

## **Remembering the Buildings of the British Labour Movement: an Act of Mourning?**

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### **Abstract**

This paper outlines the buildings of the British labour movement. Hitherto, labour activists, historians and heritage professionals have focused on the artefacts and archives as opposed to the many historic buildings of the labour movement. The narrative closely follows the course of the industrial revolution and the accompanying development of the labour movement from its beginnings in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Examples cover a wide range including the artisan trade societies, Utopian Owenite settlements and purpose-built radical and trade union premises. The authors make a brief critique of the paper itself as an example of the intangible heritage of the labour movement. It concludes with a consideration of why these buildings are relatively neglected and suggests that the notion ‘don’t mourn, organise’ might contain some clues as to specific reasons for their neglect.

### **Keywords**

Chartists, Co-operative, loss, mourning, Owenites, trade societies, trade unions,

### **Introduction**

Organisations within the British labour movement often remember their glorious past. But when it comes to the time consuming and often costly work of preserving archives, objects and sites of significance the work falls – with a few exceptions described below - to dedicated individuals and small groups rather than large labour movement or heritage organisations. Most activists like to look back but not look after. This is especially true of the built heritage, the subject of this paper. The paper begins with the buildings of the eighteenth century trade societies and moves on to cover those of religious nonconformity and early nineteenth century political radicalism. The buildings of the Owenite socialists and Chartist movements are outlined and those associated with the consumer co-operative movements, along with those of the trade unions and Mechanics Institutes. It goes on to cover late nineteenth structures from the socialist and Clarion movements and from the Labour Party.

The material culture of the labour movement has been studied and collected since the 1950s. Worker-historians like Ruth and Eddie Frow who founded the Working Class Movement Library in Salford, and John Smethurst are amongst the pioneers. In the 1960s the worker-historian, John Gorman, conducted a major survey of historical trade union banners and also collected some incidental material on buildings of the labour movement (Gorman 1973 and 1985). From the 1980s curators in social history museums were influenced by Gorman, the History Workshop movement and the Oral History Society and some developed an interest in

the artefacts of the labour movement. Gorman's influence was also felt internationally in Scandinavia and in the work of Andrew Reeves in Australia (Stahl 1998; Reeves 1988).

British labour heritage has been extensively covered in the Social History Curators Group's journal, *Social History in Museums*, and particularly in two conferences on labour history in museums (Bott and Mansfield 1988; Mansfield 1991). These sparked research and publications on the material culture of the labour movement centred on the re-development of the People's History Museum in Manchester from 1989 (Mace 1999; Mansfield 1999, 2000 and 2004; Mansfield and Uhl 2003; Clark 2001; Martin 2002). Recently these material culture studies have fed back into social and political history research (Horner *et al.* 2008).

There is little literature on labour movement buildings as opposed to other material evidence, so the authors have drawn on personal communications (1990 – 2011) with the worker historians mentioned above plus others including Raphael Samuel, Peter Carter and Gillian Lonergan. Whilst conventional architectural history, from Pevsner onwards, has mainly ignored this type of building, the paper does draw on some regional studies of labour movement buildings (Pevsner 1951-1974; Salveson 1987; Pye 1995; Fowler and Wyke 2008). Two joint conferences of the Society for the Study of Labour History, the Ironbridge Institute and English Heritage were devoted to the subject: *The Landscape of Labour History* in 1991 and *Red Bricks* in 1996, at which the key note speaker was Raphael Samuel, who referred to the subject in some of his later work (Samuel 1996 and 1998). These conferences attracted large and concerned audiences including academics, trade union officials, museum staff, Workers Education Association tutors, planning officers and students. English Heritage also published a short article in their house journal and Bob Hayes published a piece on the wider interpretation and commemoration issues relating to working class buildings (Cherry and Mansfield 2002; Hayes 2004).

## **The Industrial Revolution**

Britain created the world's first Industrial Revolution. From the late eighteenth century profits from trade, fuelled by imperial expansion, and slave produced goods, were invested in industrial production; a process supported by both landowners and middle class entrepreneurs. Investment for the Industrial Revolution was centred on iron and steel, coal, canals and railways and above all cotton textiles and the factory system. Located in the north and west of Britain away from traditional centres of wealth in the south and east, the Industrial Revolution continued its mushroom like growth. The Napoleonic Wars aided rather than hindered the process, with a demand for military products and the opening of new world markets for British exports. Large areas of the north of England became urbanised, with Manchester becoming the world's first industrial city and the emergence of the world's first labour movement (Thompson 1963). Its birth was in a troubled period, with the climax of the long wars with France coinciding with the worst excesses of the Industrial Revolution.

The early nineteenth century also witnessed political conflict as the first working class demands for the right to vote collided with not only the traditional sources of older privilege

from monarchy, aristocracy and gentry, but also with the new dynamic breed of industrialists and factory owners. But the emergent labour movement did not primarily develop in the new factories whose large numbers of unskilled women and children who were prepared to work for low wages, were initially difficult to organise.

### **Trade Societies**

Instead the early labour movement was linked to an older artisan tradition. Skilled working men in handicraft trades formed 'trade societies', small clubs to defend their institutions and customs: apprenticeship, traditional prices for work, pride in expertise and choice in the length of the working day (Prothero 1979). Loose national networks of clubs arose with 'houses of call', which were the first buildings of the labour movement and were usually in meeting rooms of public houses (Leeson 1979). They were located in the back streets of the new industrial cities, for example, *The Braziers' Arms* Salford, which was the house of call for the tinplate workers, but were also in smaller, market towns where there was a steady demand for goods not yet made in factories. Houses of call were secret meeting places where artisans discussed politics and their trade and where available work was publicised. Houses of call formed networks all over Britain and Ireland for unemployed or striking tradesmen 'on tramp' to seek work or be helped on their journey. In their early years trade societies were underground, illegal and embattled and endured legal prosecutions and police raids from allied employers and government who saw the societies' sturdy democracy as subversive and alien (Mansfield 1979).

The People's History Museum in Manchester has reconstructions of trade society meeting rooms showing their regalia, similar but often predating that of free masons. Many of the houses of call can still be found as ordinary public houses and can be easily identified from the adoption of the name of the trade, for example *Carpenters Arms*, *Wheelwrights Arms*. The heraldry of the trade is sometimes displayed on the outside swinging sign, even when its use as a meeting place for the union has long since ceased. Some trade societies died out as their handicraft skills were replaced by mechanised processes (for example those of handloom weavers) but others extended their influence to new factory based trades. As textile mills and coal mines expanded in the nineteenth century, the new factory trades learned from trade societies to develop their own unions. This new mass membership and bureaucratic trade unionism later needed different sorts of meeting places and buildings.

### **Nonconformity**

Another major influence on the British labour movement was nonconformist religion: evangelical Protestantism, separate from and usually in opposition to the state sponsored Church of England. From the late eighteenth century denominations such as Congregationalists, Baptists and Methodists (especially their Primitive Methodist offshoot) developed self-governing working class congregations. Their first act was to self build a simple chapel to conduct their own services, which, especially in rural areas or isolated pit villages, was seen as a rebellious act against the establishment. Usually built by farmworkers, coal miners or quarrymen, nonconformist chapels were a snub (in stone or brick) both to their

Church of England religious opponents and to their political and economic oppressors, be they gentry, large farmers or industrialists. Chapels became centres of working class resistance, where workers developed their own culture of self education, running their own administrative affairs, and honing skills in oratory. Knowledge learnt in chapels was readily transferable to other working organisations like friendly societies, co-operatives, political groups and trade unions, with the latter in particular using chapels for meetings until acquiring their own buildings. Though mostly now demolished in urban areas, hundreds of rural chapels still dot the British countryside, with many being converted into holiday homes in recent years.

## **Radicalism**

In the early nineteenth century a radical political culture was being formed, coincident with both the Industrial Revolution and the wars with France. The democratic ideas of Thomas Paine (forged in the American Revolution) were blended with religious nonconformity and early socialist experimentation to create a mass movement in opposition to the corrupt and oligarchic old establishment. Early radicalism embraced both working class and middle class elements, as industrialists themselves were often excluded from the British political process by the landed gentry. It was mainly an urban phenomenon and quickly developed its own premises in the burgeoning towns. These could be adaptations of nonconformist premises, like the Ancoats Free Church built by the Bible Christians in Manchester (Tomlinson 1989). This was opened in 1821 on the second anniversary of the Peterloo Massacre, where 60,000 workers in Manchester, demanding the right to vote, were dispersed violently with over four hundred killed and wounded. The mass working class movement of the Chartists (see below) met at the Ancoats Free Church in the 1830s, as other venues were denied them, and it continued to house radical activities throughout its history.

Other radical premises were secular. London's newly built Rotunda played an important role in the Reform Crisis of 1831-32, which led to the first reform of Parliament and a slight extension of the franchise. A surviving pencil drawing shows a central meeting room with a crowded (all male) stage and audience (Fig. 1). Sometimes substantial, these radical meeting halls developed facilities for refreshments. Largely unadaptable for other purposes, few of the buildings survive now. The Ancoats Free Church was demolished in 1988, despite a protest campaign identifying it with the heritage of the Peterloo Massacre. The final decision was made by the Labour Party controlled local authority which still then identified old buildings with dirt, recent industrial decline and oppression.

## **Owenism**

In the new cities industrialists often provided workers with housing. It was usually of poor quality and lacked any urban infrastructure. Some more thoughtful industrialists built model housing for their workers alongside facilities such as shops, schools, chapels and meeting places. This process was highly developed by Robert Owen, the proprietor of the New Lanark mills in Scotland (Harrison 1969). A pioneer of Utopian socialist ideas, Owen was

determined to mould the attitudes of his workforce and form the characters of their children with a unique range of institutions to change behaviours in the work place and through leisure activities. Around his mills he constructed schools, kitchens and dining rooms, temperance halls, and lecture theatres, to impose a collective solution to the problems of the industrial revolution. New Lanark was visited as a marvel of its age by many influential people, though most were deterred by Owen's increasing eccentricity and extreme secularism. Owen and his family invested their considerable wealth in building five rural communities in the UK and USA. All these failed and ruined the Owen family's finances. Probably cheaply constructed, no evidence of Owen's colonies survive today in Britain, though New Lanark itself was rescued from dereliction from the 1970s and as a World Heritage Site, has been successfully regenerated as a tourist destination, in which Owen's ideas on architecture have been interpreted, with a range of visitor attractions.

Working class radicals united with more moderate middle class reformers in the agitation to secure the Reform Act of 1832. Though this was the first reform of the old Parliament, where votes and seats could be bought and sold, it was still only a step towards democracy, securing the vote for only 5% of the population. Most workers felt tricked and betrayed and turned to radical solutions including Owen's ideas which attracted a considerable working class following. In some obscure parts of England, in a parallel way to religious nonconformity, there are still some material remains of Owenism to be found. In the Fens of East Anglia, a utopian socialist community was founded at Manea Fen, Cambridgeshire in 1838. There was a brickyard, a dining hall where 'food would be cooked by a special scientific apparatus', windmill and a cricket square, but everything ended in disaster. Most of the colonists were urban artisans, keen to settle on cheap land in clean air away from the city smogs, but few of them made successful farm workers. Little thought was given to marketing or the practical export of goods produced in one of the most isolated spots in England. Local opposition and harassment was fuelled by accusations of immorality with rumours of women held in common by the colonists, leading to quarrels and the breakup of the community early in 1841. The main building was still occupied as 'Colony Farm' until its demolition in the 1950s.

At the same time in the nearby market town and port of Wisbech, the Owenite movement was led and funded by James Hill – a ship owner and banker (Mansfield 1985). He built a Hall of the People in 1837, after engaging in correspondence with Owen about its dimensions. The latter insisted on very high ceilings in the main hall to accommodate his theories about the need for space to disperse 'bad airs' or miasmas, as well as kitchens big enough for mass catering. This became the centre for a lively working class movement, involving several hundred people, which incorporated an infant school, library, and co-operative store. There was a debating club and a mechanics institute, run on the same lines as those discussed later in this article. Visited and approved by Owen himself, the movement continued for three years, until James Hill's bank failed and with it the regular funding for Owenite activities. Hill's daughter Octavia was educated at the Infants school and in adult life she went on to be a social reformer and one of the founders of the National Trust, one of the UK's principal preservation bodies. The Wisbech Hall of the People though survives as the bar area of the

community based Angles Theatre, though when the building was converted in 1978, a new floor was inserted, dividing the old Owenite ceiling space (Fig. 2). Robert Owen went on to become the godfather of the international Co-operative movement, and his ideas on architecture retained a surprising resonance within the whole British labour movement.

## **Chartism**

As outlined earlier, the dissatisfaction with the limited franchise under the Reform Act of 1832, based on strict property qualification, led to further radical agitation. This culminated in the struggle for the People's Charter, with the Chartists becoming the world's first working class political movement. After the rejection of its mass petitions by Parliament, some Chartists took up arms and various clashes with the state occurred in 1839, 1842 and 1848. In the 1970s John Frost Square, named after the leader of the revolt, was built on the site of the bloody Chartist defeat at the Westgate Hotel in Newport, south Wales. The Labour council belatedly commemorated the event by commissioning a mural to liven up this rather dour civic space. In the nearby Blaenau Gwent mountains, the Chartist 'Caves', where it is claimed that weapons were stored and pikes were forged, still survive in an almost legendary way.

Other buildings retain a more subtle remembrance of the long clash between labour, employers and the state. The city of Durham in north east England, was the seat of a Palatine Bishop, who with neighbouring landowners dominated the surrounding coalfield. The County Hotel in the centre of the old city symbolised the power of the established Church of England and its supporting gentry and coal owners. A series of bitterly fought conflicts in the nineteenth century established the strong, Methodist influenced Durham Miners' Association. Once a year this held the Durham Miners Gala, where a mass procession of miners and their families, with their trade union banners and brass bands marched through the city and took a salute from their political heroes, assembled on the balcony of the County Hotel. This annual occupation of 'enemy territory' still continues as a celebration of regional working class identity, often from left wing pit villages, which were referred to as 'little Moscows', long after the closure of the last coal mine in the area.

Following the defeat of armed revolts, the Chartists sought other ways of achieving their goals. One method was to harness the 'back to the land' movement of Robert Owen and others, but with a political twist. This was proposed by Fergus O'Connor, a member of the Irish minor gentry, who emerged as the main Chartist leader. In 1845 he pledged his personal wealth in establishing the Chartist Land Company. This bought six country estates, breaking them up into small holdings of 1 to 4 acres, and erecting bungalow farmhouses and outbuildings. These were allocated to subscribing Chartists by lottery with the aim of them becoming self sufficient peasants and as propertied leaseholders would gain the land qualification to register for the vote, as defined by 1832 Reform Act.

The mass Chartist membership in new cities, keen to leave the dirt and squalor, subscribed their hard earned money to over 600 local branches of the Land Company. However, as with the Owenites, most were factory hands or skilled artisans not farm workers. O'Connor's ideas

of 'spade husbandry' were hopelessly impractical in a highly capitalist British agriculture. The colonists found it difficult to grow and market produce, especially in face of the hostility of local farmers and gentry. The inability of colonists to pay rent to the Land Company caused the whole system to collapse in debt and recrimination. This was not helped by O'Connor's increasing erratic decision making, which led to mental illness and his confinement. Like Owen, O'Connor planned his settlements with social infrastructure like schools and meeting rooms and some of these buildings along with the smallholdings are still in existence. The best preserved is the Snig's End settlement in Gloucestershire, where despite conversions over the years, some buildings retain original features and are listed as architecturally important by the government. The 'Hall of the People' here survives as the village pub though still has the separate entrances for boy and girl school children along with the high ceilings for clean air beloved by O'Connor as well as Owen (Fig. 3). It is probable that O'Connor himself designed the standard bungalows which formed the centre of each smallholding: 'on all the estates today, the shape is instantly recognizable, the centre brought forward under a flattened gable, a little ornament cut under the peak, a chimney at each end of the roof tree, and the roof steeply sloping down at the back to the working rooms behind the living quarters' (McKie 2008, p.511; Chase 2007, pp. 247-270).

O'Connor's building designs may have been more practical than his overall grand plan. For despite the defeat of collective working class efforts at utopian community living, in some areas the colonists with green fingers and business acumen (often from the same Chartist families) bought their functional bungalow/farmhouses and their surrounding plots. They turned to specialised market gardening and the nearness of cities like Birmingham to the Dodford settlement in Worcestershire and London to O'Connorsville near Chorleywood in Hertfordshire, meant that they had a future in supplying produce to the city masses, a tradition which still continues. These plans of the Owenites or Chartists may appear fantastic in the early twenty-first century, and the construction of buildings like Queenwood or the Hall of the People in Snig's End, seems foolhardy. But this is a condescending view, given our hindsight, as no one in the early nineteenth century knew the limitations and possibilities of the recently industrialised age.

## **Co-operation**

Meanwhile a less utopian working class initiative, no less inspired by Robert Owen, was developing in the heartland of the industrial North. In 1844 a group of mainly cotton mill workers, established a co-operative shop in Toad Lane in Rochdale, outside Manchester (Fig.4). Initially small scale, it sold basic unadulterated foodstuffs, free of the expensive 'tommy shops', company stores run by the factory owners themselves. It offered membership of the society and a yearly dividend. The business-like methods were highly successful and the 'Rochdale principles' of the 'Pioneers' spread to the whole of Britain and internationally. Local self-governing co-operative societies built a range of premises needed to provide 'cradle to grave' goods and services to working class communities in industrial areas. Premises ranged from small corner shops, through suburban depots to huge urban department stores which rivalled the private 'grand magasin'. Factories of all kinds, depots, mills, port facilities, funeral parlours, and farms all became part of the Co-op empire. By the

late nineteenth century the Co-operative movement dominated working class retailing in the UK, even rural areas. Co-op premises hosted many social activities – the Women’s Guild, debating, dramatic and musical societies - which reinforced their cultural dominance amongst the working class.

In the early twentieth century the co-operative movement attracted innovative and idealistic young architects. Its 86 strong architects department were responsible for such striking modernist projects as the 1939 Luma Lamp factory, outside Glasgow (listed and saved in 1988) and the Trafford Park Flour Mills, near Manchester which in 1903 was the largest industrial building in Europe. Co-op architects went on to pioneer the first British supermarket in Portsmouth in 1949 (Morrison 2003).

### **Trade Unions**

Trade unions developed from small embattled locally based societies to national bureaucratic but professional organisations. Initially only with skilled workers, and charging high subscriptions, trade unions found a niche role in the well developed late Victorian industrial structure, and proved themselves useful to manufacturers. Wealthy unions erected their own regional or national headquarters buildings. In 1874 the Yorkshire Miners’ Association erected what is claimed as the world’s first purpose built trade union headquarters in Barnsley. Unlike the co-operatives, British unions were largely uninterested in architectural innovation. Instead they wanted to show status, just like their industrial employers or any large private or civic organisations of the late Victorian period. In their buildings trade unions employed backward looking rhetoric and images inherited from the trade societies which also illustrated Victorian trade union regalia, membership emblems and banners. So in 1860 the skilled Manchester and Salford Printers named their new headquarters building Caxton Hall, after the fifteenth century English pioneer and follower of Gutenberg.

The growth of British industrial and unskilled unions in the late Victorian period saw a new generation of buildings, often on a mammoth scale, provided by the cheaper subscriptions from a mass membership. The coal miners in regions such as Durham and South Wales could each boast a membership of 250,000. With high accident rates and occupational diseases, some unions invested in impressive convalescent homes for sick and injured members, like that of the Lancashire and Cheshire Miners at Blackpool, which rivalled any of the neighbouring grand hotels along the resort’s seafront. In this period trade unions developed as major powers in the land which dealt as equals with government. Their national headquarters buildings, mainly in London, reflected their economic and political status.

Nondescript structures with no special design features were also typical of the wave of twentieth century trade union buildings, but with the overall growth of unskilled unions, especially for women, these offices were sometimes on a larger and more prestigious scale than in the nineteenth century.

### **Mechanics Institutes**



The prevailing accommodation between British labour and capital also played out in the Mechanics Institutes movement. From the 1820s these provided for the technical educational needs of particularly heavy industries as well as certain elements of a liberal education. Whilst most were controlled and funded by employers, they were tremendously popular with skilled working men thirsty for self education. By 1860, around 1,200 had been established in the UK, with a membership of around 200,000 (Gorman 1985, p.60). Many erected their own premises, usually with employers' philanthropy, and like trade union buildings with no particular architectural style. By the turn of the twentieth century, some Mechanics Institutes had been taken over by local authorities, along with the technical education that they taught, whilst others developed into technical universities. Some still survive, the Manchester Mechanics Institute of 1854, famous as the first meeting place of the Trades Union Congress (TUC), was rescued from dereliction in 1987 by Manchester City Council. The building is now used as a conference centre and as storage for the People's History Museum.

### **Socialism**

The growth of what Marx termed scientific socialism in Britain in the 1880s, coincided with the extension of the franchise to more men in the 1867 and 1884 Reform Acts. However emerging socialist groups (like the Social Democratic Federation, the Socialist League and the Independent Labour Party) were less successful than the two mainstream political parties in attracting new working class voters. These both supported the capitalist system; the Liberal Party encouraged trade union support with moderate social and economic reforms, whilst the Conservative's appeal was to popular imperialism and a 'beer and skittles' culture. Socialist groups were small, embattled, and often quarrelsome. As well as holding political discussions they developed cultural institutions such as bands, choirs, cycling and drama groups, as well as political discussions. Because of widespread hostility to anti-capitalist views, they found it difficult to rent premises for their activities. Pubs in working class areas were especially out of bounds to socialists, given the universal support that the Conservatives enjoyed from the brewing industry. Instead they sought their own premises in city centres or in the industrial suburbs. These were modest or medium sized, with a flexible hall and facilities for refreshments. After initially renting, socialist groups often built their own premises, sometimes with the members undertaking the building work themselves, or at least ensuring that the tradesmen they employed were union members. In the early twentieth century, socialist decorations were sometimes used in churches with working class congregations and left wing priests, or 'red vicars', such as St Mark's in Belgrave, Leicester, with its remarkable war memorial windows.

The late Victorian socialist movement enjoyed the well publicised support from artists like the acclaimed Pre-Raphaelite William Morris and Walter Crane, the pioneer of the Arts and Crafts Movement and a popular children's illustrator (Thompson 1955). Socialists took Morris' dictum to have nothing in one's house that you do not know to be useful or believe to be beautiful' to heart, and it became a badge of honour to decorate their premises in the style of their socialist heroes (Morris 1882). Sylvia Pankhurst (a member of the family whose name became synonymous with Edwardian campaigns for women's suffrage) used her art school training to paint murals for the Hightown Socialist Hall. She was helped by RC

Wallhead, a self taught painter and decorator similar to Frank Owen the main character in the British socialist novel *The Ragged - Trousered Philanthropists* (1914), who later became a Labour Member of Parliament. The hall, in Manchester's eastern suburbs, was opened in 1903 by Walter Crane who also painted his own mural. Such halls saw speeches by luminaries of the socialist and wider labour movements and enabled local people, in this case Harry Pollitt, the future General Secretary of the Communist Party of Great Britain, to begin their political career

Although arguments over policy were common at national level, locally socialists of every stripe worked together to secure common premises, such as the Hightown Hall. Alternatively halls were erected by the dominant socialist group in the locality, as with the Socialist Institute in Nelson, Lancashire (1908), a stronghold of the Independent Labour Party. Of the new socialists only the middle class intellectuals of the Fabian Society held aloof from the move to property, confident that their establishment links would find them premises for their relatively small enclaves.

### **The Clarion Movement**

The ecumenical approach was especially true of the buildings of the Clarion movement. Established in 1895 in Manchester by the hearty ex-soldier and journalist Robert Blatchford, *Clarion* was a newspaper and a cycling and rambling club (Pye 1995). It used proselytising horse drawn vans, as well as cafes to serve up vegetarian food and socialist debate. The Manchester Clarion cafe, opened by Blatchford in 1908, commissioned modern furniture and murals designed by Walter Crane, who had recently come to the city as head of the School of Art (Fig. 6). To serve their cyclists and ramblers the Clarion set up rural clubhouses, where members could stay and enjoy clean country air and socialist fellowship, reviving some of the ideals of the Chartists and Owenites. After being ejected from rented premises by hostile rural landlords, Clarion members built their own clubhouses, usually in a simple bungalow style, perhaps influenced by Chartism. Typical is the Clarion Meeting House in Newchurch-in-Pendle, on the wild moors north of Manchester. Opened by the charismatic and mercurial socialist M.P. for Colne Valley, Victor Grayson, in 1907, it still thrives today. Little survives though of socialist holiday camps, also associated with Clarion but established by independent entrepreneurs.

### **The Labour Party**

From these small socialist beginnings, the Labour Party grew enormously after the First World War, forming its first government in 1924, only 24 years after its formation. Local Labour Parties rapidly established their own premises after 1918 as they saw a real chance of gaining power. They occasionally took over socialist halls, but always on a larger scale, with provision for social activities such as licensed bars, dancing, bingo and raffles, which were used to make money for political activities. Unlike those of the earlier socialists, these were mainly utilitarian in their design and often cheaply constructed. In a similar way to that described in other papers in this special edition, sometimes members themselves (particularly building trade workers or those unemployed in the interwar slump), built them, as a way of

keeping costs down. One example is the Romsey Town Labour Club, Cambridge, opened by Ramsay MacDonald, the first Labour Prime Minister in 1924 (Topman 2006).

Unlike the northern European model of social democratic and later communist ‘workers’ houses’, discussed in this special issue, individual unions or Labour Party branches in the BRITAIN preferred to be autonomous. This stemmed from the decentralised union structure, with skilled unions jealously protecting their social superiority, and from the distinct localism in urban areas. In addition some conservative working class people used Labour halls for social activities and were suspicious of overtly left wing political activity, particularly after the foundation of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1920. So Britain never developed the model of united workers’ assembly halls as found in Germany, Denmark, Finland and elsewhere.

### **Decline**

Between 1945 and 1980 the British labour movement was at the height of its membership and power. The late twentieth century saw a decline in activism and membership of both trade unions and the Labour Party. Less participation, more bureaucratic models, and amalgamations of the skills based unions meant fewer buildings for mass meetings were required. Cheaply built halls became ripe for low grade conversion or demolition. Walton’s description (2008, p.159) of the Co-op also applies to the whole of the labour movement: ‘It ran into trouble in the 1960s, in common with other locally based, voluntarist, participatory, democratic institutions, when it encountered difficulty in adjusting its values and expectations to the new cultures of consumerism and commercial popular entertainment that took flight in that decade.’ With the passage of time the involvement of the labour movement in the construction or use of a building becomes unknown. This could be on the part of statutory planning authorities but also the local labour movement itself. Most of the large twentieth century union buildings, like that of the Amalgamated Engineering Union in Peckham, London, have been sold and/or demolished leaving only Congress House, the London headquarters of the TUC as a trade union ‘palace’, once so common as national or regional headquarters.

Much has been lost, but some examples still exist. Some, such as the Romsey Town Labour Club or the Newchurch Clarion House, are maintained and funded by the same social activities for which they were set up. Some have become labour shrines for the victories or heroic defeats of working class history like the TUC supported complex about the Tolpuddle Martyrs in Dorset, consisting of the Wesleyan Chapel, Memorial Cottages, Martyrs’ Museum and the Dorchester Court House, which hosts a huge yearly commemoration. The Rochdale Pioneers Museum has welcomed visitors since the Co-operative movement re-acquired their original store in Toad Lane, Rochdale in the 1930s. It has recently received a development grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund to improve interpretation and facilities, especially for the thousands of overseas tourists, including Japanese coach parties, seeking inspiration at the shrine of the birthplace of modern co-operation. Other labour movement buildings have also become small museums like the remote Burston Strike School, in south Norfolk, which commemorates a long running school children’s strike started in 1914 for their victimised

socialist teachers. Other redundant buildings like the Blackpool Miners' convalescent home or the Co-op Luma Lamp factory have been successfully converted into housing whilst retaining the integrity of the original.

From the 1950s and 1960s worker historians were the pioneers caring for the material culture of the labour movement, including its buildings. Since 1990 it has been done, with a few exceptions, by the Society for the Study of Labour History. English Heritage, the main government body for historic buildings, has commissioned a new book on the theme (Mansfield in press 2013). It has worked in partnership with the Society for the Study of Labour History to provide guidance for planners, developers, historians and activists; two conferences were held in 1991 and 1996. The National Trust has opened a barely altered Chartist cottage and small holding, at Dodford, in Worcestershire (Fig. 6). The Heritage Lottery Fund has funded a major redevelopment of the People's History Museum in Manchester, which discusses labour movement buildings as part of its story of the British working class. Whilst once significant sites continue to become redundant and are often ripe for redevelopment, growing knowledge about their relevance has made protection easier (Cherry and Mansfield 2002). The central narrative of labour movement buildings in Britain, is clearly one of decline but the examples discussed here show that it is still possible to examine at first hand, the courage, thrift, ambition, pride and sometimes delusion and foolhardiness displayed by the world's first industrial working class as they attempted collective solutions to their individual problems.

## **Conclusion**

Many of these buildings are neglected in part because they have no place within the dominant heritage discourse which defines heritage as grand, tangible and aesthetically pleasing (Smith 2006). The issue is not so much over what is said about the labour movement within this discourse, as it is for, say, indigenous peoples (Smith 2006, p.277), but rather its very absence. However, this paper's description of the life and death of labour movement buildings indicates the ambivalent relationship the movement itself has with its history. The wish to forget can be as strong as the wish to remember (Shackel *et al.* 2011, p.293). Heritage practices are informed by the affective and irrational as well as the rational mind, which might help to explain the passionate importance placed by some on these buildings and the actual neglect they suffer. An analysis of this ambivalence and of the assumption that preservation is always desirable would help to shed light on this complex relationship with the past (Trustram 2012; DeSilvey 2006). Coloredo-Mansfeld alerts us to 'The banal fact that material practice revolves around loss more often than preservation – luster fades, things fall apart, we eat soup' (2003, p.246). Complexity abounds when natural processes of decay meet the human desire to both remember and forget. It is not clear quite *how much* preservation would ever feel sufficient. Not to mention who should do it.

These buildings have a moral electricity because they are rooted in issues of justice. Readers may have spotted that this paper is in itself a piece of intangible heritage (Smith and Akagawa, 2009). It could be taken as an 'authorising narrative' (Waterton 2011, p.361) which claims the territory of labour movement heritage. The narrative implies a cohesive,

progressive labour movement rather than a complex array of different interests operating in rapidly changing political contexts. If heritage is a cultural process (Smith 2006) it is worth speculating on what process this paper is carrying out. Unlike some accounts of labour history (Samuel 1998, p.xix) it asserts a clear trajectory, perhaps it even apes the grand narratives of the mainstream heritage narrative. Current activists can locate themselves, or not, within this trajectory; such an identification can be inspiring, consoling, dispiriting and so on.

Smith and Campbell (2011) remind us of the old labour movement slogan, ‘don’t mourn, organise’. The reluctance to mourn or grieve exists not only on the left. President Bush announced on 21 September 2001 that now was the time for action to take the place of grief at the attack on the Twin Towers on September 11 2001 (Butler 2004, p.29). If mourning is a process which helps one come to terms with loss, then the process of heritage can be imagined as an act of mourning. Acts of mourning are very similar to Smith and Waterton’s description of heritage as ‘knowing the past through remembering and commemoration’ (2009, p.53; Leader 2008, p.8).

The injunction not to mourn comes from a sense that mourning will impede the process of creating change: remembering and feeling emotional might interfere with action. It is worth noting here that heritage is often characterised as a reactionary activity, a nostalgic adherence to the past (Hewison 1987; Smith and Waterton 2009, p.51). If one dwells too long on loss then one’s potency and agency might also be lost. Hence perhaps in part the patchy record that this paper reveals of the labour movement’s commemoration and memorialisation of its material past. But failure to work through the meanings of loss also pose risks such as extremes of vengeful reaction or a powerless melancholy.

The act of mourning is about integrating the lost object into one’s sense of self and moving on (Reineman 2011; Leader 2008, p.28). It is a process of understanding and integrating what the lost object means to the mourner. This is also one of the processes of heritage: re-locating the lost object (literally as in lost things but also the lost internal sense of the past) within oneself and in the physical landscape. Ambivalence about the lost object can interfere with this process of integration. The processes of heritage are often framed in terms of making memories and meaning (Smith 2006, p.302). We suggest there is a further process, a psychological mechanism, whereby memories are worked through in order to reach some acceptance of loss, which is the process of mourning. This might be referred to as an analysis of the ‘felt heritage’ as opposed to the heritage which is cognitively known but not consciously felt.

Smith and Waterton (2009, p.300) say ‘the moment of heritage is a moment when cultural, social and political values and meanings are recognised, scrutinised, accepted, reworked or otherwise negotiated’. What can be added here is that the moment of heritage also occurs when the meaning for the subject’s inner life is recognised and scrutinised, consciously or unconsciously. The impact of heritage on collective experience is often stressed and is particularly apposite when working with the heritage of a collective movement like the labour movement. But it works at both an individual and collective level. In other words, heritage

does psychological work, for the collective and the individual, as well as social, cultural and political work (Smith 2006, p.308).

Let us finish with the words of Judith Butler: 'Many people think that grief is privatising, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing.' She goes on to say, 'But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility' (Butler 2004, p.22). It is these relational ties that are fostered by heritage practice.

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Figures

1. Drawing of radical meeting at the Rotunda, London, c. 1831
2. Owenite Hall of the People, Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, 1837
3. Chartist Hall of the People, Snigs End, Gloucestershire, 1846
4. Rochdale Pioneers' Museum, Toad Lane, Lancashire, 1844
5. Yorkshire Miners Association headquarters, Barnsley, Yorkshire, 1874
6. Interior Manchester Clarion Cafe, 1908