

More harm than good

By Jo Gregory

A small ex-mining town in North-East Derbyshire has recently garnered an unprecedented media interest. With specific reference to two recent articles weaving stories of racial and cultural division; between the townsfolk and ‘feckless’, ‘beer swilling’, ‘criminal’ migrants from Eastern Europe. This article analyses and subsequently rejects these trajectories. It attests throughout that these publications have inflicted their political and social agendas; promoting racism, division, and tension within fragmented communities under a *guise* of objective reportage. Drawing upon interviews with three local people – Rachel*, Stephen,* and Tracy* – it unpacks the socio-economic problems in Shirebrook, arguing that deprivation and tension, stemming from the histories of industry, pride, and class struggle, are inexorably embedded and woven into the fabric of today’s Shirebrook.



Sports Direct's distribution headquarters in Shirebrook (Source: Alamy Stock Photos).

In 2004, Sports Direct's distribution headquarters opened on the outskirts of the town. Owned by Mike Ashley, who also owns Newcastle United, it has been lambasted considerably for poor working conditions and a lack of community accountability. It has been branded a ‘gulag’ (Goodley, 2015) and resembles a ‘Victorian workhouse’ (Ellis, 2016). Criticism is often linked to the percentage of workers at the plant who are from Eastern European countries, many of which now reside in Shirebrook. Tensions exist, with the right wing media arguing that the infrastructure and amenities of the town cannot support so many residents, and state that the changing demographic has changed the fabric of the community to such a extent that it has transformed into the ‘*Village of the Damned*’ (Parker, 2016); comparing Shirebrook to a horror film in which a village is overrun by frightening imposters. (Tweedie, 2016) for the Daily Mail laments that if readers ‘*Close [their] eyes and listen to the voices*’, they may believe that they are actually in ‘*Poznan or Lodz*’.

In recent years, there have been many similar reports almost exclusively from publications with an anti-immigration rhetoric. Rachel*, who brought her children up in Shirebrook, is gravely concerned about the effects these stories have upon the community. She laments that ‘*those papers stating what they did will cause more harm than good,*’ recalling that:

‘Whenever anything along those lines [immigration] got brought up [in the media], there would be a flock of people down at the market moaning about the Polish’.

She recognises that although anti-social behaviour in the village is a significant problem, and that some of the migrants ‘*aren’t the nicest of people;*’ however, she stresses that ‘*there are lots of English people there that are horrid, too, but I don’t see that being brought up anywhere*’. Echoing

a similar concern regarding racial scapegoating is Tracy*, a community care worker who lives next door to male Polish household. Tracy likes her neighbours. She says they are *'a bit loud, but what young lads aren't?'* She, like Rachel, is concerned about anti-social behaviour, but says it isn't exclusive to the migrants:

'I seen two lads last Friday pissing in the street. And they were English. I heard them shouting. It's wrong either way. English, Polish or bloody French. Same thing. It's not nice to hear that out of your window.'



'He needs to contribute more to Shirebrook!'

Stephen believes that many of the local issues stem from the controversy surrounding the Sports Direct warehouse. Stephen argues that there is a *'frustrated working class'* who *'have no opportunities,'* whereas it appears that the migrants have gainful employment in the warehouse, secure housing, and NHS access. Stephen believes that the frustration is a result of Bolsover District Council (BDC) neglecting their duties. He argues that BDC are *'bending over backwards for [Mike Ashley]'*, and that in exchange for Mr. Ashley conducting business in the area, BDC should *'be telling him that he needs to contribute more to Shirebrook'*. Stephen says that BDC have recently employed a Community Cohesion Officer, however he is concerned this is *'too late'*. Stephen is happy that Shirebrook is multicultural, but he notes that people feel so disenfranchised and alienated – by both the lack of sustainable jobs and the media slurs – that they resort to violence and racism. Tracy says her Polish neighbors, who currently work for Sports Direct, describe it as:

'A horrible place, duck. Honestly. I wouldn't let Sam [her son] work there in a million years. It's a f****ng disgrace that those poor sods have to put up with that. They say they earn a lot compared to home but it sounds like they're treated like caged animals.'*

The Enemy Within

Stephen*, a life-long resident of Shirebrook, echoes Rachel and Tracy. An activist within the community, he feels *'passionate about improving cohesion,'* and is optimistic that, with the right help, the village can recover from the current issues. He feels that issues need to be addressed objectively on both a local and national level, and is gravely concerned that anti-immigration rhetoric has led *'the communities [to] hate each other'*.

Skeggs (1997) argues this constitutes a *'spatial apartheid'* (Bright, 2011, pp.64). It is important to note that this is not a new phenomenon. Collectively labelled as *'the enemy within'* during the height of the miners' strike 1984-85, working class people have throughout recent history been lambasted as disengaged, failing, rough, and common. It is ironic that solidarity, camaraderie, and class pride are now comparatively referenced as *the good old days* by the right-wing media when discussing those areas which have, as a result of economic and social restructuring, become deprived and uncertain.

In order to understand issues within the coalfields, we must see them as they are; places which are uniquely *'deeply entangled with the specifics of local working class history'* (Bright, 2011:65) but also places of *'résistant aspiration'* (p.66) and disenfranchisement. It can certainly be argued that the resistance to migrants in Shirebrook is deeper than surface-level racism; it is an unconscious rejection and resistance to systemic oppression by society at large.

There is much to discuss about Shirebrook. None of it, however, need allude to a so-called 'village of the damned'; nor delve into discourse about a supposed 'invasion' or 'swamp'. Rather, recall Bright (2012); as *'a space of anecdotal fascination and reputation, an abandoned front line where time slips backwards and forwards, where nothing changes, and everything has changed. It is a space perhaps, most significantly steeped in the present absence of its own tructuated history'* (p.65). In essence, when discussing social issues – in any place – we must recognise them as multidimensional, multifaceted, and convoluted – not singular entities.

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