

Why after years living abroad I am suddenly fearful for my native North East

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North East born academic Paul Benneworth fears that many things we love about the North East are in danger of slipping away



Children playing in the shadow of the giant 253,000-ton oil tanker Esso Northumbria being built at the end of their street in Wallsend in April 1969

Coming home this summer was the first time I experienced serious homesickness as a migrant. I've lived happily in the Netherlands for seven years, and coming back home three times a year means it never really feels like we've left.

It's a big contrast with my university days, when coming back from Oxford's stuffy spires and forelock-tugging feudalism brought an upwelling of massive relief. From the moment we leave the ferry at [North Shields](#), it all feels so normal.

What triggered my homesickness was a rather innocent piece of research on social media's practical uses. Normally when [Twitter](#) hits the headlines, it's because of bullying or death threats, but I am studying its positive uses in helping people collectively create things they value.

A particular local account caught my eye, Made in Newcastle (@turnipheadpics). Its owners post photos from Tyneside from decades gone by (1960s to 1990s) and people comment on how it's changed since then.

I was fascinated by how people added details of buildings, streets and shops, and sometimes even their detailed personal memories of places. Following these discussions is a living history lesson, letting us peer through the veil of the past and learn more about the world where we grew up.

So I arranged to meet the site's organisers at the Low Lights Cafe by North Shields Fish Quay, a new community space and gallery I'd been meaning to visit since its opening. Made in Newcastle talked me through how they make it work, and we talked at length about the positive nostalgia feelings their account creates in their 17,000 followers.

Perhaps it was being back in one of my old haunts – the Fish Quay – that stimulated my own nostalgia and the inevitable homesickness. Although it's rapidly gentrifying, the Fish Quay remains recognisably a place of industry connected to the sea that so indelibly shaped my experience of growing up at the coast.

One of the other dominant features of a childhood growing up by the Tyne was the shipyards' dominance. Indeed, among photos of schools, shops and playgrounds, Made in Newcastle carries the occasional reminder of how ships literally towered over our riverside streets. Although shipbuilding declined across Europe in the last 30 years, nowhere did its fall from grace come as completely as in Britain. Callously neglected then junked by a long decade of anti-industry policy from a ideological Tory party, their economic vandalism went unchecked by a Labour opposition riven by infighting and chaos.

The North East never really recovered from this punitive deindustrialisation. The following 20 years were little more than a crude game of catch-up to build some jobs and rehabilitate heavily polluted industrial sites.

And so I fear profoundly for the North East under another period of unchecked Tory rule as Labour's recent descent into a farce of student union politics opens the door to unfettered neoconservatism.

We've seen the Tories are prepared to let southern commuters suffer endlessly so they can smash rail unions and raise private rail company profits. What happens when they apply this approach to our schools or [the NHS](#)?

How many school pupils will leave school uneducated and unemployable to finally hand our schools to faceless American corporations? How many patients will needlessly die to bring the British Medical Association to heel and allow its American donors to milk higher profits from our health services? Perhaps that's what caused my homesickness – a nostalgia for the well-functioning, efficient and social home town I left behind. With the Tories seemingly about to finally break my beloved North East, I hope Labour can quickly resuscitate a functioning Parliamentary opposition. Otherwise, we might all see our much-loved public services becoming nothing more than another much-loved nostalgic memory.