

28 Years After It Was Begun Peterlee Artwork Nears Completion

By David Prudames | 01 March 2004

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Photo: Horden, 1900.
Courtesy Easington District Council.

Almost 28 years after it was started, work is to begin again on an extraordinary artwork recording life in the North East of England.

The Peterlee Project is set to go on show at the University of Sunderland's Vardy Art Gallery on March 9 and will bring the story of Peterlee New Town, built in the 1950s, right up to date.

The project began in 1976 when Stuart Brisley was appointed artist in residence at the town. A year and a half later he had created an archive of photographs, stories and taped oral histories that told the story of the people who came to live in Peterlee.

Speaking to the 24 Hour Museum, Stuart explained how his idea had been "to set up a situation where one could begin to establish a sense of history, of how the town came about."

After the Second World War in a document called 'Farewell Squalor', Easington District Council asked the Government to help them build a new town to provide homes for people who had worked in and around the mining villages of the North East.

The result was designed to be a modernist idyll with vast green areas, contemporary architecture and modern housing. But as a brand new development, Stuart Brisley felt that with a lack of a history of its own he had to look to the story of the people who would make it their home.

"Peterlee only started in the 1950s so the history of the area is the history of the villages that grew up around the pitheads," he said.

So, he set about collecting the stories of the people who had grown up in mining families and could remember the time before Peterlee was built in order to find out why it was built.

Photo: over the years the archive has developed into one of the most important records of life in the North East. Courtesy Easington District Council.



"The mines were all sunk in this area on the coastline roughly between 1900 and 1915, which meant that the people, the children that came into the area with their parents, some of them were still around."

With a team of assistants armed with tape recorders he captured what information he could and pieced it together to create something of a pre-history that, in effect, told the story of Peterlee itself.

"What it does is get a sense of why the new town was there. That was the important thing," he added.

In 1977 Stuart left the project in the hands of Easington District Council. It was added to over the years and has since become an unparalleled historical record of North East culture.

Now, as Stuart explained, working with the Vardy Gallery and artist Tim Brennan, he hopes to redevelop the project and bring it up to date.

"This particular project in the Vardy Gallery is to take the whole of the archive and plonk it in the gallery and open it up to get the whole thing looked at again," he said.

"Then make a proposal for another phase of it, which would take into account the decimation of the mining industry, its aftermath and what's happened since."

As well as the exhibition, a series of public talks will be held on Tuesday nights led by local historians and representatives of the National Union of Mineworkers and Women Against Pit Closures.

These will be open discussions and it is hoped that local people will come forward and contribute, especially in the light of this year's twentieth anniversary of the 1984 miner's strike.

"It's kind of interesting that in the last week or so there is suddenly so much material about on the miner's strike," said Stuart. "This exhibition comes at a very opportune moment."

The exhibition is running until Friday April 2. For more information contact the Vardy Gallery on 0191 515 2128