

## **Navigating deindustrialization in 1970s Britain: The closure of Bilston Steel Works and the politics of work, place, and belonging\***

This article examines the impact of industrial decline on popular constructions of selfhood and place during the 1970s through a case study of the Bilston Steel Works in the West Midlands, which closed in May 1979. Following recent work exploring deindustrialization as a process of transformation, rather than simply a discreet event that is reacted to *after* the moment of closure, the article makes use of the contemporary accounts of local television and print media to uncover the immediacy of deindustrialization as a disruptive force. While studies of deindustrialization have long identified nostalgia as a characteristic, identity-defining trope of retrospective testimonies, the approach taken in this article suggests that the nostalgic reworking of identity was already a prominent feature of everyday language in late 1970s Bilston. Long-term processes of regional economic restructuring had already begun to recast the personal politics of place. The Bilston Steel Works was the last bastion of the once dominant steel industry in the West Midlands, a feature that Bilston's steelworkers celebrated as a mark of uniqueness and pride at both an individual and community level. A consequence of the closure of the steelworks was its far-reaching social and cultural impact, with the implications for self and place complexly intertwined. The article argues that notions of community and belonging did not necessarily wane but were rather reconstructed and adapted to make sense of, and begin the process of navigating through, industrial decline.

**KEYWORDS:** Deindustrialization, selfhood, community, nostalgia, twentieth century, social history

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## Introduction

In June 1978, British Steel Corporation (BSC) announced that Bilston Steel Works (BSW) in the small industrial town of Bilston, located three miles southeast of Wolverhampton and fourteen miles northwest of Birmingham, was to close with almost immediate effect on 31 October.<sup>1</sup> At the time of the announcement, the Iron and Steel Trades Confederation (ISTC) – Britain’s largest steel union – was holding its annual conference in Scarborough; neither they, nor the workforce or local community, had been consulted on the closure notice. The conference was adjourned, and a special meeting of the ISTC’s executive committee was convened that drafted a resolution calling for a national steel strike on 6 August that was subsequently endorsed by the ISTC conference.<sup>2</sup> Immediately BSC rescinded its closure notice and entered negotiations with the ISTC and the local workforce.<sup>3</sup> Yet, the ISTC strike action had not been called in opposition to the closure per se but the decision being made without proper consultation. BSC were fully aware of this and thus their withdrawal of an immediate closure was tactical; they knew that negotiations would lead to the inevitable closure of BSW.<sup>4</sup> And close it did, partially in May 1979 and totally in July 1980 with the symbolic ‘Elisabeth’ blast furnace – the last remaining steel blast furnace in the West Midlands – unceremoniously demolished in October 1980.

To date, the closure of the BSW has received no substantive attention, something partially explained by problems of conceptualizing and periodizing deindustrialization. Firstly, the decline of the steel industry itself has received little attention in social histories of deindustrialization. The work that does exist on this subject has focused largely on: the impact of the 1980 steel strike;<sup>5</sup> political and

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<sup>1</sup> *Express and Star*, 30 June 1978.

<sup>2</sup> The National Archives: Public Records Office (TNA: PRO), Kew, BT 255/1012, ‘Telegram from ISTC General Secretary Bill Sirs to Industry Secretary Eric Varley’, 29 June 1978.

<sup>3</sup> TNA: PRO, T 370/725, ‘Treasury briefing document’, 30 June 1978.

<sup>4</sup> Geoffrey Dudley and Jeremy Richardson, *Politics and Steel in Britain, 1967-1988: The Life and Times of the British Steel Corporation* (Dartmouth, 1990), 106.

<sup>5</sup> Charlie McGuire, “‘Going for the jugular’”: The *Steelworker’s Banner* and the 1980 national steelworkers’ strike in Britain’, *Historical Studies in Industrial Relations*, 38 (2017), 97-128.

economic debates over the contested nature of steel ownership, size, and location;<sup>6</sup> or the sociological impact of the decline of steelmaking in regional heartlands such as Sheffield and north east England.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, studies of deindustrialization in Britain are frequently incorporated into debates about Thatcherism and the 1980s – something the closure of BSW predated.<sup>8</sup> Most radically, Avner Offer argued that the Thatcher government oversaw the systematic collapse of manual employment in the 1980s that swept away the economic and social stability for most people who since the 1860s had been employed in a ‘proletarian mode of production’ centred around skilled or semi-skilled manufacturing employment.<sup>9</sup> This association has led to deindustrialization being conceived of as a moment or event, rather than a longer-term process and framework through which the lived experience before, during, and after industrial change is understood and historicized. As the economic historian Jim Tomlinson has argued:

It is important to emphasize the long-term nature of this change. The 1979–82 episode was extraordinary in its speed and extent, but the process began much earlier. While the stress in

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<sup>6</sup> Geoffrey Dudley and Jeremy Richardson, ‘Steel policy in the UK: The politics of industrial decline’, in Yves Meny and Vincent Wright (eds), *The Politics of Steel: Western Europe and the Steel Industry in the Crisis Years, 1974–1984* (London, 1986), 308-368; Martin Rhodes and Vincent Wright, ‘The European steel unions and the steel crisis, 1974-84: A study in the demise of traditional unionism’, *British Journal of Political Science*, 18 (1988), 171-195; Alastair Blair, ‘The British iron and steel industry since 1945’, *Journal of European Economic History*, 26 (1997), 571-81.

<sup>7</sup> John Westergaard, Iain Noble and Alan Walker, *After Redundancy: The Experience of Economic Insecurity* (Cambridge, 1989); Huw Beynon, Ray Hudson and David Sadler, *A Tale of Two Industries: The Contraction of Coal and Steel in the North East of England* (Milton Keynes, 1991).

<sup>8</sup> Eric Hopkins, *The Rise and Decline of the English Working Classes, 1918-1990: A Social History* (London, 1991), 194-231; Offer, Avner, ‘British manual workers: From producers to consumers, c. 1950-2000’, *Contemporary British History*, 22 (2008), 537-571; Jorg Arnold, ‘“De-industrialization”: A research project on the societal history of economic change in Britain (1970-90)’, *German Historical Institute London Bulletin*, 34 (2012), 34-60; Andrew Perchard, ‘“Broken men” and “Thatcher's children”’: Memory and legacy in Scotland's coalfields’, *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 84 (2013), 78-98; Michael Kitson and Jonathan Michie, ‘The de-industrial revolution: The rise and fall of UK manufacturing, 1870-2010’, in Roderick Floud, et al. (eds), *The Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain, vol. II: 1870 to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 2014), 302-329.

<sup>9</sup> Offer, ‘British manual workers’, 546.

the literature on the radical effects of the Thatcher period is understandable, it gives a very misleading picture of the chronology and, by implication, the processes at work.<sup>10</sup>

Elsewhere, David Swift and Jim Phillips et al. have recently shown the analytical utility of re-casting deindustrialization as a long-term metanarrative process, in their respective discussion of attitudes to immigration in West Yorkshire and Scottish political culture during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>11</sup> Here, there has been a historiographical shift away from themes of loss, trauma, and nostalgia that have dominated the study of deindustrialization.<sup>12</sup> What instead comes to the fore is the very different contexts in which the process of deindustrialization took place, and the varying extent to which its effects were offset over the post-war period. As Pete Hodson has recently stressed, this requires a foregrounding of the lived social experience rather than what he terms ‘the de-industrial aesthetics’.<sup>13</sup>

Building on these interventions casting deindustrialization as a long-term process, this article explores how the closure of BSW represented a challenge to Bilstonians because the steelworks and its industrial culture had long been central to local people’s construction of a sense of self and place. In particular, this article uses the case-study of Bilston to move beyond seeing place as simply contextual and to stress how deindustrialization was a process of change to the emotional, social, and personal connections that allow people to ‘do’ and ‘be in’ place.<sup>14</sup> The article argues that there was

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<sup>10</sup> Jim Tomlinson, ‘De-industrialization not decline: A new meta-narrative for post-war British history’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 27 (2016), 87.

<sup>11</sup> David Swift, ‘Competition or culture? Anti-migrant hostility and industrial decline: the case of West Yorkshire, 1962–1981’, *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* (2019), 1-17; Jim Phillips et al., ‘Deindustrialization, the Linwood car plant and Scotland’s political divergence from England in the 1960s and 1970s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 30 (2019), 399-423.

<sup>12</sup> As discussed in Tim Strangleman and James Rhodes, ‘The “new” sociology of deindustrialization? Understanding industrial change’, *Sociology Compass*, 8 (2014), 411-421. See also Steven High, Lachlan MacKinnon and Andrew Perchard (eds), *The Deindustrialized World: Confronting Ruination in Postindustrial Places* (Vancouver, 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Pete Hodson, ‘Titanic struggle: Memory, heritage and shipyard deindustrialization in Belfast’, *History Workshop Journal*, 87 (2019), 224.

<sup>14</sup> Julia Bennett, ‘Doing belonging: a sociological study of belonging in place as the outcome of social practice’, PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 2013, 25-58.

not so much a simple loss of these connections, but rather that industrial change represented a disruption to the stability of both work *and* place, and the construction of collective and individual identities; the onset of deindustrialization remade these connections in a manner that was neither homogenous nor uniform.

This approach seeks to capture personal experience within the immediacy of deindustrialization, making use of press comments and letters to the editors in local newspapers, such as the Wolverhampton-based *Express & Star* and the Bilston and Wolverhampton edition of BSC's in-house journal *Steel News*, as well as archived footage from ATV – ITV's Midlands television channel – digitized by the Media Archive for Central England (MACE). Both source types have already shown their value for uncovering place-based personal narratives in important work on the politics of race and immigration in nearby Smethwick and Wolverhampton.<sup>15</sup> Together these sources capture something close to a vernacular language which, as Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite has argued about sociological personal testimony, 'offer a window into the repertoires, ideas, and images people drew on in giving an account of themselves and their society' at the historical moment of inquiry.<sup>16</sup> Through these sources we can heed Jorg Arnold's call for historians to 'recapture the transformation [of deindustrialization] in its open-endedness' while also triangulating and contextualising the recollection effect inherent in oral history testimony of the closure of BSW.<sup>17</sup>

The article begins by exploring how BSW's workplace culture was seen as fostering a uniqueness that kept it – and the town of Bilston more generally – apart from the industrial decline that was rapidly reshaping the Black Country region by the 1970s. It then turns to explore how from the closure announcement in June 1978 workers began to reinterpret these engrained assumptions around the distinctiveness of work and place, aligning the town more closely with broader regional

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<sup>15</sup> George Kassimeris and Leonie Jackson, 'Negotiating race and religion in the West Midlands: narratives of inclusion and exclusion during the 1967–69 Wolverhampton bus workers' turban dispute', *Contemporary British History*, 31 (2017), 343-365; Rachel Yemm, 'Immigration, race and local media: Smethwick and the 1964 general election', *Contemporary British History*, 33 (2019), 98-122.

<sup>16</sup> Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class, Politics and the Decline of Deference in England, 1968-2000* (Oxford, 2018), 12-13.

<sup>17</sup> Jorg Arnold, "De-industrialization", 43.

narratives of decline. The third and final substantive section addresses how longstanding dispositions became blurred and reworked by nostalgia, creating a particular cultural memory of place from as early as 1979 that has residual resonance to this day. The article concludes that notions of community and belonging, which were given meaning and reinforced by the culture of industrial workplaces such as BSW, did not necessarily wane as these workplaces closed, but were rather reconstructed, adapted, and rationalized through the state of flux deindustrialization wrought.<sup>18</sup>

### **The construction of Bilston's industrial culture**

By the turn of the 1970s Bilston had been a centre of metal production for over two hundred years.<sup>19</sup> As late as 1976, 63 per cent of Bilstonians were still employed in metal-based manufacturing, including 71 per cent of the town's male workers. Within the wider West Midlands, only 39.5 per cent were employed in metal-based manufacturing, with the picture much starker on a national level: only 16 per cent nationally were employed in the sector in 1976. Bilston's industrial makeup was therefore something of an anomaly when set against regional and national trends. Further reinforcing Bilston's economic idiosyncrasy, service employment in the town was around 25 per cent, well below the national average of 60 per cent.<sup>20</sup> The outstanding feature of Bilston's economy was the enduring dominance of, and dependence on, a narrow range of highly interdependent metal-based manufacturing industries. Bilston was not experiencing what Eric Hopkins has called the 'two distinct movements' in the British economy during this period: 'one away from the old staples and into the

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<sup>18</sup> On the continual reconstruction of identity in the face of social and cultural change across the post-war period more generally see Jon Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me? The Search for Community in Post-War England* (Oxford, 2019).

<sup>19</sup> Wolverhampton City Archives (WCA), Wolverhampton, Records of the British Steel Corporation (1967-1980), DB-31/3/1/2/2, 'Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works', March 1978, 16.

<sup>20</sup> WCA, Local Studies Library Collection, LS/LB672/7, 'Draft report on the redevelopment of the Bilston Steelworks site', January 1980, para. 4.2.1.

new industries, and the other into the service or tertiary sector'.<sup>21</sup> In fact by the end of the 1970s, BSW was still one of five major employers who between them provided almost half of Bilston's employment, something Wolverhampton Borough Council noted as 'a peculiar feature of the Bilston area'.<sup>22</sup> BSW alone constituted 10 per cent of Bilston's total employment making BSW the largest single employer in the town, leading ATV reporter John McLeod to describe it as the 'heart of the community'.<sup>23</sup> Stefan Ramsden's study of Beverley in East Yorkshire has suggested the important role local industry played in fostering 'local patriotism' in a small town, creating a sense of place around steady employment that secured kinship networks and long-term friendships.<sup>24</sup>

Yet a picture of 'occupational community' in Bilston was not so clear-cut. Although 96 per cent of the BSW workforce was drawn from within five miles of the plant by 1978, only a quarter of those came from Bilston itself, with a further 37 per cent from the neighbouring Wolverhampton area.<sup>25</sup> This still left a significant minority who were recruited from a wider catchment area, mainly an assortment of neighbouring Black Country industrial towns. As Trevor Griffiths has discussed, the working classes had journeyed significant distances to work since the late nineteenth century, often dividing families and weakening local occupational association.<sup>26</sup> In an area with well-connected transport links like the Black Country, it is no surprise to see a workforce drawn from across the conurbation. In fact, Wolverhampton Borough Council said that it was 'traditional' of the area to draw a workforce from at least a five-mile radius.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>21</sup> Hopkins, *The Rise*, 122.

<sup>22</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, 'Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works', March 1978, Appendix 15, para. 2.5.

<sup>23</sup> Media Archive for Central England (MACE), University of Lincoln, *ATV Today*, 'A Sad Day For Bilston', first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>24</sup> Stefan Ramsden, 'The role of the industrial workplace in working-class community, 1945-1980', *Family & Community History*, 19 (2016), 38-43.

<sup>25</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, 'Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works', March 1978, Appendix 10.

<sup>26</sup> Trevor Griffiths, *The Lancashire Working Classes c.1880-1930* (Oxford, 2001), 133-138.

<sup>27</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, 'Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works', March 1978, Appendix 15, para. 5.3.

There is some suggestion that this may have been a fairly recent pattern for BSW. In 1978 the company commented that while historically employees had been recruited from the ‘immediate environment ... of more recent years the catchment area has been widened considerably’.<sup>28</sup> With the economic decline of West Midlands metal industries during the 1970s, workers from further afield were being drawn to BSW in search of work. This was coupled with the fact that Bilston faced a continuous flow of outward migration. Between 1971 and 1976, 11,017 metal-based jobs were lost in the Wolverhampton Borough with most of these losses concentrated in the Bilston area. This loss of employment disproportionately impacted men with nearly 8,000 – or 72 per cent – of the lost metal-based jobs being previously done by men. Over the same period, new male employment only increased by 2,228 whereas female employment increased by 5,192 owing largely to the growth of service sector employment, mostly in the public sector.<sup>29</sup>

Despite ‘traditional’ employment patterns changing around both the town of Bilston and wider Wolverhampton area, BSW was still seen as the bastion of Bilston’s metal-based industry as late as 1978, employing 2,300 workers. BSW workers were not unaware of this. Many celebrated not being swept up in the West Midlands industrial decline as a mark of their distinctive attributes. For some, the importance of this could not be understated. Melting shop worker Eric Cotterill told *Steel News* that he believed the loss of metal-making across Wolverhampton was something that would not affect BSW if ‘every single employee makes a contribution’.<sup>30</sup> Hard work – and taking pride in it – was the answer to sweeping economic change, with workers sure of their own ability to deliver productivity growth. From this, workers self-fashioned a reputation for being hard-working, skilled craftsmen that produced high quality goods.<sup>31</sup> For some, this was something innate and exclusive with crane operator Derek Hayward claiming in 1976 that cranemen were ‘born not made. They are a

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<sup>28</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, ‘Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works’, March 1978, 16.

<sup>29</sup> WCA, LS/LB672/7, ‘Draft report on the redevelopment of the Bilston Steelworks site’, January 1980, para. 4.2.2.

<sup>30</sup> *Steel News. Bilston, Wolverhampton & Birchley Works edition*, 2 May 1975.

<sup>31</sup> *Steel News. Bilston, Wolverhampton & Birchley Works edition*, October 1976.



“special breed”.<sup>32</sup> Similarly, in a 1977 interview with ATV, one blastfurnaceman took pride in the fact that he and his fellow workers were ‘the last of ‘em, what you’d call a “breed”’.<sup>33</sup> Alongside pride, there was also an awkward sense of guilt for many about the relative security they felt at BSW. They were conscious of the broader industrial change happening around them and laced a recognition of their uniqueness with a remembrance that this ‘breed’ had, until very recently, been much more widespread across the region.

Even BSW management cultivated this aura of distinctiveness. A 1978 report on the future of the plant spoke glowingly of the workforce’s longstanding interest in BSW being an efficient and competitive plant. The report put this workplace culture down to the plant’s relatively small workforce drawn from the local areas and ‘the Staffordshire workman’s attitude generally’.<sup>34</sup> Above all, this was an attitude that celebrated loyalty to the plant, something that took on various guises but remained a common motif throughout the 1970s. This sensibility was perhaps heightened by the fact that the ‘Elisabeth’ blast furnace – built in 1954 as part of a major redevelopment of BSW – was the last remaining blast furnace in the West Midlands. In 1975 John Adams suggested workers had every reason to be proud of ‘Elisabeth’ as it was ‘within the top three [most productive blast furnaces] in the UK’.<sup>35</sup> One blastfurnacemen went as far as to that ‘I probably worry about her [the blast furnace] more than my own family at times. I’ve put her before my wife at times. We all have on the blast furnace end’.<sup>36</sup> It was traditional within the Midlands steel industry to name blast furnaces after women, something that fostered a certain emotive connection to the labour process amongst blastfurnacemen; ‘Elisabeth’ was seemingly dependent on male provision and protection in order to

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<sup>32</sup> *Steel News. Bilston, Wolverhampton & Birchley Works edition*, February 1976.

<sup>33</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Bilston Blast Furnace’, first broadcast on 11 July 1977, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-11071977-bilston-blast-furnace>.

<sup>34</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, ‘Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works’, March 1978, 16.

<sup>35</sup> *Steel News. Bilston, Wolverhampton & Birchley Works edition*, 18 May 1975.

<sup>36</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Bilston Blast Furnace’, first broadcast on 11 July 1977, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-11071977-bilston-blast-furnace>.

function. Yet, this shopfloor culture also filtered down from what ISTC branch secretary Reg Turley described as the ‘loyalty and cooperation’ between workers and management.<sup>37</sup>

An interesting example of this culture was evident when BSW blastfurnacemen refused to go on strike – against the view of the National Union of Blastfurnacemen – in 1975 in support of a pay dispute at the Llanwern steelworks in Wales.<sup>38</sup> Arguments against the strike played on BSW’s distinctiveness and individuality as a means to preserve continuity of production, as one blastfurnaceman told ATV at the time: ‘I always reckon to tell ‘em: let ‘em settle their own differences, we’ll settle ours. And that’s all there is. And besides, we come out on strike, what do we get? We get sweet bugger all!’.<sup>39</sup> This was a view met with approving nods from those watching the interview. Even those sympathetic to strike action could only rationalize the case through local knowledge, to the point where views spoke more to conditions at Bilston than at Llanwern. As one BSW blastfurnaceman said: ‘I’ve never seen them [the Llanwern blast furnaces], but I know what they’re like here. These blokes are worth another £20 a week easily. And when they say £70 a week and £80 a week, and £90, it’s not 40 hours, you know? It’s 55.5!’.<sup>40</sup>

Bilston’s apparent uniqueness was seen by non-BSW steelworkers as egotistical, with John Vincent recalling how when BSW workers went on courses, steelworkers from other plants ‘used to say we were arrogant at Bilston because we considered ourselves to be the best’. For Vincent, he was sure that this was an accurate representation because ‘we were trained the best. There was no lad in the melting shop or on the blast furnace who went on without his City and Guilds’.<sup>41</sup> Although 73 per cent of BSW employees were male industrial grade, most of these were in unskilled or semi-skilled

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<sup>37</sup> *Express and Star*, 16 January 1976.

<sup>38</sup> *Steel News. Bilston, Wolverhampton and Birchley edition*, 19 September 1975.

<sup>39</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Steel Industry’, first broadcast on 18 September 1975, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-18091975-steel-industry>.

<sup>40</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Steel Industry’, first broadcast on 18 September 1975, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-18091975-steel-industry>.

<sup>41</sup> *In the Shadow of Elisabeth (ITSOE)*, ‘We were here once’, 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 13.40-13.59 mins.

employment; only 24 per cent were skilled tradesmen working in the rolling mill or melting shop.<sup>42</sup> But amongst the BSW workforce, ‘skill’ was often understood in rather subjective terms. Finishing end manager David Sparks argued that *all* workers developed ‘great experience and skill’ through the works rotational apprenticeship system.<sup>43</sup> After their apprenticeships many remained in the same division for several years; skills were therefore developed at BSW that were highly specific and personal. As Ross McKibbin has pointed out, the organizational structure of English steelworks since the early twentieth century has consistently included numerous different small shops and departments, fragmenting employment and fostering a ‘jaunty and attractive individualism’ amongst workers.<sup>44</sup> Indeed, a poster in the May 1956 ISTC union’s *Man and Metal* journal declaring steelmaking ‘one man and his job’ encapsulates what Mike Savage has termed the ‘rugged individualism’ of male manual work cultures.<sup>45</sup>

This workplace individualism was not necessarily incompatible with constructions of wider sense of belonging or collective value.<sup>46</sup> John Vincent, who stated he received ‘self-satisfaction from the job’ in and of itself while also believing ‘you’d done something, you’d contributed’, evoked the individualistic and communitarian nature of work, something he clearly saw as complimentary rather than contradictory.<sup>47</sup> As labour historian Arthur McIvor has suggested, manual workers often felt that their jobs simultaneously ‘belonged to them and that they were part of a community’.<sup>48</sup> For Vincent, it

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<sup>42</sup> WCA, British Steel and Springvale Co-operative Social Club (1945-2007), DW-173/2/2, ‘The future of Bilston Steel Works: An initial appraisal (Report by University of Aston Joint Unit for Research on the Urban Environment)’, 22 August 1978, 22.

<sup>43</sup> *Steel News. Bilston, Wolverhampton & Birchley Works edition*, 29 August 1975.

<sup>44</sup> Ross McKibbin, ‘Why was there no Marxism in Great Britain?’, *The English Historical Review*, 99 (1984), 299-301.

<sup>45</sup> Modern Records Centre (MRC), University of Warwick, Records of the ISTC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/26, *Man and Metal*, May 1956, 20. On the ‘rugged individualism’ of post-war workplace culture see Mike Savage, ‘Sociology, class and male manual work cultures’ in John McIlroy et al. (eds), *British Trade Unions and Industrial Politics. The High Tide of Trade Unionism, 1964-79* (Aldershot, 1999), 23-42.

<sup>46</sup> Savage, ‘Sociology’; Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*, 135-163.

<sup>47</sup> *ITSOE*, ‘We were here once’, 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 13.21-13.39 mins.

<sup>48</sup> Arthur McIvor, *Working Lives. Work in Britain Since 1945* (Basingstoke, 2013), 61.

was the ability to receive satisfaction from both the productive nature of the work as well as its meaning for self-value that explains why people wanted to remain at BSW for their entire working lives.

When interviewed in 1979, melting shop worker Harold Ellwell had worked at BSW for forty-one years and was adamant he had never had any desire to work anywhere else.<sup>49</sup> Ellwood was not unique in this; by March 1978 more than half the industrial workforce had been at BSW over ten years.<sup>50</sup> When fourteen rolling mill workers retired in October 1976, they collectively had 452 years' service between them – an average of thirty-two years each.<sup>51</sup> As a result, Rob and Linda Allen – a married couple who met at BSW – recalled a typical experience of how 'you always knew someone of working age who worked the Steel Works' and would always see someone in Bilston you knew around the change of shift.<sup>52</sup> This naturally led to a general familiarity and amiability amongst the workforce. Typical of this was the importance of workplace humour, sometimes often from a worker's very first day. For Rob Allen turning up on his first day dressed in a clean white shirt, a belt instead of string to keep his trousers up and proper laces rather than bits of wire in his boots led to him only being mocked for being 'a right Bobby Dazzler'. From that moment he was referred to as 'Dazzler' for his entire working life.<sup>53</sup> As McKibbin has observed of the inter-war period, these workplace interactions often 'made tolerable the boredom and stress of work'.<sup>54</sup> Indeed, blast furnace engineer Andrew Simpson often noted in his work diary the routineness of his work and how on one day in February 1973 he 'messed about doing very little' which left him 'bored to tears most of the

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<sup>49</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'A Sad Day For Bilston', first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>50</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, 'Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works', March 1978, Appendix 13.

<sup>51</sup> *Steel News. Sheffield division*, 15 October 1976.

<sup>52</sup> *ITSOE*, 'We were here once', 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 3.24-3.42 mins.

<sup>53</sup> *ITSOE*, 'We were here once', 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 8.46-9.21 mins.

<sup>54</sup> Ross McKibbin, *Classes and Cultures: England 1918-1951* (Oxford, 1998), 129. See also Helen Smith, *Masculinity, Class and Same-Sex Desire in Industrial England, 1895-1957* (Basingstoke, 2015).

time'.<sup>55</sup> This boredom led some workers to find alternative ways to occupy their time, for example Dick Westwood ran an intensive care unit for birds damaged by the heat from the blast furnace.<sup>56</sup>

While automation may have made steelmaking more boring and changed the relationship between worker and craft, the industry was still fraught with danger. At BSW, stories of slag ladles exploding and workers being gassed by blast furnace leaks were frequent.<sup>57</sup> An ATV reporter who visited BSW in 1977 claimed that BSW's working conditions 'makes a car production line look like an hospital operating theatre'.<sup>58</sup> Workers often saw the hazardous working environment as ordinary, and part of the idiosyncrasy that made BSW unique. Andrea Hickey said the lack of safety equipment on 'Elisabeth' and the amount of flames and sparks one would see walking around BSW was 'unbelievable' but just 'part and parcel of the Steel Works'.<sup>59</sup> Likewise, a blastfurnaceman in a 1977 ATV interview said that although the work was hot and dirty he was content with the fact that 'you get used to it after a time, it's a matter of course'.<sup>60</sup> Colin Simkiss concurred in 1976, commenting that BSW was 'hot, dirty and rough. But I love this place'.<sup>61</sup>

Tolerating these working conditions and the risk that came with it was part of a wider culture of working-class masculinity. In order to get through a shift on the blast furnace, a worker explained

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<sup>55</sup> Bilston Iron & Steelworks – A Retrospective, 'Andrew Simpson's unpublished work diary, 2 February 1973', <http://britishsteelbilston.com/diary/jan-mar-1973/>, accessed on 17 May 2018.

<sup>56</sup> *Steelworks News. Bilston and Wolverhampton edition*, 7 September 1978.

<sup>57</sup> See Bilston Iron & Steelworks – A Retrospective, 'Andrew Simpson's unpublished work diary, 11 July 1973', <http://britishsteelbilston.com/diary/jan-mar-1973/>, accessed on 17 May 2018; MACE, *ATV Today*, 'A Sad Day For Bilston', first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>); *ITSOE*, 'We were here once', 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 5.11-5.31 mins.

<sup>58</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'Bilston Blast Furnace', first broadcast on 11 July 1977, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-11071977-bilston-blast-furnace>.

<sup>59</sup> *ITSOE*, 'We were here once', 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 4.44-5.10 mins.

<sup>60</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'Bilston Blast Furnace', first broadcast on 11 July 1977, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-11071977-bilston-blast-furnace>.

<sup>61</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 22 January 1976.

to ATV that ‘you muck about and look forward to getting a good drink to cool down’.<sup>62</sup> During summer months, when temperatures could reach one hundred and fifty degrees Fahrenheit, workers often lived during their shift on a diet of salt tablets and heavy drinking, with foremen sometimes employing an elderly worker exclusively to get beer from the canteen.<sup>63</sup> But expressions of ‘machismo’ attitudes in the industrial workplace could be emasculating.<sup>64</sup> In 1979, a retired BSW worker spoke of how he began working at BSW disposing of ironstone and other ‘muck’ in an iron barrel that in total weighed twenty-two-and-a-half hundredweight. He evocatively said that if he was asked to put that on a horse and cart and take it up to Bilston town hall he would be ‘put in jail for cruelty’.<sup>65</sup> For this retired worker, the actively dangerous conditions were more than emasculating – they were dehumanising.

Through the tensions of expressing a ‘machismo’ attitude in the face of dangerous working conditions, there was still the creation of bonds of loyalty and familiarity. John Vincent explained how during his first two years working at BSW he and other single males worked Christmas Day ‘because we let married men with children have Christmas. Us single blokes weren’t bothered, and we went to work. That’s how it was: give and take, people looked after one another.’<sup>66</sup> In the oral history interviews, such remembrances are captured through a widely used metaphor of family.<sup>67</sup> Oral historian John Kirk, who also found the frequent deployment of the family metaphor amongst railway workers in north west England, suggests its use was in part a ‘cognitive device, but also one grounded

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<sup>62</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Bilston Blast Furnace’, first broadcast on 11 July 1977, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-11071977-bilston-blast-furnace>.

<sup>63</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘A Sad Day For Bilston’, first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>64</sup> Ronnie Johnston and Arthur McIvor, ‘Dangerous work, hard men and broken bodies: Masculinity in the Clydeside heavy industries, c. 1930-1970s’, *Labour History Review*, 69 (2004), 135-151.

<sup>65</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘A Sad Day For Bilston’, first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>66</sup> *ITSOE*, ‘We were here once’, 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 1.36-2.00 mins.

<sup>67</sup> *ITSOE*, ‘We were here once’, 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 0.56-1.24 mins, 1.26-1.37 mins, 2.25-2.32 mins.

in an emotional response to change and continuity'.<sup>68</sup> In Bilston, former steelworkers recalled the family atmosphere as a lamentation on the loss of the regularity, commonality, and self-respect they associated with their workplace rather than simply a nostalgic juxtaposition of the 'good jobs' of the past with the 'poor jobs' of now.<sup>69</sup>

By the mid-1970s, BSW was as an island of an older economic order not only nationally and the wider Black Country but within Bilston itself. Yet BSW remained the cornerstone of Bilston's 'local patriotism' and sense of place, built on a longstanding familiarity, commonality, and an increasingly marked vernacular understanding of its distinctiveness in the face of wider industrial change. Indeed, for a BSW workforce increasingly drawn from across the Black Country conurbation, Bilston represented the final vestige of a *specific* industrial culture. But this was to change dramatically.

### **Adjusting to new realities in late 1970s Bilston**

In August 1976, work relining the 'Elisabeth' blast furnace at a cost of £1.6 million was completed, something BSW general manager George Blakeley said would ensure ironmaking at BSW for 'at least another five years' which he was confident would 'dispel rumours of the doomwatchers'.<sup>70</sup> Moreover, BSC Chairman Charles Villiers was to make what would turn out to be an infamous visit to BSW in November 1976. During this visit, mechanical craftsman Ted Wall asked Villiers what he considered BSW's future role to be within BSC. Villiers replied 'I promise you this. The Corporation is at Bilston to stay'.<sup>71</sup> Less than a year later, on the 1 October 1977, the 'Elisabeth' blast furnace was mothballed. BSC insisted the mothballing would last for six months or the duration of the trade recession in the steel industry. In actuality, the blast furnace was never to be relit. What made the decision to mothball

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<sup>68</sup> John Kirk, 'Coming to the end of the line? Identity, work and structures of feeling', *Oral History*, 36 (2008), 51.

<sup>69</sup> Strangleman and Rhodes, 'The "new" sociology', 417.

<sup>70</sup> *Steel News. Bilston, Wolverhampton & Birchley Works edition*, September 1976.

<sup>71</sup> *Steel News. BSC Sheffield Division*, 10 December 1976.

most jarring is that BSW had been weathering the storm of the trade recession and profitability only slipped into the red after ‘Elisabeth’ was mothballed.<sup>72</sup>

Retrospectively, ISTC General Secretary Bill Sirs called the decision to mothball the ‘Elisabeth’ blast furnace ‘one of the dirtiest tricks ever ... played on us’ and strongly believed that BSC never intended for ‘Elisabeth’ to be brought back into operation.<sup>73</sup> Sirs’ conviction of BSC’s ultimate intentions was not unwarranted; the UK government and BSC had been firmly against the long-term continuation of the open-hearth steelmaking technology used at Bilston since 1975.<sup>74</sup> Indeed, in November 1977, only a month after mothballing, government briefings began to bracket BSW with ‘high-cost’ steelworks despite being the only profitable plant within that category.<sup>75</sup> The week after these briefings were discussed, Villiers wrote to Prime Minister Jim Callaghan stating that ‘old, high-cost plants do have the smell of death about them’ and the objective now was to ‘take the workforce with us’ on this belief.<sup>76</sup>

BSW workers had an enduring belief in the viability of BSW; an identity had been constructed out of BSW’s distinctiveness within the regional economy. As such, the Join Union Action Committee, chaired by Dennis Turner, launched a campaign that was focused firmly on ensuring the plant’s survival not on the level of compensation to be won by accepting closure.<sup>77</sup> The longing to keep BSW open at all costs was handled in a remarkably non-ideological way. The long history of being a privately-run plant led the local ISTC branch to state that ‘if the worst came to the worst and it meant saving jobs, we would not oppose a private takeover’.<sup>78</sup> Future economic viability of BSW was central, bringing to the fore the plant’s profitability that hinged on the productive

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<sup>72</sup> WCA, DW-173/2/2, ‘The future of Bilston Steel Works: An initial appraisal (Report by University of Aston Joint Unit for Research on the Urban Environment)’, 22 August 1978, 8.

<sup>73</sup> Bill Sirs, *Hard Labour* (London, 1985), 67.

<sup>74</sup> TNA: PRO, T 370/723, ‘Draft paper on steel closures by Lord Beswick’, 24 July 1975.

<sup>75</sup> TNA: PRO, PREM16/1772, ‘High-cost steelmaking plants briefings’, 11 and 14 November 1977.

<sup>76</sup> TNA: PRO, PREM16/1772, ‘Letter from Charles Villiers to the Prime Minister Jim Callaghan’, 22 November 1977.

<sup>77</sup> Frank Reeves and Mel Chevannes, *Real Labour. The Biography of Dennis Turner* (Wolverhampton, 2014), 57.

<sup>78</sup> *Express and Star*, 17 October 1978.



capacity of the ‘Elisabeth’ blast furnace. Unsurprisingly, the mothballing decision generated significant anguish amongst the workforce. Indeed, only three months before the mothballing, a blastfurnaceman told ATV that ‘I don’t know what we’d do if we were left without her. There would be a lot of broken hearts around the blast furnace’.<sup>79</sup> Here, the gendered construction of the relationship between a blastfurnaceman and his site of work was evoked through the perceived loss of the patriarchal paternalistic connection he had to the blast furnace. It is clear this worker did not expect this ‘heartbreak’ to be realized so soon. As late as September 1978 Graham Fazey – chairman of the local ISTC Committee – complained forcefully to Bill Sirs that BSW management had not maintained the blast furnace during its supposed temporary mothballing to a standard that would make relighting ‘a simple and functional operation’. Moreover, BSW management would not provide union representatives with ‘any statement on the blast furnace, whatsoever’.<sup>80</sup>

What took hold of the workforce after the mothballing was confusion, doubt and the seeds of distrust. Indicative of the situation, the *Express & Star* carried a headline ‘Works escapes steel axe plan’ on 20 January 1978 after an ISTC official said that there was no reference to closing BSW in an upcoming Select Committee on Nationalized Industries report,<sup>81</sup> only for rumours of 400-500 job cuts to circulate in the local press in early February 1978. Such a situation was described by the workforce as ‘devious’ and an attempt to close BSW ‘by back door methods’.<sup>82</sup> Language of ‘betrayal’, ‘cheating’ and the use of ‘dirty tactics’ became widespread. The epitome of this breakdown of trust between management and workers came in January 1979 when 500 workers sought to repair and recommission a damaged furnace only to be threatened with ‘summary dismissal for gross misconduct’.<sup>83</sup> The *Sandwell Evening Mail* complained in an editorial in November 1978 that since the blast furnace’s mothballing, workers had been ‘working night shifts and weekends without

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<sup>79</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Bilston Blast Furnace’, first broadcast on 11 July 1977, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-11071977-bilston-blast-furnace>.

<sup>80</sup> WCA, DW-173/1/2, ‘Letter from Graham Fazey to Bill Sirs’, 13 September 1978.

<sup>81</sup> *Express and Star*, 18 January 1978; *Steel News. Sheffield Division*, 20 January 1978.

<sup>82</sup> *Express and Star*, 7 February 1978; *Express and Star*, 8 February 1978.

<sup>83</sup> MRC, Records of BSC, MSS.365/BSC/56, ‘Draft letter to employees at Bilston’, 31 January 1979.

producing anything for more than a year' yet cautioned not to 'blame the workers' who were 'angry and worried'.<sup>84</sup> A rather tongue-in-cheek cartoon accompanying the editorial captures the mood a year on from the mothballing.

**[Figure 1 here: Sandwell Evening Mail cartoon of the mothballed blast furnace, 8 November 1978.]**

This anger and worry spilled over into relations within the BSW workplaces. Harold Elwell claimed in 1979 that the confusion of the previous two years was 'killing the spirit of the men' and there was 'not the same comradeship and team spirit there was in the old days'.<sup>85</sup> Indeed, one former worker recalled how Bilston's fabled family spirit 'deteriorated [in] the last couple of years'.<sup>86</sup> A sense of what had long kept Bilston apart from both local and national level change began to evaporate into a more common 1970s experience of post-war conceptions of a 'shared future' breaking down.<sup>87</sup> Melting shop worker Bryan Simkiss when asked about the campaign against closure in early 1979 was adamant it was a lost cause as he was sure the closure would come in the 'pretty near future'.<sup>88</sup> Workers radically adjusted to a sense of inevitability. As local ISTC official Jack Gavin lamented in an article for the ISTC journal *Man and Metal* that 'it is sad that the odds are so heavily stacked against continuation when a capable workforce is to be disbanded'.<sup>89</sup>

What was at stake for Bilston's identity, and the centrality of the steelworks to that future, came into sharp focus. When BSW escaped inclusion in the government's 1975 steel closure

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<sup>84</sup> *Sandwell Evening Mail*, 8 November 1978.

<sup>85</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'A Sad Day For Bilston', first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>86</sup> *ITSOE*, 'We were here once', 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 2.11-2.24 mins.

<sup>87</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'The people's history and the politics of everyday life since 1945', in John Arnold et al. (eds), *History After Hobsbawm: Writing the Past for the Twenty-First Century* (Oxford, 2017), 272-291.

<sup>88</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'A Sad Day For Bilston', first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>89</sup> MRC, ISTC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/31, *Man and Metal*, 'Fifteen years in the Black Country by Jack Gavin', March 1979, 121.

programme, one letter to the *Express & Star* declared the news was ‘particularly satisfying ... [and] doubly gratifying during this chilling period of economic and industrial recession’ while optimistically seeing it as a ‘significant portent for an improvement in the present depressing situation’.<sup>90</sup> But in March 1978 the Wolverhampton Borough Council warned BSC that ‘a large proportion of the potential unemployment which could arise from closure would be in those groups which already dominate the unemployment figures’ and ‘it is unlikely that suitable alternative employment will be available in the area, particular for those with skills found only in steelmaking’.<sup>91</sup> The Wolverhampton & Bilston Trades Council warned the Department of Industry that this lack of employment in Bilston would lead to ‘despondency, and ultimately unrest that could terminate in more vandalism, muggings and violence’.<sup>92</sup> Although an extremely pessimistic outlook, albeit not unusual for the time, the concern here was that without viable industrial jobs, Bilston’s social cohesion would be compromised.<sup>93</sup>

As early as 1978, the temporal meaning of BSW within Bilston was beginning to shift. BSW was already being internalized in historic terms, and its locally celebrated distinctiveness was believed to be completely misunderstood by local industrial and political authorities. William Garner rather sarcastically opined in a letter to the *Express & Star* that ‘surely it isn’t necessary to teach these eminent people that old doesn’t necessarily mean obsolete or incapable of being viable’. For Garner, Bilston was being ‘stripped of its steelmaking merely to feed a cash consuming monster [BSC]’ and they were doing so through the ‘industrial “rape” of our heritage’.<sup>94</sup> Similarly, J. Deary angrily argued that Wolverhampton Council ‘does not want industry in the town’ and is instead concerned with creating a garden city while ‘this town is dying’. His letter concluded that ‘if Bilston Steelworks

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<sup>90</sup>*Express and Star*, ‘Letter from Ken Gretton’, 22 January 1975.

<sup>91</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, ‘Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works’, March 1978, Appendix 15, para. 4.5, 5.1.

<sup>92</sup> TNA: PRO, BT 255/1012, ‘Letter from Wolverhampton & Bilston Trades Council to Business Secretary Eric Varley’, 21 November 1978.

<sup>93</sup> Stuart Hall et al., *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (London, 1978).

<sup>94</sup>*Express and Star*, ‘Letter from William Garner’. 19 November 1978.

closes, it will be a blow from which Midland industry may never recover'.<sup>95</sup> BSW's distinctiveness was important not only to Bilston but also to the wider Black Country region.

On this assumption, the Joint Union Action Committee was successful in mobilising a 'day of demonstration' on 11 September 1978 made up of industrial workers from across the region, who opposed the closure of BSW in both its own terms but also the wider threat to job prospects in the Midlands.<sup>96</sup> This is not to say that some did not have a more parochial view of what was at stake. 71 BSW workers signed a statement saying they 'abhor the idea of other men in other jobs and other firms going on strike to support our claim for employment or adequate compensation'.<sup>97</sup> This was not a new attitude – nor an unusual one – amongst BSW workers as we saw with the case of Llanwern in 1975. But however workers conceived of a sense of place, the impending closure was a threat to it.

The final acceptance of closure was secured in May 1979 when redundancy payments were agreed averaging £7,000, with some skilled workers receiving up to £22,000.<sup>98</sup> While the ISTC played its part securing the highest possible redundancy payments, its reluctance was evident. ISTC branch secretary Graham Fazey was adamant redundancy payments were nothing more than 'cheap bribes for our jobs' and a 'devious ploy'. Moreover, Fazey suggested that the approach taken by BSC was in effect dehumanising the workers by believing that 'throwing a few handfuls of corn, Bilston would come tumbling into their pigeon loft'. Fazey believed BSC were forgetting that they were 'dealing with people not pigeons'.<sup>99</sup> Bill Sirs wrote to BSC Chief Executive Bob Scholey in 1979 criticising high redundancy payments as 'buying off' sustained political and industrial action. In the case of BSW, Sirs believed that the workforce was actually 'determined to protect its future, and money is not the answer'.<sup>100</sup> In his 1985 autobiography, Sirs expressed things rather differently suggesting: 'how can you get workers, many of them in their fifties, some of them in debt, others needing a new car or

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<sup>95</sup> *Express and Star*, 'Letter from J. Deary', 16 September 1978.

<sup>96</sup> WCA, DW-173/1/3, 'Draft letter from Dennis Turner to Wolverhampton trade union branches', August 1978.

<sup>97</sup> *Express and Star*, 3 September 1978.

<sup>98</sup> TNA: PRO, BT 255/1012, 'Bilston early closure agreement', 1 May 1979.

<sup>99</sup> WCA, DW-173/1/2, 'Letter from Graham Fazey to Bill Sirs', 12 December 1978.

<sup>100</sup> MRC, ISTC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/31, *Man and Metal*, 'Bilston must stay! Letter from Bill Sirs to BSC Chief Executive Bob Scholey', 29 January 1979, 4-5.

furniture or a holiday, to turn down huge sums of money and instead fight the employers? The fact is, you cannot'.<sup>101</sup>

For Sirs, high redundancy pay-outs were the answer to maintaining a level of 'affluence'. Yet at shopfloor level, debates around redundancy packages revealed a complex and multifaceted attachment to employment that was about more than just pay and firmly rooted in a sense of self and belonging. Bryan Simkiss, a skilled melting shop worker, spoke in almost opposing terms to Sirs memoir, telling ATV that he was going to lose money on his house as no one would now buy property in Bilston and he could no longer afford to run a car he had only purchased eighteen months ago.<sup>102</sup> Blastfurnaceman Malkiat Singh embodied the extremity of shopfloor resistance to redundancy when stating 'if they want to buy my job it will cost them £1 million – in other words, it's not for sale'.<sup>103</sup> Here it is important to stress that since 1968, 19 per cent of the BSW workforce was of immigrant origins, largely from the Caribbean, Eastern Europe and especially the Indian subcontinent.<sup>104</sup> Foreign-born workers considered Bilston their home and, as Singh stresses, found a sense of belonging through industrial employment just as much as the local-born workforce. Recognising the ethnic diversity of workforces in places such as Bilston during the post-war period is vital for dispelling myths of a white, unchanged, and parochial working class being 'left behind' by the process of deindustrialization.

In particular, many workers were keen to express their disdain that the loyalty they had given to BSW was not being correctly compensated. Although one worker was to begin a new job the following Monday – and suggested 'there's plenty work around if they'll look as far as I can see' – he still scorned his pay-out saying 'I've lost a good job. How the hell can I be happy [with] what they give me? Twenty-five years, weekends and that. What they've give me? I [can't] be happy with

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<sup>101</sup> Sirs, *Hard Labour*, 69.

<sup>102</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'A Sad Day For Bilston', first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>103</sup> *Express and Star*, September 1978.

<sup>104</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, 'Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works', March 1978, Appendix 11; Reeves and Chevannes, *Real Labour*, 36-37.

that.<sup>105</sup> Harold Elwell, when asked what he thought about the size of his own redundancy package was similarly dismissive: ‘So what? What’s £7,000 for another ten years. I’ve got ten years to work yet.’<sup>106</sup> The implication being that Elwell would not be able to find suitable alternative employment. BSW’s celebrated distinctiveness was replaced and brought into line with a much broader picture of the industrial change that had taken hold of the West Midlands. For the Wolverhampton Borough Council the closure of BSW would be the latest case of an all too familiar ten-year trend of outward migration following industrial closures. In 1978 the Council warned ‘the West Midlands is quickly becoming one of the major losers of population ... disguising what would otherwise be a potentially high unemployment rate’. The Council was concerned the closure of BSW would most likely mean younger workers and those with skills and qualifications moving out, unbalancing the ‘age and social structure of the Bilston area’.<sup>107</sup>

The BSW plant itself had become a place where re-rooting oneself following industrial decline occurred. Most of this, as we have seen, had been internal migration within the West Midlands but some had moved to Bilston from further afield. For example, crane driver Frank Farrell had only moved to BSW in 1978, after being made redundant at a Scottish steelworks, on the assumption that BSW was a productive plant and therefore ‘work for life’. In 1979, Farrell stated that he ‘didn’t fancy being out of work again’ but rather candidly believed that there was ‘no chance whatever’ of another crane job locally as ‘all other heavy industry had gone’.<sup>108</sup> Just as more longstanding residents and workers had, new mobile workers such as Farrell similarly recognized the closure of BSW as a radical disruption to the embodied sense of belonging around Bilston’s industrial uniqueness.

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<sup>105</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Bilston Steel Works’, first broadcast on 13 June 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-13061979-bilston-steel-works>.

<sup>106</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘A Sad Day For Bilston’, first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>107</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/2, ‘Confidential report by the Joint Working Committee on the future of Bilston Works’, March 1978, Appendix 15, para. 7.1, 7.5.

<sup>108</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘A Sad Day For Bilston’, first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

By the end of the decade, Farrell's 'job for life' ambition already seemed an anachronism. In a familiar lament, one steelworker on strike in 1979 said that 'I've got two young sons. I'm not only thinking of my future, but I'm also thinking of their future as well'.<sup>109</sup> The idea of an industrial heritage as something to pass down was clearly of importance to many workers.<sup>110</sup> This striking worker also said that if he had to find new employment, he would most likely have to leave Bilston, something he was not prepared to do; familiarity of place mattered just as much as work. Even those with less pessimistic views of future employment were worried about the *type* of work they would be doing. Bryan Simkiss said that he was 'resigned to labouring for some time'.<sup>111</sup> For a worker who had been employed in skilled work in the BSW melting shop, an admission of a life of precarious and low-paid employment was not something to be thrown around lightly.

BSC did recognize the challenge its former workers would face seeking future employment in Bilston and embarked upon an extensive campaign promoting training and counselling sessions during the closure period. The most popular of these courses were different forms of driving instruction – whether that be for a fork-lift truck or an articulated lorry.<sup>112</sup> BSW workers were being preparing for a future working life that was perhaps more atomized than they had been used to. Indeed, these types of courses represented the transformation of 'archetypal' working-class male employment in the late twentieth century; from static yet communal work in 'traditional industries' to more mobile, socially isolating work such as trucking or becoming a 'white van man'.<sup>113</sup>

The pinnacle of this more privatized way of thinking was, arguably, to establish one's own business. According to the counselling service at BSW, around 5 per cent of workers were

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<sup>109</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'Bilston Steelworks to Close', first broadcast on 16 March 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-16031979-bilston-steelworks-close>.

<sup>110</sup> *Express and Star*, 'Letter from J. Deary', 16 September 1978; *Express and Star*, 'Letter from William Garner', 19 November 1978.

<sup>111</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'A Sad Day For Bilston', first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>112</sup> *Steelworks News. Bilston and Wolverhampton edition*, 30 August 1979.

<sup>113</sup> Jon Lawrence, 'Individualism and community in historical perspective', in Shana Cohen et al. (eds), *Austerity, Community Action, and the Future of Citizenship in Europe* (Bristol, 2017), 247.

considering setting-up their own business in Bilston. While this may seem insignificant, Alec Gillott, who conducted these counselling sessions on behalf of BSC nationwide, told *Steelworks News* that ‘the figures for Bilston are among the highest I have known’.<sup>114</sup> Here a working-class individualistic spirit comes through, but so does the wish to remain in place which for many Bilston workers was of more central concern. Jon Lawrence has shown how in both affluent 1960s Luton – where 74 per cent of manual workers said they would like to set up a business – and deindustrializing Sheppey in the 1980s, self-employment and establishing a business was less to do with Thatcherite entrepreneurialism and more a practical strategy of ‘getting on’ and exerting control over one’s life.<sup>115</sup>

Yet this longing to remain was often tamed by the realities of a perceived lack of employment prospects, as workers were forced to confront a future they had never envisaged possible. A worker with thirty-two years’ service cagily acknowledged that although he would receive more than the £7,000 average this was not enough, as, in this worker’s words, ‘I’m fifty-three years of age, I’m not gonna get another job now’.<sup>116</sup> Redundancy payments became symbolic of a stopgap measure masking fundamental change. A local shopkeeper told ATV in December 1979 that while he felt people have got ‘extra money in their pockets at the moment because of redundancy payments’ he was concerned ‘they’re buying now because later on they feel they won’t be able to make such purchases and spend such money ... in possibly 12-18 months we’ll have to worry and think again because this is when problems will start again’.<sup>117</sup> A TSB bank manager said ‘I don’t know how readily available jobs are going to be in this area – probably not at all in some cases’ and was therefore advising workers to use their redundancy pay-outs to ‘take up their roots and move

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<sup>114</sup> *Steelworkers News. Bilston and Wolverhampton edition*, 5 July 1979.

<sup>115</sup> Jon Lawrence, ‘Workers’ testimony and the sociological reification of manual / non-manual distinctions in 1960s Britain’, *Sozial Geschichte*, 20 (2017), 37-47 and Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*, 189-190.

<sup>116</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Bilston Steel Works’, first broadcast on 13 June 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-13061979-bilston-steel-works>.

<sup>117</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Further Job Losses at Bilston’, first broadcast on 13 December 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-13121979-further-job-losses-bilston>.



elsewhere ... to re-establish themselves somewhere'.<sup>118</sup> Melting shop worker Bryan Simkiss, whose entire immediate male family all worked in BSW and lived on an estate where 'half worked at Bilston', was happy to think about 'selling up and moving to a different part of the country' in response to the poor job prospects. During the interview with ATV it was his wife who interjected to exclaim 'oh we don't want that'.<sup>119</sup> Familiarity was important and while decisions to uproot were not taken lightly, it was a reflection on how the closure of BSW radically disrupted everyday life beyond working patterns.

During BSW's final year of operation, then, workers began to articulate frustration with the rapid decline of what had long made the plant – and Bilston more generally – distinctive: a stable sense of work and place, and the self-esteem and pride they associated with this. Bilston had suddenly fallen into line with a more common local landscape that reoriented popular attitudes around meanings of loss, uncertainty, and flux that were only to grow stronger by the turn of the 1980s.

### **Nostalgia, loss, and the meaning of post-industrial place**

1,800 workers were made redundant as a result of the initial closure of BSW in May 1979. As per a Joint Management Committee report from March 1978, BSW continued as a 'flexible support plant' employing 600 people in the rolling mill.<sup>120</sup> In the final Bilston and Wolverhampton edition of *Steelworks News* published on 19 November 1979, BSW general manager Stan Bull called the 600 workers who would remain in the rolling mill 'round two of the history of Bilston'.<sup>121</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, this was a rather sorry comment; from the publication of Bull's words, it was a history that would last seven months, with the complete closure of BSW in July 1980. A review of BSW's

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<sup>118</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'Bilston Steel Works', first broadcast on 13 June 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-13061979-bilston-steel-works>.

<sup>119</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'A Sad Day For Bilston', first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>120</sup> WCA, DB-31/3/1/2/1, 'Confidential report on continuation of rolling & finishing facilities at Bilston Works', March 1978.

<sup>121</sup> *Steelworks News. Bilston and Wolverhampton edition*, 19 November 1979.

future carried out in June 1980 by BSC suggested that the ‘considerable body of opinion’ amongst the workers who stayed on in the rolling mill was that the configuration was ‘doomed from the start’.<sup>122</sup> This was something disputed by the ISTC, with Dennis Turner arguing in December 1979 – when rumours of the total closure first circulated – that: ‘The view of the workforce is such that ... the workers who stayed at this mills-configuration would in fact have a secure life in this job. And now they find that the whole question of the future of Bilston is once again brought into question’.<sup>123</sup>

The future of Bilston often loomed large. Indeed, a number of workers recognized this during the embers of the closure campaign. In March 1979, ISTC branch secretary Reg Turley and shop steward Cecil Baines became involved with ‘The Bilston Group’. The Group was established as a new experiment in community planning, bringing together Bilstonians from different walks of life, including a clergyman, a magistrate, a community worker and other trade unionists.<sup>124</sup> Turley said the group was set up to ‘tackle any problem which is important to the future and well-being of our community’ and the group would ‘write to central and local government or any other body with constructive suggestions and opinions in the hope that we can influence policy for the benefit of the whole community’.<sup>125</sup> It was probably no accident that *Steelworks News* published an article on the Bilston Group in the same edition that it reported BSW was to close; it was a suggested potential avenue for moving on from the closure. Moreover, Turley’s understanding of the group suggests he already accepted a not too distant future whereby Bilstonians would have to actively hold together the sense of community he believed BSW had embodied.

Once BSW completely closed in 1980, ten redundant workers – most of whom had been active within the Join Union Action Committee – took a dramatic step to actively hold together community on the former space of BSW by each using £2,499 of their pay-outs to purchase BSW’s

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<sup>122</sup> MRC, BSC, MSS.365/BSC/56, ‘Bilston Review’, 11 June 1980.

<sup>123</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Further Job Losses at Bilston’, first broadcast on 13 December 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-13121979-further-job-losses-bilston>.

<sup>124</sup> *Steelworks News. Bilston and Wolverhampton edition*, 29 March 1979.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*

on-site social club, rebranding it as the Springvale Co-Operative Sports and Social Club (SSSC).<sup>126</sup> It cannot be overstated that for a redundant manual worker in 1981 with few future job prospects, £2,499 was a significant sum of money to put into one project. The consortium did not see this as a business venture from which they might profit, rather they saw this as a philanthropic exercise and a contribution to their former colleagues and the wider community.<sup>127</sup> Despite Dennis Turner's belief that SSSC held together a sense of local community and social cohesion following the closure of BSW, the club operated a hierarchical membership structure that privileged those with direct ties to BSW. Although the most common membership option was 'associate membership' – which was open to all who resided within fifteen miles of the centre of Wolverhampton – it was only possible to be a 'full member' if you were a redundant BSW steelworker or claiming a BSC pension. Even wives and unmarried children up to the age of twenty of former BSW workers were only eligible for 'social membership', thus relegating their importance to the club.<sup>128</sup> In essence, SSSC was a working-men's club. Richard Hall has observed how in the immediate post-war years these kinds of clubs provided a space for men to socialize with childhood friends and ex-brothers-in-arms following demobilization.<sup>129</sup> In the early 1980s, SSSC provided a similar environment in the aftermath of deindustrialization for ex-work colleagues. The place-based criterion is interesting here. In part, this may be due to Bilston being administratively within the Borough of Wolverhampton following the abolition of the Borough of Bilston in 1966 – a decision older Bilstonians regarded as an act of political vandalism that robbed the town of its own sense of identity.<sup>130</sup> However, what mattered most was centralising the BSW plant, *not* the town of Bilston; SSSC physically embodying a memory of place and an industrial culture that reached well beyond Bilston and into the wider Black Country region.

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<sup>126</sup> WCA, DW-173/3/2, 'The New Springvale Co-operative Limited: Report of the auditors', 20 July 1982.

<sup>127</sup> Reeves and Chevannes, *Real Labour*, 65.

<sup>128</sup> WCA, DW-173/3/1, 'Rules of the new Springvale club', April 1981.

<sup>129</sup> Richard Hall, 'Being a man, being a member: Masculinity and community in Britain's working men's clubs, 1945-1960', *Cultural and Social History*, 14 (2017), 75.

<sup>130</sup> Reeves and Chevannes, *Real Labour*, 21.

BSW's closure was often rationalized in emotive, almost anthropomorphized terms, that took on social and cultural significance.<sup>131</sup> For example, an ATV special programme on the closure of BSW in 1979 was itself called *A Sad Day for Bilston*. In oral history interviews, Andrea Hickey recalled that when BSW finally closed she was upset 'beyond words' and 'shed more than a few tears many times', while Bert Turner argued that because BSW was 'like a family ... grown men were crying when they saw that last ingot coming down the mill'.<sup>132</sup> Framing the steelworks as a family – an inherently private sphere – made expressing such emotional affect and vulnerability the normative expectation. In the House of Commons in November 1979, John Blackburn – Conservative MP for the nearby constituency of Dudley West – stated that 'members of the Christian faith would say that Good Friday was a sad day, but it was a sad day ... when the steelworks were finally closed'.<sup>133</sup> At the time of the 'Elisabeth' blast furnace's demolition in October 1980, a former worker with twenty-two years' service noted that 'many people in the surrounding area will be most depressed seeing this activity taking place'. But he stubbornly refused to agree with the ATV interviewer's contention that this was the 'death of the Black Country', arguing that 'I wouldn't quite put it like that because we hope to see a resurgence of activity on this site, but certainly it is the last vestige of iron making in our area'.<sup>134</sup> While this worker did not wish to conceive the closure of BSW in terms of 'death', what is notable in the case of Bilston is how quickly the 'half-life of deindustrialization' – a term coined by literary scholar Sherry Lee Linkon to explain the extended, persistent effects of industrial decline – set in, with the effects of the deindustrial 'half-life' as salient in contemporaneous discourse as much as recollected memory.<sup>135</sup>

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<sup>131</sup> Valerie Walkerdine, 'Communal beingness and affect: an exploration of trauma in an ex-industrial community', *Body & Society*, 16 (2010), 91-116.

<sup>132</sup> *ITSOE*, 'We were here once', 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 9.53-10.06 mins.

<sup>133</sup> *Parliamentary Debates* (Commons), 973, 7 November 1979, 512.

<sup>134</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, 'Elizabeth – the last blast furnace', first broadcast on 3 October 1980, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-03101980-elizabeth-last-blast-furnace>.

<sup>135</sup> Sherry Lee Linkon, *The Half-Life of Deindustrialization: Working-Class Writing About Economic Restructuring* (Ann Arbor, 2018).

For former melting shop worker Bryan Simkiss in 1979 this was understood in an overtly class rhetoric of ‘them and us’: ‘this is the trouble of these things, they don’t know how it affects people in communities. This thing affected our whole family.’<sup>136</sup> Simkiss’ use of ‘people in communities’ implies an impact beyond the boundaries of Bilston itself, recognising BSW’s significance to the wider Black Country. Simkiss also conceives the loss of work as having a directly personal as much as communal impact, segueing between the language of community and family. To speak of the loss of community often disguised what former workers were equally concerned with: a loss of self-identity. As a former steelworker glumly told ATV in December 1979: ‘I’m just hanging about the house doing nothing – nothing to do. Usually, I get up you know, come to work and I’m alright. But I haven’t got nothing to do now. Nothing whatsoever ... I don’t think I’ll get a job in the near future – this year or next year’.<sup>137</sup>

It is not exactly novel to suggest, as Yvette Taylor puts it, ‘industrialization as good (for men) and de-industrialization as bad (for men)’,<sup>138</sup> but this does not make it any less stark that this particular male steelworker struggled to see how to position himself in post-industrial Bilston, and the importance of a place-based sense of self. But aspects of masculine identity fostered in the workplace never left some. When a former steelworker was asked in 2015 whether he kept in contact with former colleagues after BSW’s closure, he replied that he only ‘bumps into them occasionally’ and even then, he is mostly queried with ‘aren’t you dead yet?!’.<sup>139</sup> The dry humour of the industrial workplace was as sharp as ever. For some, navigating Bilston’s post-industrial landscape was possible by intersecting ‘older’ identities with new realities. Tellingly, this former worker suggested that these types of interactions only happened amongst the ‘old ones’ as they were ‘still about’. The implication

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<sup>136</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘A Sad Day For Bilston’, first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>137</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘Further Job Losses at Bilston’, first broadcast on 13 December 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/atv-today-13121979-further-job-losses-bilston>.

<sup>138</sup> Yvette Taylor, *Fitting into Place?: Class and Gender Geographies and Temporalities* (Farnham, 2012), 7-11.

<sup>139</sup> *ITSOE*, ‘We were here once’, 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 0.31-0.47 mins.

being that many younger workers did indeed leave the area after closure. This led him to lament that BSW had been ‘the lifeblood of Bilston. They were the heart and soul of this town the steelworks were’.<sup>140</sup> BSW was positioned as both what gave Bilston a sense of identity as a ‘steel town’ but also what fostered familiarity and commonality amongst people. As another former worker captured rather simply this was a ‘lost part of the heritage’ which many younger and even middle-aged residents of Bilston in the twenty-first century do not remember.<sup>141</sup>

This was something that the BSW worker J. Richards strikingly captured in his poem *Redundant* published in the March 1979 edition of the *ISTC Man & Metal*. Although written in 1979 when BSW was nominally still open, Richards captured the realities not only of the present but the soon to come future and encompasses the ease at which individual and community experience would morph. Sherry Lee Linkon has impressed the importance of literary sources for uncovering ‘the emotional, intimate, everyday effects’ of deindustrialization as ‘although large-scale social and economic forces shape individual lived experience, most people do not see their daily lives through the movement of capital or neoliberal politics’.<sup>142</sup> Richards’ poem captures the bitterness of the workers who believed the loyalty they had shown towards BSW had not been reciprocated – there was once a time of ‘skill and pride’ where men ‘gave lives to industry till they died’. All that was left now as ‘their just reward’ and a ‘bitter pill’ was unemployment.<sup>143</sup> As such, Richards argued that Bilston is no longer a steel town. Through imagery of stillness and quietness, Bilston became a place where very little would happen: ‘The factory gates are closing / machines are quiet and still / No roaring of the furnaces / No rolling of the mill’.<sup>144</sup>

Similarly, Peter Hill, a former electrical engineer, wrote an unashamedly nostalgic poem titled *Ghost Town* as part the Bilston Community Association’s ‘In the Shadow of Elisabeth’ oral history

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<sup>140</sup> *ITSOE*, ‘We were here once’, 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 0.51-0.55 mins.

<sup>141</sup> *ITSOE*, ‘We were here once’, 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 16.05-16.30 mins.

<sup>142</sup> Linkon, *The Half-Life*, 15.

<sup>143</sup> MRC, ISTC, MSS.36/ISTC/4/31, *Man and Metal*, ‘Redundant by J. Richards’, March 1979, 159.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*

project in 2015. Hill's poem echoed The Specials' 1981 lament for Coventry,<sup>145</sup> but as early as 1976 ISTC branch secretary Reg Turley had said that without BSW, Bilston would 'become a ghost town'.<sup>146</sup> Constructed as a 'ghost town', Bilston, for Hill, had been unable to adjust to industrial decline; the industrial past haunts, but continues to shape, the town's post-industrial present and future.<sup>147</sup> It remarkable how *Ghost Town* echoes imagery of Richard's contemporaneous poem, especially the loss of pride in work and Bilston's identity. Hill presents an invitation to 'come with me now to days when steel mills stood / And furnaces scorched night skies bright blood-red / When Bilston men had jobs and times were good'.<sup>148</sup> As Ben Jones has powerfully argued, nostalgic narratives in working-class writing are purposive as both a social function and representation of individual experience in critiquing contemporary stigmatization.<sup>149</sup> The line 'When Bilston men had jobs and times were good' was a refrain repeated four times, justified with other nostalgic phrases such as 'the happy lands of our childhood / Where father's work and pride kept us well fed' and 'our town provided livelihood / For countless homes, in areas widespread'.<sup>150</sup> Hill's poem also made reference to 'flowing steel – our town's lifeblood', phraseology mirrored in the recollection of oral history interviews.

Over the course of Bilston's deindustrial 'half-life' there was a conscious construction of the meaning of place through the metaphorical use of life and death. Jörg Arnold has discussed how in the ex-mining communities of Kellingley the tropes of death and loss act as ways to understand a

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<sup>145</sup> Although specifically referring to Coventry, the Specials' song sought to capture a common experience around social deprivation, unemployment and urban decline. See Matthew Worley, *No Future: Punk, Politics And British Youth Culture, 1976-1984* (Cambridge, 2017), 94 and Jorg Arnold et al., 'The de-industrializing city in the UK and Germany: Conceptual approaches and empirical findings in comparative perspective', *Urban History* (2019), 1-5.

<sup>146</sup> *Birmingham Evening Mail*, 22 January 1976.

<sup>147</sup> Alice Mah, *Industrial Ruination, Community, and Place* (Toronto, 2012).

<sup>148</sup> Bilston Iron & Steelworkers – A Retrospective, 'Ghost Town by Peter Hill', <http://britishsteelbilston.com/people-2/poem-of-bilston-works/>, accessed 17 May 2018.

<sup>149</sup> Ben Jones, 'The use of nostalgia: Autobiography, community publishing and working-class neighbourhoods in post-war England', *Cultural and Social History*, 7 (2010), 355-374.

<sup>150</sup> Bilston Iron & Steelworkers – A Retrospective, 'Ghost Town by Peter Hill', <http://britishsteelbilston.com/people-2/poem-of-bilston-works/>, accessed 17 May 2018.

‘structure of feeling’ around temporality and affect.<sup>151</sup> What is observable in Bilston is the movement from the individual experience of loss toward a collective embodiment at the level of place. For example, Bryan Simkiss stated in February 1979 that ‘for some people down that plant [the closure is] gonna kill ‘em’.<sup>152</sup> Work at BSW is perceived as the central facet of selfhood and without it, Simkiss saw former workers becoming dislocated from a sense of living. By 2015, a former blastfurnaceman in an oral history interview contested that the loss of BSW ‘killed the heart of Bilston because Bilston was a steel town’.<sup>153</sup> The closure of BSW was perceived as both final and all encompassing, both within the contemporaneous moment and retrospectively. Moreover, there is a fluidity to how the meaning of loss moved between the personal to the communal over time. The implications of industrial decline for self and place became complexly intertwined, as much as being reworked by the fraught nature of nostalgia. Indeed, this nostalgic reworking was something that manifested itself as much within the immediacy of deindustrialization as in recollected testimony.

## Conclusion

Viewed from the perspective of post-industrial, twenty-first century Britain, a place like Bilston, organized around a dominant industry as late as the 1970s, appears a relic of a bygone age. But even at the time of BSW’s closure, this article has demonstrated how there was an understanding that everyday life in Bilston and at BSW was largely out of kilter with both regional and national economic trends. Within this context, Bilston’s supposed ‘traditional’ patterns of life took on new meanings. Many workers at BSW saw this as a mark of local distinctiveness, a defining marker of

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<sup>151</sup> Jorg Arnold, “‘Like being on death row’: Britain and the end of coal, c. 1970 to the present”, *Contemporary British History*, 32 (2018), 3-9.

<sup>152</sup> MACE, *ATV Today*, ‘A Sad Day For Bilston’, first broadcast on 8 February 1979, <https://www.macearchive.org/films/format-v-08021979-sad-day-bilston>.

<sup>153</sup> *ITSOE*, ‘We were here once’, 25 January 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhDo5NZvwyg>, 10.57-11.11 mins.



identity. As they themselves put it, they were the last of a ‘breed’, a recognition of their own sense of uniqueness and individuality.

Moreover, the power of place, and the specificity and importance of its meaning to everyday life, is best uncovered by surveying radical change such as deindustrialization over the long durée, revealing that people are more than just ‘left behind’. Indeed, the realities of industrial decline required not only adjusting to localized economic instability, but also, more importantly, the simultaneous (re-)construction of meanings of selfhood, belonging and community.<sup>154</sup> There is therefore no surprise in the fervour animating the emotive language about the closure of the Bilston works, captured in both testimony from the time and recollected oral history. As Claire Langhammer has pointed out, emotion has rarely been used as a category of analysing labour history.<sup>155</sup> This may in part be due to a tendency to see emotional cultures as confined to women’s working experiences. Yet the case of Bilston shows how, in the context of industrial change, the use of emotional language by male workers re-shaped the boundaries between work and place and subjective perceptions around the nature of work; industrial work was not only important for identity construction but offered an emotional connectivity based on loyalty, pride, and self-worth that was replaced by betrayal, disillusionment, and loss.

While nostalgia and loss have long been central analytical lenses in deindustrialization studies, this article shifts the focus away from what has replaced industrial work and rejects tracking change backwards to an imagined ‘year zero’ when working-class everyday life was rapidly and disruptively ‘unmade’.<sup>156</sup> Rather this analysis suggests that an understanding of Bilston as the last vestige of the Black Country’s steelmaking heritage was important for the creation of a cultural memory of place before and during deindustrialization as much as in retrospective remembering. Critical to this latent nostalgic sensibility was its purposive, functional value in reconstructing

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<sup>154</sup> These themes will be explored further in my forthcoming PhD thesis ‘Deindustrialisation, place and belonging in England since 1960’.

<sup>155</sup> Claire Langhammer, ‘Feelings, women and work in the long 1950s’, *Women’s History Review*, 26 (2017), 77-92.

<sup>156</sup> Jefferson Cowie, *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (New York, 2010).

individual and collective identities in the immediacy of industrial decline; Bilston was still a ‘steel town’, but one without a steelworks, and workplace identities fostered in the steelworks were vital for navigating a fundamentally different working future.<sup>157</sup>

In a landscape of limited employment opportunity and outward mobility, former steelworkers looked back at the 1970s as a heyday, albeit one that was recognized as not necessarily representative of wider experience. But from the perspective of former BSW steelworkers, what mattered was that the early- to mid-1970s symbolized the stable, secure employment which crucially underpinned senses of both place and self. In the face of wider industrial change however, the perceived unique continuation and its celebration by the BSW workforce speaks to the 1970s as a moment of self-fashioned identities and possibilities rooted in individuality and autonomy rather than ‘crisis’.<sup>158</sup> Although working-class life had been in transition since at least the late 1960s, the case of Bilston supports scholarship suggesting that this fragmentation was not necessarily a sudden nor a uniform phenomenon nationally, yet alone within a particular place.<sup>159</sup> As with Guy Ortolano’s investigation of change in Milton Keynes during the late 1970s, Bilston’s sense of place as a ‘steel town’, was defined against, rather than alongside, the prevailing winds of change.<sup>160</sup> Uncovering the full nature and implications of deindustrialization in all its complexities requires more attentiveness to the everyday, immediate impact of this change. This does not mean simply shifting the *moment* of deindustrialization to earlier in the century, rather it means recasting deindustrialization as a process that helps us to shed new light on Britain’s supposedly secure, pre-Thatcherite industrial past.

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<sup>157</sup> Jim Phillips et al., ‘Being a “Clydesider” in the age of deindustrialisation: Skilled male identity and economic restructuring in the West of Scotland since the 1960s’, *Labor History* (2019), 1-19.

<sup>158</sup> Emily Robinson et al., ‘Telling stories about post-war Britain: Popular individualism and the “crisis” of the 1970s’, *Twentieth Century British History*, 28 (2017), 268-304.

<sup>159</sup> Stefan Ramsden, ‘Remaking working-class community: sociability, belonging and “affluence” in a small town, 1930–80’, *Contemporary British History*, 29 (2015), 1-26; Sutcliffe-Braithwaite, *Class*, 14-33; Lawrence, *Me, Me, Me?*

<sup>160</sup> Guy Ortolano, *Thatcher’s Progress: From Social Democracy to Market Liberalism Through an English New Town* (Cambridge, 2019), 143-183.

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