

Durham RCCs work supporting communities in 1936 is still as necessary today



Laying the foundations of the New Coundon Social Service Centre. Are you the boy in the picture? Can you tell us who he is?

The birth of Durham Rural Community Council

History has a habit of repeating itself but now in 2009, despite the odds, we have the infrastructure to help ourselves.

The world in 1937.....

- May - Neville Chamberlain became Prime Minister after Baldwin resigned
- June - The Hollywood star 'Blonde Bombshell' Jean Harlow died aged 26
- June - The Duke of Windsor married Mrs Wallis Simpson (a divorced woman) in France following his abdication
- July - US popular composer George Gershwin died aged 38
- August - The Japanese bombed Shanghai in a new offensive against China
- October - Duke and Duchess of Windsor met Hitler in Berlin
- November - Hitler called his military aides together and outlined his plans for world domination.

.....meanwhile in Northern England

the depression which followed the General Strike of 1926 remained a black cloud. County Durham was labelled by the government as a 'Special Area'. 22.4% of school-children showed symptoms of undernourishment, a housing survey showed overcrowding to be amongst the worst in the country. Tuberculosis was rife and unemployment, although down on 1933, was the highest in Great Britain and if that wasn't enough - world war loomed on the horizon.

The scene was set then for the Government agency of the day 'The National Council for Social Service', which was organising social work amongst the unemployed, to found The Community Service Council for Durham County. And so our organisation was born.

In a booklet, published in spring 1940, by Durham Community Service Council entitled '*Co-operation – rebirth in County Durham*' (price 6d) there is an article written – rather snootily - by Barbara Donington, (author listed by the Left Book Club founded to disseminate and advance left-wing political and social ideas) which describes the villages of the County. In it she says 'When we think of an English village, we usually call to mind a pleasant picture of peaceful rural life where, although there may be poverty, there is not despair, and fairly happy community life is attainable, partly because of the interest and financial help of the more wealthy people living in the neighbourhood. The villages of County Durham present a quite different picture; and this is chiefly because they often came into being through coal-mining and not through farming.'

She observed that farming brought out a patient and unhurried attitude to life in its people and those villages had an air of tranquillity and spaciousness, with their village greens and large cottage gardens. After denigrating the effect of mining on the character of its workers, she goes on to paint a black picture of their houses and villages.

'Village' does not seem to be the right word to use for the two or three rows of miners' cottages cramped together in the smallest possible space, with the pithead and slag heap in place of the village green as the central point.

'One moment you are walking across a newly ploughed field hedged with elms, or a pleasant meadow where sheep are grazing and then, over the next hill, you come upon the inevitable pithead with its slag-heap, pyramid-shaped, dominating the small grey cottages, built in close rows, each with its tiny backyard and the line of privies at the bottom.'

In 1937 she tells us 'The pit may now be closed, with the gear standing rusting, and there is a feeling of hopelessness and desolation over the place. A small community hurriedly got together, houses rushed up just adequate to hold miners' families and give shelter; everything subordinate to the pit, leaving no time or thought for other things. And then, when there is no more money to be made, the pit is closed and the place is abandoned as rapidly as it was formed.

'But those who live in the cottages and can find no work elsewhere remain behind – derelict community, unwanted and almost forgotten. One knows too well the details of poverty and unhappiness which those villages represent.'

You will recognise truth and ignorance in her article but, nevertheless, the hopelessness of the situation described has haunted the area repeatedly and felt no less keenly by those in recession today.

Durham Community Service Council, as it was known then, set out its stall to attack the causes of unhappiness in three separate ways: social service clubs; personal case work; co-operation with other bodies. The three were derived from the belief that it is individuals who matter and the desire to see each unique personality given the opportunity of growing to full stature – in fact the same philosophy of empowerment Durham RCC strives to achieve today.

In 1947 the Community Service Council for Durham County Ltd (then based at Hallgarth House, Durham City) published a booklet 'This neighbour of mine' (priced 6d). In it the Chairman, The Dean of Durham, endorsed an article outlining the work of the Council which was, in the interest of impartiality, written by 'a friend' who had no connection with the organisation .

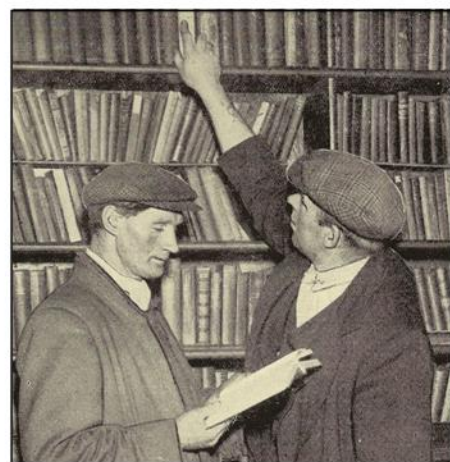
In the article the writer states 'its work is to help existing organisations, deciding what has to be done and to dividing that work



The King and Queen visit Tow Law Social Service Club in 1939, above.

Members enjoying their library, below. 90 courses were completed in 1936/7 in conjunction with Workers' Education Association.

in the manner least wasteful of time and effort. He goes on 'The organisation has encouraged local councils in Middlesbrough, Sunderland and West Hartlepool. And through the Council they are kept in close touch with one another.' He states that it is because the Council is on the best of terms with the Local Authorities, in particular the Education Authorities, that its work runs so smoothly. Andsome things never change.....'The Local Authorities, like the voluntary association, are there to serve the general good of the community, but far too often, instead of co-operating over the job of work to be done local government officers and voluntary workers are apt to eye one another like two strange dogs met together above one bone. That this state of affairs does not exist in County Durham is due, in part at any rate, to the liaison work of the Community Service Council.'



Local people at work on the interior of the Toft Hill Centre, above, and, below, the Coundon Centre nearing completion.

In the Community Service Council's second annual report 1936/37 (when the executive included three Bishops, one Dean, three



The New Coundon Centre nearing completion. The huts are the design of D. McIntyre, Chapter Architect. (N.E. Dly. Gazette photograph).

Honourables, one Reverend and a Lady) Sir George M. Gillett, J.P. Commissioner for 'Special Areas' said in the foreword: 'Whilst my Department is doing its utmost to revive old industries, there are over 100,000 workers in County Durham and on Tyneside whose services are unfortunately still not required by Industry.'

In Bishop Auckland, of 9,000 insured workers, 4,000 were unemployed. Bad conditions were the legacy of the unemployed coal-miners, many of whom were too old to train for another calling. Their days were spent in work which was the most dangerous of all occupations which took its toll of lives at a yearly rate of over a thousand men. Over 4,000 per annum received injuries, and in Durham the average wage during 1936 was a fraction over £2 per week per man employed.

Meanwhile, it was thought by the powers that be, steps should continue to be taken to help those who remain unemployed to occupy their time in the most useful and interesting way possible, and to keep themselves fit for work when it is offered.'

In the Statement of Accounts for the year ending March 31, 1937 it is noted that the Community Service Council received a grant of £5,269.6.4. And so it was possible for work to begin.

Social clubs, which conformed to no standard pattern, developed in accordance with local tradition did much to remedy the frustration felt by the unemployed—although membership was not limited to the unemployed. And so social service clubs grew up in Durham County supported by the Community Service Council. Voluntary labour built, repaired and extended premises to be equipped with occupational, cultural and recreational facilities.

The Social Service Clubs even went on to organise summer Holiday Camps.

The report tells the story of

occupational and educational activities, music and drama. physical training and adolescent welfare work. During the year there had been a steady increase both in the range of the Councils' activities and in the number of people who took advantage of its services. The report lists an excess of 150,000 attendances at classes throughout the County.

At Butterknowle Social Service Centre classes included woodwork, cobbling, upholstery, men's keep-fit, women's keep fit, history, recreation, drama, choral society, local government, ambulance class and the cobbling of children's boots.

meals, and set to work. A typical instance was the Amenity Scheme at Tow Law - once home to a great iron foundry. The spirit of the men at Tow Law was not broken by the decline and at the suggestion of the Community Service Council they gathered together to use their enforced inaction for profit. The foundry had left an unsightly memorial. A lease for this waste land was arranged and two hundred men volunteered to give their labour to turn it into a football field, a children's playground and an open air swimming bath. A committee was formed among the workers which selected 'gangers' or foremen to superintend the work and authority was given them to



Heavy work at Tow Law. (N.E. Dly. Gazette photograph).

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Amenity Schemes

About 30 Amenity Schemes, of land clearance and reclamation, were completed in the County during 1936/37. By arrangement with the Government's Commissioner for Special Areas, grants were arranged to make possible the purchase of leases and technical advice needed throughout the course of construction. The men were provided with boots and overalls, plus an allowance of 9d. per day for

Heavy work at the Tow Law amenity scheme, above.

direct operations. Through the Council, the London Rover Scouts heard of the scheme, appealed to their members and a regular £15 per month was collected and sent to Tow Law.

The work took years to complete but men began to feel that they were partners - growing strong and practising their skills together - in fact moving a mountain!



The Amenity Scheme at Witton Park

Adopting Bodies

One of the most interesting and perhaps the most significant offers of help afforded the Social Service movement came from 'adoptions'. Organised groups in the south came voluntarily to the aid of the north to the tune of many thousands of pounds and an inestimable quantity of personal service.

Whole villages, counties and towns took a special interest in village—or groups of villages in County Durham and sent clothing, money and equipment and, most valuable of all, relationships.

In government office typists, clerks, commissionaires, heads of departments and under-secretaries accepted a voluntary deduction ranging from pennies to pounds on their monthly salaries and sent it to clubs in the County. The Home Office, the Patent Office, the Ministries of Agriculture, Health and Labour, the Exchequer and Audit Crown Agents, Post Office, Board of Education and Office of Works were only a few of those who undertook this truly admirable task.

Help came not only from the affluent but also from the poor - even from children in elementary schools, and from men and women whose earnings were not large, but

who had security of tenure and a reasonable livelihood and were willing to lend a hand to their fellows who possessed neither work nor security. Some £17,000 was collected in one appeal alone - remembering the average wage of a miner was little more than £2 per week at that time.

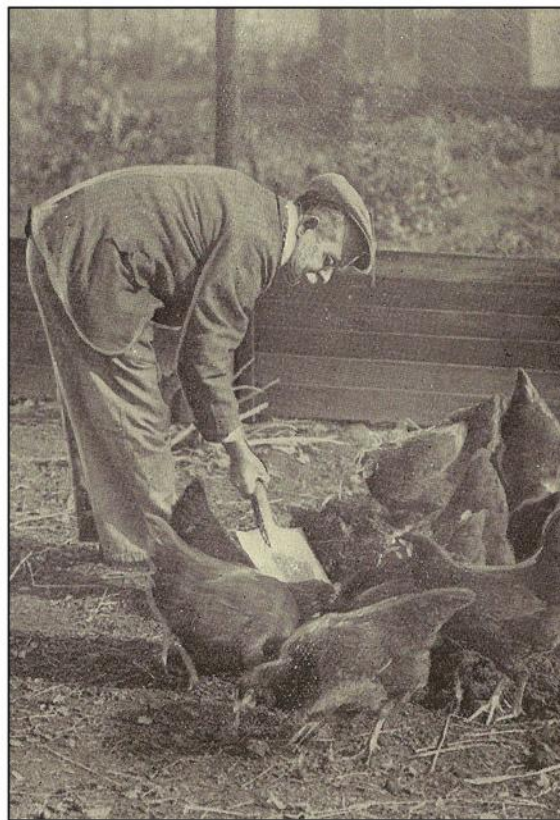
74 County Durham settlements were twinned with Adopting Bodies.

Full Circle

The report ends by drawing attention to the problem faced by organisations in Durham of the psychological effects of the

conditions of the day—in which a new generation was growing to manhood and womanhood saying it was a matter of greater urgency than almost any other problem.

The same problem is thought by many to be of equal seriousness in 2009. At that time there existed many groups for young people like the Boys' Brigade, The Girl Guides, The Boy Scouts which are not 'cool' enough for the youth of today - so it's hats off to those community groups working hard through current social difficulties and managing to channel the energy of the latest generation of young people.



At work on one of the Government Poultry Schemes, left.

Below, making a bowling green at Witton Gilbert.

Maureen Thomas 2009.

