

Inspiring the next generation of Environmental Historians at the University of York

Having spent a large proportion of my time analysing the volumes of the Tyne Improvement Commission (up to 1939, so only 3 decades to go!), and one week in late January at the National Archives in London, I emerged last Tuesday, 18th Feb, from a quiet, focused and highly productive world of research to discuss my Tyne project with several environmental history MA students at the University of York. Thankfully, I hadn't forgotten how to teach, or indeed, how to talk at all. I delivered the seminar alongside the course leader, Professor David Moon, an environmental historian who has worked extensively with us on our previous AHRC-funded projects, 'Local Places, Global Processes: Histories of Environmental Change' and its follow-on, 'The Places that Speak to Us and the Publics We Talk With'.

Preparing for the seminar provided an opportunity to take a few steps back and organise the copious amount of archival material I have thus far amassed. I prepared some power point slides, and divided the Tyne's story chronologically into four sections: The Pre-Modern River, 1500-1800; The Industrial River, 1800-1975; The Kielder Scheme and Regeneration, 1975-present; and the Tyne's Future. I also presented a few slides on the existing literature, emphasising how different and exciting forms of media are currently enabling a diverse range of people to engage with the Tyne's history.

- *Tyne View: a walk around the Port of Tyne*, was published in 2012 to tell the story of an epic walk along the Tyne's tidal section, from South Shields to Tynemouth via Wylam Bridge, by four locals (a photographer, a writer, an artist and a poet). The successful book contains an exciting mixture of social history, photography, illustrations, interviews with locals and poetry.
- *Tyne View's* author, Michael Chaplin, has written a theatre production called 'Tyne', which celebrates the history of Tyneside's great river using dramatization and a combination of music, images and stories written by several local writers. I am delighted to have a ticket to

see the production at the Customs House, South Shields, on Saturday 1st March (watch this space for my critique!).

- Sting's recent album, 'The Last Ship', released in late 2013, provides a deep insight into the river's industrial past, with clever lyrics describing intimate details from working lives, providing a direct line to the industrial Tyne. My favourite song is 'Skyhooks and Tartan Paint' – [listen to it online](#) and I guarantee that it will make you smile. If you need any Geordie to English translations, you know where I am!

I was delighted to meet such an enthusiastic group of students, who had prepared exceptionally well for a consequently fruitful and mutually beneficial seminar discussion. They were particularly interested in how my research findings could be used to inform and shape future Tyne policies as a result of working hard during the research project to build relationships with relevant governmental bodies, local charities and water companies. We discussed my invitation to join the Clean Tyne Project's Steering Committee to plan their 25 year anniversary celebrations, which will take place in summer 2014, and their kind offer to demonstrate their important debris collection work on the river to all 'Power and Water' team members at our Team Project Meeting in Newcastle in early June 2014.

We also discussed the Dunston Staiths Restoration project, which is going to use recycled wood, collected from the river and provided free of charge by the Clean Tyne Project, to restore the UK's largest timber structure. Dunston Staiths were built originally in 1893 to facilitate the discharge of coal from the railway to keel boats. Once completed, the restored staiths, which will be open to the public, will form an important part of future generations' education and heritage, as well as making an important contribution to tourism.

We discussed the complex relationship between the Tyne and human activity, in terms of what we have done to the river and what the river has done to us as a two-way, symbiotic process. The subject of unintentional, positive impacts of human activity on rivers was raised, and we discussed the example, highlighted by T. C. Smout and Mairi Stewart in their *The Firth of Forth: An Environmental History* (2012), of ducks having flourished by eating the worms which fed on sewage and the organic discharges from breweries and distilleries and then subsequently plunging into rapid decline when the sewage was redirected from the Forth to treatment works to improve water quality (pp. 166-167). We also discussed Smout and Stewart's example of how

the removal of the mills upriver changed the Forth's flow, which reduced the numbers of dragonflies and frogs (p. 174). I am going to keep my eyes open for similar processes in the Tyne's history.

The students asked if the River Tyne has accumulated any nicknames. This is something which I have not considered thus far; if people have used affectionate or derisory nicknames when referring to the river, this could provide a useful route to understanding how the meaning of the river changed from generation to generation. The archives are full of derisory descriptions of the river, such as 'cursed horse pond', 'simply a creek' and 'open sewer', but an actual personifying 'name' for the river is a different concept entirely. I will look into this matter further.

The seminar was a great idea, suggested by David Moon, and proved to be a roaring success. I hope that the students took as much from the seminar as I did. I would like to thank the University of York, Prof. Moon and his MA students for the warm welcome I received last week and on behalf of the Power and the Water team, I wish them the best of luck with the rest of their environmental history course.

Source: <http://powerwaterproject.net/?cat=3>