man in the paint-speckled jeans. Suddenly my usual answer doesn't feel right. I was going to tell him about my father-in-law being from Haydock.

About him needing help supporting my mother-in-law, who has multiple sclerosis. Maybe I would have told him about the workplace accident that made it hard for me to find work, and almost had me sleeping rough in a city where temperatures could drop to thirty degrees below zero. But that's how I got here, not why I stay. I smile at my new friend. I realise it doesn't matter what I say. He doesn't care where I'm from. He doesn't care how much money I make, or if I wear a suit. He just wants to have a chat while he's watching the match and drinking his beer. I raise my glass. "I like it here."

Homesick for the North
Catherine West-McGrath

An invite to a Southern home,
Perhaps I wouldn't feel alone.
How kind of them to offer lunch,
Was told they were a friendly bunch.
And coats hung up and scarves unwound,
Soon talk turned to my holy ground.
My accent let my new friends know,
I'd left the North some years ago.
'But oh how grim' they had to tell,
'Back streets that look like living Hell.
And once again I did defend,
My land, my family and friends.
'How lucky you were to move out,
Your education paid no doubt.
And set up home, you must have wowed,
Your parents must have been so proud.
I tried to tell them all I missed,
But they would just not hear of it.
'Such culture here and art so rare,
How barren it must be up there.
And conversation must be more,

Intelligent without the poor'.
But I had been there many times,
So reaching down in to my mind.
I told them of the pride within,
That patch of Earth they could not dim.
That grew such brave and fearless
minds,
To explore worlds and make new finds.
Discover truths for all to know,
And protests won so we could grow.
Then music, literature and art,
The North was there right from the start.
Sons left to fight in foreign parts,
And daughters left with broken hearts.
New industry seduced with pay,
But kept production's means away.
'But why then is there such despair?
And dreariness, is it the air?
I've watched the programmes on TV,
A journalist went up to see.
He tried to find and spoke to folk,
To understand why they were broke'.
'Enough of this North South divide,
What we need now is common pride.

Surely what's best for our country,
Is just a little equity'.
And then a guest was keen to tell,
How their properties were doing well.
But talk soon turned excitedly,
To Northern English history.
The type I thought was really cool,
Not that I learned it while in school.
A complex web that took its toll,
On farming, cotton, steel and coal.
Sometimes neglected, blamed and shamed,
Often ignored, abandoned, gamed.
Its children might have had to flee,
To take new opportunity.
Like I was then sat in my chair,
Away from home yet always there.
Then one kind guest who'd heard me
try,
Speak of my pride and tell them why.
Said, 'Most sat here I bet can trace,
Some ancestry back to this place.
It's not then such a foreign land,
But lives that we can understand'.
Soon each one lifted their disguise,

Declaring their own Northern ties.
Sometimes through ones own family tree,
Or where they'd studied their degree.
And then we all agreed this space,
Deserved to take its rightful place.
Deserved to have its history known,
Deserved its share of money shown.
A place where people long to be,
A land of opportunity.
And rather than just still survive,
Deserved to have its people thrive.
And as I wrapped my scarf again,
And stepped out in the Southern rain.
I longed to breathe my Northern air,
And so I did not long despair.
I made a plan to catch a train,
And see my Northern home again.

The Visitors **Christopher Darlington**

It was never easy visiting your hometown in the North, so why her husband wanted to visit the old streets where they both came from she didn't know. It had been thirty years and lots of things had changed. Meaning mostly old bricks and mortar had been knocked down and so had so many landmarks from the past, leaving piles of rubble and clouds of thick dust that never seem to settle for very long. Barbra was always on the move always looking to fine tune the exact details of her life.

Since her teenage years, she always wanted more than a back street two up and two down council house like her parents. With its familiar damp draft ridden rooms that made you shiver in winter, especially walking on the cold stone tiles of the brick, back kitchen that echoed, especially when her parents argued first thing in the morning lighting the coal fire, cooking dripping on toast for breakfast as a distant crackling radio blared out big band music. Barbra wanted so much more than this to look forward to. So didn't ever feel as nostalgic as Bob may have done. She felt no regrets no pangs of coming home no secret longing to be back in those distant days.

Mostly she felt a great relief to have left all this behind and got an education and moved on to much better things. Mostly Barbra knew once you started these journeys there was no turning back. It was like a good meal enjoyed. You always wanted more, and you never wanted this social climbing to end. Recently, she felt they had got into a deep rut. It was if they had paused halfway up a ladder. She wanted much more than the semi-detached suburban house she lived in now, with its lovely lawns, and full of flowers pots and the good husband and the two point four children all paid for by her husband working so hard and such long soul destroying painful hours.

She didn't seem to see the great queue of people who would be in a great imaginary line, wanting her life and her way out of poverty if they could get it. It was not enough for Barbra, nothing was ever enough. That's why her fat, sweaty Businessman husband brought her back to where they came from to get her feet back on the ground, so she might realise how far they had come from the old days. Also so he could get a bit of gloating done too. He enjoyed seeing the children of people he grew up with, still playing dirty and barefoot in the street.

Some children were playing across the road trying to set fire to an old mattress. He reached in his pocket and threw them a handful of sixpences which they soon fought over. This made him laugh for the first time in a long time. It was similar to feeding a flock of wild birds and he delighted in that moment of superiority. Age had caught up with them both and their climb up the imaginary ladder had faltered. Barbra was deeply unhappy. They got out of the old Black Daimler car slowly. Barbra began to play with her pearls like they were well worn rosary beads without the prayers. As she looked down at the piles of dust and the filth, still left there by the demolition guys, it was as if her past had just crumbled at her feet and wouldn't let go of her. It was clinging to her shoes.

They began to walk about a bit in the fresh air and remember which family had lived in which old house and even some of the children they had both played with as youngsters. Barbra appeared to him her old self again and the young girl he fell in love all those years ago, sadly that moment didn't last long. Then for a while they walked in a kind of strained silence trapped in each other's moods, rooted deeply inside them. They did miss the old days but only for a few moments neither would admit to it or want to go back.

As they got in the car one of the little boys threw a half house brick at the back windscreen causing a slight crack. He'd seen Bob laughing at and teasing his friends with sixpences and was very angry and rightly so, no one has the right to belittle another person in this way, no matter how poor they were. Bob just looked in the rear view mirror with a wry grin on his face, seeing only his former self as a child of those streets, instead of the real naughty child of the present that stared in to the car. He said to his wife "nothing ever changes round here" and off they drove slowly.

A procession of poverty floated before their eyes through the car windows as children carried on lighting a fire across the road. They were soon on the way back to the suburban dream they had worked so hard to build. A place where the houses were still in neat little rows and looked the same, expensive and un-lived in, because they were always working. Maybe it was a way of giving the children a start in life, so they could reach the top of that imaginary ladder they had never made it too. They both knew only greed lived here. Love couldn't thrive in a sterile environment of constant wanting more.

The Northern Rail Ride

Tamara Hulse

"Life up north?... what a dismal dream!" said the foreigner to the northerner on the train with no steam. "Bore-some and snore-some there's no pace to life" those words were just words but they cut like a knife.

"What do they know about our way?" I thought, I am sure there's a lesson here needs to be taught! Looking them over I took everything in, their clothing, their posture, the smirk... not a grin! It was clear from their face that they thought we were lesser, so I told them just why I believe that we're better!

"OASIS, THE BEATLES, STONE ROSES, THE SMITHS." The words sounded frantic as they left from my lips.

"PIES, PUDDING, PEAS AND GRAVY ON CHIPS." they stared as I listed probably thinking I'd flipped!

"DIVERSITY, CULTURE, COMMUNITY, PRIDE, CURTAINS THAT TWITCH FROM NEIGHBOURS WHO HIDE! MICHELIN STARS WITH WINING AND DINING, INDUSTRIAL REVOLUTION, and I forgot to say MINING!"

My hands in the air I must have looked crazed, but then something happened that left me amazed. A lady stood up and looked at me square, she nervously touched at a loose strand of hair, "Flat caps and accents that nowhere else has, bingo and Ringo and bands made from brass".

"Forests and woodlands." another man called "and in my town of Bolton we have our own Albert Halls." Three more of these strangers raised up out of their seats, and in harmony they hummed out Coronation Street. A new fella stood, puffing out his large chest; I could see through his t-shirt he wore a sting vest, "Rugby and football but it's got to be City" blue moon then was sang, of course the teams ditty! This was the north, we all came together. United we stand in sports, music and weather.

Then their eyes darted from one to another, northerners together like sisters and brothers. A little old fella must have been about seventy, cleared out his throat like he had to say plenty "Pints in't pub that don't break bank, and winnin't war.. well you've got us fort thank!" Now I can't guarantee that all facts are true, because he gave me a wink like he knew that I knew! Tell a few porkies as long as their pies because you won't find a northerner who knows how to lie!

I looked at the foreigners, their eyes all a glow. I could see that we had them it was starting to show. Lesser or better it didn't much matter, I didn't much care if their judgement was shattered. Because I knew in my heart in my own northern soul, the north was the best place I could ever call home. Friends far and wide from Runcorn to Rippon, Manchester, York... Heck the whole of North Britain!

Most left the train at Wigan North Western, the last few remaining probably stayed on to Preston. I heard on the grapevine that the foreigners stayed, was made to feel welcome and picked up a trade. Ending their days writing books and so forth and telling their friends about life in the north.

Dancing with Ghosts **Tony Topping**

A deserted rest room in an old tired factory that clung to the end of a terraced street in down town Wigan. The cold December wind cut through the hole in the window and its icy fingers turned the pages of a discarded newspaper. A tap drip dropped into a stained and dirty deep square ceramic sink. Somewhere inside the dank walls a rat listened intently then scurried on its merry way. The sun lay low soon to disappear for a day never to be seen again but the date on the newspaper was still plain to see...

Friday December 21st 1973, inside the Black Bull pub young men flexed and flowed past the young and not so young women, impressing none but happy all the same. Kisses were found but passion was absent in all but the few lucky ones and alas I wasn't in that number but hope lingered in the smoky scented air and promise was never far away. The night of the Christmas do was near and a blind date awaited me. The number 23 dropped me off outside the cavernous Wigan Casino with its red neon light and my platform shoes led me through that entrance door for the first time.

I checked my reflection in the mirrored column and hoped it was good enough. A pint of ale to settle my teenage nerves and a nod to the old ones from work sat with their wives. The forty something's nodded back though the odd one got up to pat me on the back and asked me did I want a glass of pop before nipping back to the wife laughing. Check the reflection again, sigh and make my way up the stairs to the balcony seats where the lads had arranged to meet. Some have brought their girlfriends and what does she see in him?

Alan's not arrived yet, he's bringing his girlfriend and her mate. It's her mate I'm interested in, sort of a blind date, if we like each other, best get another pint in... I'm at the bar fidgeting like a dog at a flea convention when Alan walks in with these two girls and I wonder which one is mine, if she likes me, but they both look ok. He sees me at the bar and I pull myself up to my full 5ft 9in (5ft 6in without Platforms) and straighten my tie as he walks over. The girls find a seat and check me out from a distance, let's hope they are short sighted.

"Awreet T?" he sez "Awreet Al" I say "Which ones mine? If she likes me"
"Dark haired one" he sez "She says your awreet, don't worry T" "Did she?" I say "What are they drinking?" "Cherry B" he sez "Bloody hell bit posh aren't they!" I say, fiddling in my pocket to check my money, never bought a Cherry B before and not sure of its exotic value.

We walk over with the drinks, Cherry B not too exotic as it turns out "Awreet" I say "Awreet" they say, followed by a silence that last two lifetimes. I gulp half my pint back and it kills me. Gillian, dark hair, looks at me and I do this wide smile with wet eyes, she looks away.

"Do you want another Cherry B?" "Go on then" she says "I'll come with you to the bar." We get up and I walk towards the balcony bar and the bored barman "Come on." she says "We'll go to the downstairs bar for the drinks." Bit daft I think but oh well. We go down the Casino stairs and as we reach the bottom she pulls me into an alcove and kisses me, and can she kiss. We were in there a while, or so it seemed when one of the forty something's spots me and shouts to his mates "Look at this mon the randy little bugger!" I'm about to protest my innocence when one of the wives shouts "Good luck to em' your only young once!"

We return to the balcony and I check myself in the mirrored column yet again, my reflection winks back. The night is drawing to an end and the wooden dance floor begins to fill with the old un's doing their thing. The DJ puts the new Slade single on and I grab Gillian and make for the floor intoxicated by Brown & Bitter and Christmas but mainly by Brown & Bitter.

As we dance the old un's make a circle round us and the floor is ours surrounded by smiling booze filled faces "So here it is Merry Christmas, everybody's having fun..." Then the light grows dimmer and the crowd begins to fade, people smile before vanishing into the ether and their shadows dissolve into the cigarette burned wooden dance floor, leaving nothing. I look at Alan and he smiles back and waves before he also disappears into that cold starry night Christmas 1973... I hope you're all still dancing somewhere...

Dedicated to Alan Telford and Frank Robinson who sat with me on the young-un's balcony.

Karaoke at the Pride of the North **Kenneth Scally**

Burly retired warehouse man, Willy Eckerslike, shuffled to the stage for his turn in the All-star karaoke at the Pride of the North bar in Benidorm. Billy went to Benidorm every year without fail, he stayed in the same old hotel, Los Paralytics de Mar, with his wife and youngest lad Norman, who was a shy young feller of thirty seven, also their Maureen, her husband Bobby and their two reprobates Tyrone and Errol, oh and granddad, who did nothing but moan because the pubs didn't sell Mild.

"Watch what you're doing you big daft ape-oth! You're not in the all-inclusive now!" said a disgruntled customer as a river of Cerveza San Alphonso, cascaded into his lap from the upturned glass. Willy's shuffling frame had almost knocked the table over. "What's up? They'll wash, you soft beggar!" "You'd best send another one over when you've sung your song! Clumsy sod!" Willy just grunted Willy loved Benidorm, though he couldn't understand why they let the bloody Spanish tourists in or let all those Spanish people work in the bars and hotels. They couldn't speak English, cook bacon proper, or pull a decent pint. Not like the barmaids in the Pig and Dead ferret, back home in Wiggin. But still it was sunny and not too many Germans.

Willy reached the stage without further incident and was approached by the DJ, Earl Harrington, alias, Melvyn Thistlethwaite from Barnsley, sporting his curly perm and his spray tan. He loved working in Benidorm because it was full of people from Lancashire and Yorkshire, no one else could understand a word he said. He smiled at Willy which momentarily blinded him. The Earl had just had his teeth whitened and they had caught the reflection of the Glitter ball dangling from the ceiling. His grey roots were showing through the Grecian 2000, and he resembled a cross between an aging glam rocker and Dracula.

"What have you got for us tonight Willy?" said the affable master of ceremonies. "Bridge over Troubled water Earl, it reminds me of the Canal bridge at Wiggin Pier." "Ladies and Gentlemen Willy Eckerslike, singing Bridge over Troubled Water. one of the greatest hits of that American Feller Simon Garfunkle!" Half of the audience applauded, the rest went next door to catch the sky sports in the Old Bull and Bush.

Willy had a lovely voice, until he started singing. His dulcet tones could charm the birds out of the trees, or did it force them to migrate early, any way it got shut of them. Willy grumpily snatched the Mic from Melvyn; the orchestral strains began. Willy's voice missed the intro completely, he was out of tune out of time and out of audience. The remaining patrons had quickly joined the others watching Sky Sports at the Old Bull and Bush, leaving Willy's family alone in the bar. They supped up when Billy had finished and made their way

back to the all-inclusive at the Los Paralytcs, Melvyn quickly sent a runner to the Old Bull and Bush to let them know Willy had gone.

As they slowly walked back to the hotel, Willy turned around to Ada his long-suffering spouse; "You know Ada I don't think that lot appreciate good music?" Ada carried on oblivious to his words. "Ada are you listening?" "Sorry love, did you say something? I still have my earplugs in. This sea air plays havoc with my tinnitus. You know what Doctor Singh said about my delicate eardrums?" They got back to the Los Paralytcs all-inclusive happy hour, which had been going on since dinnertime. They made their way to the bar deftly stepping over a group of Glaswegians, who had been supping Cerveza De Costa with Fundador chasers all day.

Willy reached the bar; "Manuel six bottles of Cerveza de Costa!" Meanwhile, Tyrone and Errol had been to their room to get their latest money-making scam, "The Cockroach Grand National." All week they had been hunting and capturing the biggest and fittest cockroaches they could find. They had twenty, averaging three and a half inches in length. They had christened their captives with names such as Arkle, Red Rum, Seabiscuit and Boris Johnson. Then put sticky labels on the poor creature's wing cases as name badges. The boys had made a track from the old paper backed books from the hotel lounge bookcase. The athletic insects were in a large Tupperware with air holes which Tyrone had made with the flick knife he had bought from the Joke shop.

They called for last bets, called the cockroaches to starters orders. The box was put on its side on the track, the lid was lifted clinically and expertly, reminiscent of the trap doors at Haydock park. It was pandemonium, the cockroaches must have misunderstood the instructions in English. They ran everywhere apart from down the track, women screamed, burly men ran like hell, chairs and tables fell. There was so much ale swilling around the floor, you could have swum for the exit. Luckily most of the cockroaches made it to the patio doors and into the garden, led by David Cameron.

The few that didn't were washed down the drains, were they would most likely find new cockroach partners and live happily ever after. Willy smiled for the first time in a fortnight, or was it just wind? He shuffled to the bar where Manuel and Miguel were gaping like a pair of prize Chubs in an angling clubs display case; "Another six bottles Manuel, my table got knocked over. Lads will be lads." Willy shuffled back to the dry bit in the corner, his ale ration replenished. "Manuel! He's, just booked in for a month in February!" "No! You, joke me Miguel!" "No Amigo! Consuela on reception just told me, we go to the Oficina de Employ in Alicante tomorrow?"

Some May Say It's Grim Up North
Samantha Turner

Some may say it's grim up north
All chimneys, coal and smog
The men all wearing flat caps
With walking sticks and clogs
But on these streets of cobble stones
And alleys back to back
In terraced houses row by row
No sunshine does it lack
Mam is keeping busy
It's wash day for the women
With dolly tub and rubbing board
And clothes pegs in her pinny
Dad's gone working down the pit
Hewing coal with all the men
Our Nancy's at the cotton mill
And I'm off school again
When weather's good and dads been paid
We pack a bag and catch the train
Funfair, donkeys, fish and chips
My favourite are the crispy bits
Blackpool tower, beach and sea

Children's faces bright with glee
Sometimes we go to Wigan Park
A basket filled with scones
We'll picnic in a shady spot
Relax the whole day long
Thursday night my Dad goes pub
A pint well-earned he says
I hear him whistling up the path
As he makes his merry way
My Auntie lives in Cumbria
My Uncle has a farm
There's lots of lakes and mountains there
So beautiful and calm
I'd like to take a boat upon
A lake like that some day
Sail to a little island
From school I'd hide away
Our street at home is not like that
But we do have fields and cows
Mam sends me to the shop sometimes
For milk from Mr Brown
There is a big house on the hill
A mighty hall called Haigh

With servants for the rich folk
A keeper on the gates
I dream that I'm a lady
All posh in dresses made
From satin pink and lavender
Hemmed with pretty lace
I'd walk among the gardens
Just to 'take the air'
Saunter among the flowers
I wouldn't have a care
The only way I'll see Haigh Hall
Is working with the cook
Or cleaning out the fires
Head to toe in soot
Maybe I'll meet a handsome groom
We'll marry in the spring
A ribbon on my finger
While he can't afford a ring
Or I could be an entertainer
The North has bred a few
Mam says that I'm a dreamer
To shut up and eat my stew
We've George Formby

Cleaning windows
Ukulele songs that linger
Stan Laurel makes us laugh
On stage and screen acting daft
Beatrix Potter, Peter rabbit
Fame and talent
Up north we have it
All said and done though
Life's not bad
I've got a loving Mam and Dad
I don't go hungry
No holes in my socks
Dreaming's alright but I'm happy with my lot
Doors are always open
And neighbours are our friends
In times of fear and trouble
All help to make amends
Laughter from the children
Playing in the street
Gossip from the women
With everyone they meet
We fierce and loyal northern folk
Are proud and stubborn too

But even though we don't have much
We'd gladly share with you
So come and pay a visit
There's pie fresh from the oven
I'll lay an extra place for you
Let Mam know that you're coming

Every Witch Way **Shaun Fallows**

The corridors seemed different now. All the shouting and accusations had stopped but they were the same corridors for certain; dusty, cold and smelling of damp, as the rain fell heavily and steadily outside. The still meek body of young Mary Crofter was a sad figure as she tiptoed through the castle, trying to piece together her thoughts about the execution. She showed all the signs. It couldn't be denied, for one, she'd never been in any hurry to find a husband, for two, she very rarely wore anything but black and for three, there were times when she'd chosen only the days Saturday and Thursday to leave her home to forage for food.

Finally, the give-away; Mary had a nervous twitch of the right eye and the ever increasing, involuntary shaking and trembling, starting from the hands and eventually seizing her whole body. These clues were cast iron and it said as much in the town's church records. Mary could not even begin to explain her unusual ways or these strange spasm symptoms herself. She had every witch way all right. So therefore, she was a witch.

Mary had been born early, and almost never came out at all. From almost as soon as she could talk, she developed a nervous stammer. Close friends thought evil had stolen her voice. Her mother doted on her though, despite all these things, and despite the fact she had been born out of shame. Aggie, Mary's mother, a peasant farm labourer, was an attractive, cheery wench, despite her desperate rags. She was taken by fancy of the local rich landowner and fell pregnant. The landowner soon got bored and this sordid secret came out eventually. With gossip and rumours abound it would only be a matter of time before people would start to wonder and hate.

Mary and her mother had to flee at nightfall. In the flight people who Mary had once considered friends, prodded her with make-shift tools, spat at her, and as the fear choked Mary. She could see their faces full of fear then her body was stripped naked and set alight. The smoke and flames rose high into the night, seen from all around from the Northern town of Blackburn to the nearby town of Burnley. Eventually the flames were extinguished from her burning body by a passing priest, while out walking. His position in the community and general conscious quickly taking pity on the savaged corpse. So that is how their new life, in a new town started.

Contrary to fairy-tales and the like, Witches do not use cauldrons, keep pet frogs, wear pointed hats or have broomsticks. It's much more sinister than that. They look just like the normal person, in many ways. They move around amongst crowds, fearful of being found out. They offer cures to any illness for old stuck souls, using gathered charms and scavenged foods. This is how they must try to make a living, and a life.

These Witches, once dead like young Mary, become restless and can, sometimes, develop the ability to travel backwards or forwards to any point in time they wish. This phenomenon was happening to Mary when we join the story at the castle. She was discovering the virtues of this power and just one week earlier, on a sweet Friday, she had travelled far into the future, stayed long enough to learn, and was dumbfounded, and it had to be said relieved to discover, that the afflictions she had given were in-fact two things, new things she had never heard of.

Not being able to write or spell she even struggled to say the words and found it sounded very silly. The future words she had discovered that matched her circumstances completely were medical. Early onset Parkinson's Disease. And then there was the other curious thing that explained her tears and angry rages. Depression. She noted that in this new world, and this funny looking room, there were unknown objects that made unrecognisable hi-rate noises and she saw men talking. They seemed to repeat what the objects said. She decided, in their matching white appearance, all must have changed, they must be the witches of this time.

A week can seem a long time, even when you are a spirit, and now as Mary left the castle, she found her usual spot, on a blustery Pendle hill. She could see for miles and miles. Having been buoyed that there were exciting, different explanations in a vast future had taken most, if not all, anger about the execution. Yes, she wished she still had a life amongst the living, but ironically, the stronger desire for answers as a spirit, had given her the said mystical powers she never actually had in her real other life.

So, reader, as I sit here in the year 2020 in an electric powered wheelchair, feeling truly part of technology, it would be tempting to think Mary's life in the mid 1600's was an event that never happened. It makes us wonder that in some way we always just repeat history? A comforting thought was sailing up out of Mary's mind and off into the Pendle air like a kite. She reasoned history can't be stopped, and even the worst parts of it should never be erased. It was excruciating to admit but perhaps those people the ones who had laughed loudest and tortured her happily, did so for fears they really thought were genuine. How many more would die like Mary? Dark forces, computer trolls and technology witches operate all around us, out of sight. When cruel implicants know nothing else.

Untitled Dave Hughes

"His voice brings a little comfort as he steps on the back of the boat, "I think this is it" I say, showing him the violin. I'm not telling him how much I paid for it. The fact is I haven't, I've got it on tick, 25 quid from a second-hand shop, case and bow all in good condition, so I reckon I've got a bargain. Darren, being the expert in everything antique, had told me what to look for, the way the carving goes in at the top, the pattern of the wood at the back, the signs to tell if it's a good 'un. And as far as I can see, it has them all, except for one thing, there's the name scratched on the inside. I can't quite make it out though, maybe Billy. I pretend I haven't seen it. It won't help me sell the thing. Whilst he's looking at it, I tell him about the change that's gone missing, and the little potted herbs off the roof.

"My change keeps going missing" I explain. He shows no interest then offers me 60 quid for the violin. I act disappointed.

"But it's got all the things you said to look for" I say, in a matter of fact way shrugging my shoulders, "What about 70?" He agrees and tells me it's not a violin but a fiddle.

"Here, give us a go." I play it for the last time. Darren seems quietly impressed, he didn't know I could play the fiddle, and neither did I. It just seemed to come alive all on its own. He gives me 40 and promises the rest. At last I can eat!

"Watch the boat, I'm just nipping to the shop." I'm going to get something for the dog, a pie, and maybe some milk. The 40 quid is a gift that's come just at the right time. Dashing off the boat I notice a woman stood on the other side of the canal, just stood watching. I've never seen her before. She's staring at the boat, standing perfectly still. I rush to the shop.

The next day the council had been whilst I'd been out and taken down all the brambles from the side of the canal, exposing a labyrinth of tunnels which all lead to a perfectly round nest containing all my coins and a few other things I hadn't realized had gone. Everything except the herbs.

'The crafty little sod' I think. Pal, my whippet, has obviously been stealing the coins off the boat, to hide in his own little house. For some reason he'd taken to sleeping outside in the brambles on the embankment and now only comes on the boat to eat.

Pal seems excited this morning, worrying the back door. I open it and find I have a new neighbour. After being here on my own for over a year, it's a bit of a shock. I'm greeted by a fellow with goggly eyes.

"Hi, I'm Nick" he says, leaning on the side of his boat, and what a boat! A 74 foot, old wooden narrow boat with the cabin running the full length. Nick, a thin, tall guy with a southern accent tells me about his journey.

"I've poled it all the way" he says smiling. "From Essex", "That must have took some time" I reply. "Yeah, about 6 months."

Later, he tells me about the boat, he'd brought it here because this is where it was originally put in the canal. It had somehow made its way to London but was now back in the place where it had started out its life.

Sometime later, I find out about its original owner, a man called Fred and his wife worked on the canal, from Worsley to Stoke on Trent, taking coal and bringing back pottery. Apparently, one winters night his wife fell off the back of the boat whilst going through a tunnel and drowned and that's when Fred decided to go and work down the pit.

I learn all this standing in the boat house pub next to the canal where I'm moored, in a place called Astley Village. There's an old display case that's on the wall just as you walk in. There's old photographs and one is a picture of Fred the boat, yes, the boat's called Fred too, named after the owner. His wife is standing on the back. To my horror, it's the same woman that was watching from the towpath.

A few nights later one of the locals comes to see me on my boat, he'd heard about the violin I'd sold, or should I say fiddle, and wanted to know what it was like. I told him about how well-made, it was and how easy it was to play.

"Funny that" he says looking out towards my new neighbour. "Fred used to play a fiddle on the back of this old boat right here."

"What do mean? How do you know?" "Oh, he worked at the pit here with my grandad. He was always telling us stories about old Fred" "Go on, like what?" "Well, it was quite a thing, he'd stop off at certain villages along the canal and put on a bit of a show from the back of his boat with his wife, even the dog joined in. He'd play the fiddle and she'd have the dog doing tricks, the best was she'd have it walking on its back legs with a bowl in its mouth so people could put money in. Oh aye, they did alright, what with her selling the herbs and potions too."

I tell him about the woman I'd seen on the towpath that day, how she was just stood staring. "You've seen old Enid." "So that was the name of his wife? Enid, that's an unusual name." "Not really." he replies "everything has a name, even his fiddle had a name, I think he called it Billy."

Up North

Barbara Roberts

A Northerner can strike up a conversation with complete strangers at a bus stop. It's usually about the weather and how wet, cold or windy it's been. We never expect any good weather and secretly like our brooding intense skies and bracing 'fresh' air. If the sun does shine for more than a few days our towns are full of Northerners wearing shorts and flip flops sitting outside pubs and cafes soaking up the warmth. We prefer cash to cards and call all our parent's friends 'Auntie' and 'Uncle'. Most of us are trustworthy and honest, sometimes blunt to the point of rudeness and we'll call you 'love' or 'cock' as a term of endearment.

We like a pie, a chip barm or chips with gravy and for 'tea' a dish of lobby with beetroot. We brew proper beer and love a toasted tea cake with a nice 'cuppa'. We call lunch 'dinner' and dinner 'tea' while 'supper' is a snack we have before going to bed. We do still wear flat caps but the clogs went out once the cobbled streets got covered in tarmac. We're proud of our northern roots but distrust anyone we consider 'different' and we've been saying 'put big light on' for years. Long before Peter Kay used it in his comedy standup. We have a dry sense of humour and enjoy 'taking the mickey' out of our 'mates' at every opportunity.

We can spot bullshit a mile off. We're very proud of our heritage of famous sportsmen and women, comedians, artists, musicians and writers. We're considered hardworking because we're descended from miners and spinners known for working long hours in harsh conditions. We call ourselves 'salt of the earth' and describe anyone south of Birmingham as a 'southern softy'. Some northerners have never visited London despite it being a short two hour train journey.

Maybe they think it's full of crafty cockneys and diamond geezers or pickpockets waiting to steal their cash the minute they step off the tube? We find it hard to accept that our children and grandchildren may have become southerners. Our grandson who was born in London is football mad and an avid Spurs fan but his dad says he's half northern and he's always throwing a rugby league ball at him but he can't get him to eat his lobby. He laughs when we say book, chair or 'buzz' and complains that it's cold up north but he still loves to visit.

In Winter, we like to take him to Blackpool to be nearly blown off the pier, ride a donkey on the beach and suck a stick of rock while queueing to see the illuminations. It's what we did with his dad and these shared experiences are part of our DNA. Northerners are always looking for other northerners. We once checked into a remote hostel in New Zealand and the owners immediately asked us where we came from. 'We live near Manchester' we mumbled vaguely thinking they'll never have heard of Leigh but they recognised our flat vowels and pressed us for the name of the town.

It turned out that they came from Tyldesley and we were like old friends when we left two days later. We'd found our indigenous tribe. But big changes are happening 'up north' and we're not sure who we are anymore with many of the staunch labour constituencies turning blue. It's the start of a new decade and we're about to leave the EU to go it alone so none of us know what's going to happen next.

Going out in the 70s in Wigan

Susan Rigby

We would meet up on a Saturday night at Wigan Central Post Office then wander down the road to The Victoria Pub on Wallgate. The meeting place for all. The same crowd would venture in every week and you got to know everyone by name. People came in from all over the Wigan Borough including Ince, Hindley, Platt Bridge, Marsh Green, Worsley Hall, Shevington and Beech Hill, too many to name. There were people from Swinley and the higher end of Standish to whom we referred to the posh part of town. The Vic as it was known back then, was a pub to let off steam for us all.

There are now apartments at the top with a McColl's newsagents underneath. Even though we were sixteen years old under the legal age to consume alcohol we did get served by a particular barman in his twenties or thirties who we chatted to. He was about five feet nine quite jovial with a small wispy beard and sparkling blue eyes.

Questions were never asked way back then as to how old we all were. We visited all the other pubs like the Minorca and Clarence all on the same street that allowed us in, then we would go to our favourite place to dance the night away. Wigan Casino which was a huge first world war building, with a bar downstairs and one upstairs, and a set of stairs which led to the top floor where you could hang over the thick brown bannister and look out for a lad you fancied.

It was not just for the all-nighters dancing to Northern Soul it was a dance hall which opened from around eight pm until twelve thirty am. My friends and I would dress up in the latest fashions. In particular, I remember wearing a short maroon crimplene dress, which was like polyester material and sling back white shoes which would ease you across the huge maplewood dance floor. We would go along and queue outside to get in, everyone pushing because it would get full pretty quickly.

Once inside I was the one who would go to the bar and buy the drinks because I was the tallest and looked older. When the music started, we would run on the dance floor and dance around our handbags in a circle. The music played by the resident DJ would resonate around the hall and our ears would pound to Tamla Motown and the hits of the seventies. You had to shout to one another to be heard. It was a great meeting place for us all and we would let our hair down and enjoy ourselves.

At the end of the night the slow music would come on and if you were lucky and a lad asked you to dance you were like the cat that had got the cream. On one occasion I was walking up the stairs and of course there were the lads who drank too much. Someone threw a glass.

My ankle was cut and an ambulance had to be called because there was blood everywhere. I had it stitched up at the hospital and had no anaesthetic because I had been drinking cider and blackcurrant it was a favourite of mine. Ooh the pain. When I got home, my Mum was worried when she saw me get out of an ambulance. I did not go out dancing for several weeks.

Now that time has moved on. I think back to those days when we were young and free to be whatever we wanted to be. Time passes so quickly and I can imagine the ghosts of Wigan Casino lingering on forever. For people who do not know Wigan. In the Grand Arcade there are drawings of Wigan Casino, upstairs near the Costa Coffee. Nice memories to look at when you are sipping your tea or coffee.

A Eulogy for an Un-lived Life **Graham Roberts**

I was born in 74, in a northern town without a station, and without a plan. Last year I travelled to York Away to watch us lose 9-8 in the torrential rain. But as I stood there sheltering on the windy terrace a long way from home, I slowly became overwhelmed with a combination of loss and belonging. These were after all my people. But I didn't go back home with them. Because I'm in the wrong crowd, mulling over a past, and a future that I never had. The here and now, the there and then. I was born without any sense, or entitlement. I managed to go to a Yorkshire University to do the wrong degree. It's still there in my accent, but I don't know where I am.

Somewhere south of Crewe, without you. I followed a job down south to Weybridge, I didn't really know where that was either. What can I say? I apologise, it sounded just south of Birmingham. And anyway, I was only going to pick up some experience, I'd be back soon. Over 20 years later and I'm sat in a terraced house in south London typing this, in a suburb I've called home for the last decade. But Back to the Rugby. I told myself I'd move back home and buy a season ticket if we ever made it into Super League. However, in the Grand Final when Turley scored his last minute drop goal to take us into extra-time, my emotions were tainted.

And last year, I bought myself a London Broncos shirt. I have a Southern wife, and a cockney child now. He prefers football to Rugby League. And he won't even touch corned beef hash, doesn't matter what I call it. Once a year I meet my old Uni mates. We get drunk and they ask me over and over again. How can you live in London? Over and over. Until it starts to sound like an echo. But they have a point. So now I'm Looking back, but also across, up on Pendle hill, It's with me still. I can still recall the solitude of cycling up out of Settle and down into Malham, with the setting sun in my heart. Then before you know it 20 years have gone. I still travel back 'home' now and again To visit my parents in the school holidays.

On crowded trains or motorways. Suffering standard class and traffic delays. Back into a different town. We've both changed, been rearranged. Have we both lost our identity? Have we diverged? Are we old and tired? Is there a sense of place or pride? I like to run along the canal and enjoy the horizon as it gets dark and speechless. I'm bigger and everything seems smaller.

Sometimes I keep running and only stop to ask myself who I was then. Life unravels backwards. With a certain flavour. A certain taste. A sense of waste. People talk of heritage and ugly buildings and talk about what's left. There used to be a barber in town who charged a brick for a haircut. It took 20 years to build up his house and then they knocked it down in a day.

To make room for the cars for the bakery. The industrial revolution petered out some time ago. But there's still a sort of timeless history. I woke up the other day to the news they'd turned Blue. Where they'd once been red, born and bred. Perhaps I could've done something sooner, devised a plan. Heroic moments, few and far between. In another life. I'd have read the book. In another life. You'd rescue me.

Or Maybe one day I could still go back and live there. To quietly go unnoticed, or as some kind of saviour. Photographs of factories, pictures of people, a certain taste, a sense of waste. Intertwined with memories and longing. But the past isn't there anymore. At least the words come out better these days. But there's no way back, there's no way back.

Charlie's Angels

Alison Armfield

Sunday morning 17th December 1978. Pat is lying awake in bed, a familiar feeling of excitement creeping through her body. It always starts with a sharp intake of breath as she opens her eyes, followed by an increasing sense of anticipation. This has been going on for some years now and he never let's her down. Initially she was woken up by the sound of him announcing his arrival but these days she is always fully awake, her ears straining to hear him in the distance. Today is no different. She's been awake for a full hour, her children either still sleeping or quietly amusing themselves in their bedrooms. She could get up and go to them, dress them, feed them, but she doesn't want to leave her warm and cosy bed before he arrives.

Today is definitely the day. mThe last Sunday before Christmas. mSame time, half past nine, every year. mFor Pat Christmas isn't Christmas without him. She looks across at the clock on the bedside table. Twenty eight minutes past nine. She feels the excitement mounting. She closes her eyes and listens intently. Yes! There it is! She can hear the distant thumping of the drums. As the sound gets closer and louder they are joined by the muffled tones of the trombone, then the horns. Her heart beats faster and joins the thump, thump rhythm of the drums. By the time she hears the unique notes of the cornet, she can make out the specific carol - Silent Night. It's always Silent Night. They March down the lane, playing the last few bars as they stop right outside her bedroom window.

Silent Night followed by We Three Kings and Little Town of Bethlehem and then they are on the move again. Pat wriggles contentedly under the covers and sighs. Christmas has started. She suddenly jumps up, grabs her dressing gown and races downstairs. She has been enjoying Charlie's Christmas renditions for enough years now to know that once the band starts to move down the lane there will be a knock on the door and one of Charlie's Angel's will be there with a collection box. Pat smiles to herself.

Charlie and his Angel's are a part of the Tyldesley's history. In fact brass bands have been part of northern industrial culture since the early nineteenth century with many old cotton and mining communities proud to have their own brass bands, resplendent in uniform and talented in musicianship. Tyldesley is no exception and it is to Tyldesley Brass Band that Charlie has given his total allegiance. Joining at fifteen he never once considered moving on to bigger, more successful bands. No aspirations to conduct or adjudicate, just a pure passion for playing and teaching. Always brass bands and always Tyldesley. Pat knows all about Charlie from the local newspapers.

She remembers the photograph of him marching a group of youngsters down Derwent Street, encouraging them to be as in love with brass bands as he was. On opening her front door, there it is, practically the same scene. The man himself, marching his band of young players down the street. Grabbing a handful of loose change, she tosses the coins into the proffered collection box and gives a wave to Charlie on the other side of the road. Of course he doesn't wave back. She doubts that he has even noticed her, absorbed as he is in the performance of his band. Is he aware that locally they are known as "Charlie's Angels" she wonders.

Has he any idea of how much pleasure he brings to people? Would he be surprised to realise that he and his band make Pat's Christmas? As Charlie and his band disappear down the lane, Pat closes the door and steps back into her Sunday morning. The earlier excited anticipation is now pounding in her chest. She looks toward the staircase and hears her children beginning to stir in their bedrooms. With a wide grin on her face, she takes a deep breath and bellows "Come on kids, out of bed! Christmas has started!"

Paris, Passion & Pies

Sharon Godiff-Pulido

The circumstances which had brought her back to Paris had been sad, but the funeral of her mother had also given her the opportunity to stay a while longer. After the children had paid their respects and departed more than 10 days ago, she found herself enjoying her home country and the new sense of belonging she had discovered whilst visiting long-lost family. Since becoming a widow at only 42, Monica had been forced into independence with 4 young children below the age of 12, and grieving for her beloved Ronald, she had found life hard juggling 2 part time jobs her home and kids, but the rewards had been worth it.

Wigan hadn't been her first choice, she had imagined living in a sophisticated cottage in the Cotswolds but it was a terraced house in Standish that she called home and she was immediately welcomed and included by the town and she had made many good friends, who had been her 'family' and a comfort when she was in need. She had never remarried. She had lived in Northern England for more than 40 of her 66 years, and Monica would always be proud of being Mrs Higson, mother of 4 beautiful and now grown up children, each with a good English education, a variety of interesting, responsible careers and now scattered all over the UK in relationships and with some children of their own.

She giggled to think that Anglo French relations had never been as fruitful and wiped some flaky buttery crumbs from her abundant chest, she had missed a good croissant. But sitting in the stately Guard de Nord station, waiting for her connection to the airport home, she began to wonder "should she stay?" As the only remaining daughter of the now late Yvette and Françoise she had a small house to dispose of, nothing of any great value but she could make it a comfortable home? Her pension would be available soon and she could live quite easily off that and the small inheritance she had, if she was careful. As if her ponderings had been heard, or was it fate? The announcer declared her train was delayed.

She ordered more croissant and continued to consider the questions for and against this madness, and she was getting quite excited at the prospect of a new beginning. It was during her delicious deliberations, that a young couple sitting at the next table, became exuberant in their affections. Monica was no prude and she glanced over remembering how she and her darling Ronald had always been able to kiss and embrace in public, he wasn't the typical reserved Englishman.

They often took a picnic and walked hand in hand along the canal on warm summer nights, they could have been in the French Riviera but one glance in their picnic basket revealed not Michelin star cuisine but the best Lancashire fayre, no sparkling Champagne but a bottle of pop, Dandelion and Burdock to be precise, that washed down his favourite meat paste sandwiches and local pork pie followed by a packet of cheese and onion crisps and maybe even a Singing Lilly? She smiled to herself, they enjoyed their food and each other's company, she had loved him very much.

Suddenly she became aware of a distinguished gentleman possibly her own age also sitting close by. He made no attempt to conceal his enjoyment of this couples heightened emotions, he looked over at Monica and winked at her. She was shocked, had she been so lost in passion with her ghostly lover that he could see she longed to be kissed and caressed once again. She felt a mixture of embarrassment and what else? She wasn't sure, she quickly looked away, but the couple continued, with soft moans and whispers floating in the air.

She couldn't help herself she glanced back towards the man, but he was no longer there. She exhaled, was that relief or disappointment she felt? The couple untwined and walked towards the platform hand in hand. Taking a sip from her coffee cup she realised she had been holding her pastry mid-air for some time and she lay it down back on the plate, it no longer seemed as thrilling. Suddenly she longed for the train to take her home, to Wigan. Croissants were lovely but she really was a Pie Eater.

Wall of the Pies

Michael Addison

The wall was built in a matter of weeks, focusing a straight line from the edge of Caernarfon to Grimsby. The government proclaimed it to be a short-term austerity measure, following the failure of a nationwide banking scheme. While it just seemed to be teething issues at first, the damage later spiralled to all sectors of public life. Least that's how my Grandad tells it. That wall.

You'd be at the summit of Whernside and still be staring up at the sky. When they built it, no quarter was drawn, no half-measure taken. It remained a permanent white mark, dividing both sides of the country. Some tried to dig under or risk a daring climb. Every try was a beggars defeat; heavy policing brought strict obedience under an iron fist.

The news ran nothing else. Granada, ITV and the North West BBC spun story after story to keep fears at rest. The wall is coming down any day now; wait a little longer. Don't do anything stupid or you'll face the repercussions. Just wait. Hold out. While most of us got on with things making the best of a bad situation, there was always talk of a criminal element, bubbling underneath the surface. It could've been any Greggs, in any town. I'd stumbled in one day and requested an order of a steak bake and chocolate muffin. By series of fortunate events, this turned out to be a secret code.

Without much ado, the staff ushered the patrons out and led me down into the staff basement. That's where I met the ringleader and visionary. A man called Bob. In amongst high street clerks, bank office workers and hi-vis folk, the man I came to know as Bob took centre stage. His presence was astounding, a bearded beatnik spouting out diatribe after diatribe of caustic wit under frenzied eyes and a sardonic smile. By the time I picked up his message, I'd realised this was a call to arms. A rebellion against the status quo. Sod off the wall, let's send a message. I didn't take much convincing.

It took less than a day to make the preparations. Hundreds of thousands of pies, stocked up in countless trucks travelled across the A-roads and motorways. I'd hopped a lift in the back of a beat-up Ford Corsa. The closer we got to Chester, the more the wall loomed over us with its miserable malevolent presence. I patted the backpack on my lap. Ready and waiting. What once was the cathedral had been sliced in half, either side taking a piece of its heritage. I'd hopped out the car, hoping to move through the crowd that'd gathered at the perimeter.

The force must've been swarmed by similar folk like me all standing by in our hundreds and thousands. I don't know who threw the first pie. It flowed out like a wave of muddy anger, vitriol and gravy in one concise motion. We began chucking pies at the wall, splattering the draconian white fixtures in dashing colours and textures. Brown mush and carrot chunks; lobbing one after another with increased fervour. This was the start of a revolution...

Silent Smiles from a Northern Town

Mike Fahey

Being a profoundly deaf implant wearer can be quite challenging sometimes, but it can also be a relief to be able to switch off the relentless noise of daily life. My wife and I were in the local coffee shop in Wigan for a coffee last week and I didn't have my cochlear implant switched on (far too much background noise for me) which gave me the chance to observe what was happening around me in total silence. My wife nipped to the loo and so I'm sat peacefully on my own and all around me are people chatting and enjoying their coffee. I am doing my usual perusal of my fellow man while wincing at how bitter the coffee is (why I drink this stuff I don't know).

There are two girls laughing and smiling across from me, a big long haired bearded guy with shorts on is well into his laptop, headphones on, feet tapping away and nodding his head to the music, three paint splattered workmen in front of me seem to be sniggering at something, and the queue of people at the coffee bar snakes almost through the doors into the street. They too, seem to be extraordinarily happy with their lot, grinning and smiling to themselves. Makes a change to see so many people happy for a change... I feel like I am the only sad miserable old git in the shop, when my wife comes back and sits down beside me laughing to herself. Now what's she giggling about? I think, and look at her questioningly.

She explained "I was queuing for the loo and I thought I could hear someone singing away inside... but when the door opened it was a quite grumpy old lady... no way was she singing in there! It's only when I got back here I realised it's that guy over there with the laptop... he's singing really loud and he's quite good." I looked across at the guy again, and this time it was obvious that he was singing, eyes closed, shaking his head like a demented Stevie Wonder... really enjoying himself. Finally I smiled... Yes.

That was the effect he was having on everyone around him, the whole shop was listening to him and looking at him enjoying himself and he totally lit the shop up. Even though I could not hear him, the sight of so many happy people could not fail to lift my spirits. And THEN... a member of staff walked over to him and asked him to leave because he had finished his drink! He was sadly packing his laptop away when a lady in the queue put a fresh cup of coffee in front of him. As she put it down, she looked at him and smiled.

Dorothy's Children **Paul Blinkhorn**

Dorothy sat at the large kitchen table, her hand clasping a cup of tea. It was fresh from the pot and she savoured every mouthful. She appreciated these rare moments, when silence briefly fell on her home and her apron wasn't being tugged at by a pair of small, attention-seeking hands. Out of sight, a houseful of quiet children conjured a thousand worrying images, particularly when they were fuelled by the latest instalment of Dan Dare comic strips. For her, anything more than brief silence was viewed with suspicion. Generally though, the house was incredibly lively with her growing rabble running up and down the bare wooden stairs and pouncing on one another without even the smallest warning.

It was a closely knit family unit and she was the thread that kept them all together. Now in her 50s, Dorothy continued to make room for the laughter of her children; to show them that they were loved. She'd almost been married once, to a man named John, who like her own father years previous also lost his life fighting a war on foreign soil. He and many men like him had made the ultimate sacrifice to make the world a better place. For over a decade, she had been taking in the world's waifs and strays. None of her eight children were hers by birth and for that reason she had come to understand the suspicion with which she was viewed by those around her.

The tightly packed terraced houses down the hill were deliberately assembled in such a way as to make natter and idle gossip inevitable. She tried not to hold it against them though, for in those cobbled streets she also saw a thriving sense of community, which once you had gotten beyond the barricade, had all the warmth of a coal fire in the dead of winter. Though outwardly giving the appearance of enjoying a moment of uninterrupted relaxation, Dorothy was in fact running through the long internal checklist of chores that she had set herself that morning. Notes on bits of paper had the tendency to go astray, often being found days later in the form of a discarded paper plane or chatterbox - or as remnants amongst the ash of last night's fire.

From inside the kitchen, the sound of the side door could be heard opening. "Peter is that you?" Shortly after a young man in his early twenties entered, followed closely by a border collie that proceeded to jump up at Dorothy, pawing at her lap and nuzzling its head into her. "Bromley, get down boy", scolded Peter, pulling the dog back by its collar. "I'll grab his lead and take him for a walk". "Thanks, love". Peter had come to her first. His mother had died some years earlier and very soon after his father had remarried. His father had been unprepared for a life alone with a young child and with all the best intentions had chosen a wife who seemed to make it her sole purpose in life to beat and belittle Peter into submission until her own biological children could come along.

When these much desired siblings arrived, her behaviour only worsened and Peter then aged just seven, frequently found safety sleeping beside the railway tracks in a dilapidated shed, before eventually finding a loving home with Dorothy. His father hadn't fought to keep him, and for a long while that had really affected him. His father had chosen his new family over him, but now as a young man himself, Peter was glad of the fact. He knew he was a better person for having gone to a place where he was wanted and where he could thrive. Many of his siblings remembered very little of their time before coming to live with Dorothy. They possessed little more than fragments which rarely managed to distract them from the laughter and joy that generally took up their days. For this Peter was thankful.

As Dorothy neared the end of her cup of tea, the silence upstairs broke. A flurry of footsteps came as if from nowhere, as one by one each of her children made their way across the landing and down the stairs. As she looked to the ceiling smiling, she could make out each child's distinct footsteps as they passed above her. She knew who was with whom and where each of them had been. For the children, this particular skill had them puzzled and frustrated in equal measure; nothing got past her. As the children flooded into the room, they approached the table like the quickening tide, surrounding Dorothy and engulfing her in hugs and kisses as Peter returned home and found a comfortable position in the doorway of the kitchen to observe.

The clothes airer suspended above the table also found itself caught in the midst of the storm, causing it to sway to and fro and several small garments to fall to the ground. Beyond the clambering bodies of the children, little could be seen of her aside from the odd glimpse of blue floral that adorned her apron. From beneath the many arms and legs of the children using her as a climbing frame, Dorothy gradually emerged, cup still in hand. "Come on you lot. Time for supper", she said as she parted the children, like Moses at the Red Sea. As she made her way to the kitchen to retrieve the roughly sliced pieces of home cooked bread she had cut only minutes earlier, she wondered - as she often did at this time of the day as to the exact source of her children's endless swathes of energy. If she could only find and bottle it, her family would never want for anything. For now though, the children were more than content with their supper of bread and dripping and each other's company. They didn't want for much, but what they did have they had in abundance.

Untitled Sarah Wilkinson

In Bolton, they have pasties, The Eccles lot can keep their cakes, Because o'er 'ere in Wiggin, We've mastered the best of bakes. This is the story of my grandad Jimmy; a baker's boy that was born and bred in Ince. Like most around here, Jimmy loved nothing more than a good pie. Whether it was his mam's steak and ale, a butter pie on Friday or the classic meat and potato, Jimmy couldn't get enough. As a teenager, he was constantly developing the recipe in his dad's bakery. Trying out new flavours and changing the quantities in his mission to achieve perfection. Just after he turned 19, Jimmy decided to solve the riddle of the perfect pie once and for all. He started with the bakeries in Wigan, travelling from Aspull and Haigh to Golborne and Leigh. Using his days off to visit towns like Bolton, Chorley, and Blackburn; he even went down to that London one weekend.

"Astur sin our Jimmy? Youll ne'er believe He's feckled iz motor, iz bags are packed, Iz mam wer' skry-kin when it wer time to leave"

Mrs Crossland from over the road gave him five bob, the butcher made him up some jackbit, and his mam and her friends shed a tear at his going-away party. The next day, he began his journey: eating pies in every port, town and village from John O' Groats to Lands' End. He knew that Cornwall made some beltin' pasties, so he thought it would be a good place to try. He soon arrived at Mousehole, a beautiful coastal village where the local delicacy was Stargazy pie. A pilchard-filled dish mixed with eggs and spuds and covered with a pastry crust. It was a significant improvement on the fish pie his mam made, he thought to himself. From Wales, he wrote back to the family.

Singing the country's praises, he declared he had eaten mountains of Welsh cakes and Bara Brith. He talked of a fish and chip shop in the village of St Clears; even saying it was better than the one in Blackpool, which was high praise indeed. He was proud to announce that the minted lamb pie there was a top contender. After his Welsh adventure, he travelled around the Irish counties before making his way across the Scottish border. Now, he had a good idea about the Scotch pie already as they were popular around the country. However, this mutton-filled treat straight from the bakers of Glasgow was significantly better than any of his own attempts.

"Astur 'erd bout our Jimmy? Altethi wha' yon mon's gone mad, He's saying tarrah to Wigan Off abroad iz he lad?" With bellywarch and carrying a few extra pounds, Jimmy began his global travels in America; a continent renowned for its dessert pies. From the deliciously sharp key lime pie in the Sunshine State to the creamy Boston pie; there were apple pies, cherry, blueberry and more. He ate empadão de frango in Brazil and marvelled at the pastel-de-choclo in Chile, before heading across to the Asian continent.

The buko pie in the Philippines was something to write home about, but it was Russia where he found a favourite in the coulibrac. He spent several years travelling over Asia and across Europe before deciding to extend his trip to visit Africa. His mam certainly wasn't happy about this change of plan. She thought he'd get eaten by lions and chased by wild rhino, but instead, he delved into the African cuisine with a seemingly endless appetite. He was most impressed with pastilla in Morocco, but said the best was the bobotie; a South African dish with spicy curried lamb.

"Iz feet were getting weary and missin' iz 'owd bed" "Longin' for some Wiggins comforts, He fawt be 'ome to wed"

Whilst he still hadn't found the perfect pie, the experience was enough and he was undoubtedly glad to be home on Wigan soil. A few weeks later, his old school mates invited him to a dance. Graham had said there'll be plenty of lasses, Mick promised he'd get a round in, and it'd been ages since he'd had one too many. As he was having a laugh with his mates, he noticed someone out of the corner of his eye. There she was. Whether it be chicken or meyt and pratar, Steak, pork, or fish by some accounts, It's the fillin' tha' meks the pie, It's what's on th'inside tha' counts.

They were wed a year or so later. My grandad used to say it was love at first sight, but granny would laugh and ask how he could remember after drinking so much. A few weeks after they had got back from their honeymoon, they were settling in their new home and things were getting back to normal. A new type of normal for a man who had spent the last decade travelling the world, but he was happy in his new life. "What's for tea?" He called into the kitchen as his belly rumbled after a hard day's graft. "Pie, peas and gravy," she answered. It had been a while since he had a pie.

Sitting at the table, his beloved wife put his tea in front of him. He thanked her, poured her a glass and got ready to tuck in. A few moments later, Jimmy put down his fork and loudly exclaimed, "Flippin' eck!" as his eyes filled with tears at the incredulity of the situation. "What's up love?" Betty asked. "It's bloody perfect... I've found it at last. It was here all along!" Jimmy replied in between booming laughs that filled up the room and joyful tears that scratched the back of his throat. Betty smiled and kissed him on his forehead. She'd have to make pie again she thought. Sekkl' down mi tale is dun, Sithi perfect pie was 'ere at 'ome, Waiting for thi' in ol' Wigan, And welcoming you back from where you roam.

