Stories in their place

Matt Edgar

January 2013

Version 1.0

http://matt.me63.com/place/

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## Description: http://me63.files.wordpress.com/2011/03/newtonsapple.jpg?w=678“The bit where the screen went black and you said ‘look up’”: on the irresistible pull of a story in the place where it happened

This is my youngest son, Pascal, when he was two years old. He’s looking sheepish because he’s just picked an apple. It’s an apple from the orchard at Woolsthorpe Manor, Lincolnshire, the orchard where Isaac Newton first conceived of gravity.

We were drawn to this beautiful, remote farmhouse for a tea break on a long journey, and ended up learning some science. A master storyteller can make the laws of gravity come alive anywhere, even in a lift[[1]](#footnote-1), but to experience them at Woolsthorpe adds an extra weight. The National Trust which now owns the house has turned a barn into a small discovery centre where you too can see the forces of nature anew, right where Newton did more than 300 years ago.

In his famous Proposition 75 Theorem 35, Newton wrote: “If to the several points of a given sphere there tend equal centripetal forces decreasing in a duplicate ratio of the distances from the points; I say, that another similar sphere will be attracted by it with a force reciprocally proportional to the square of the distance of the centres.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

That “reciprocally proportional square of the distance” bit means the attraction gets stronger, much stronger, as things get closer together.

So it is with stories. Sheffield and Leeds are 34 miles apart. When I told the story of Leeds steam engine pioneer Matthew Murray in the Cutlers’ Hall, Sheffield, the Interesting North audience gave me polite applause. (Granted, it was 10:30am on a Saturday when many had got up early to be there.) When I told the same story in Temple Works, Leeds, just across the road from the site of Murray’s Round Foundry the audience gave much more. I could have raised a mob there and then to tear down James Watt’s statue in City Square.

It’s more than just playing to a home crowd. A story in the same county is quite interesting. A story in the same city is more compelling. A story in the place where it happened is extra powerful.

That’s why it was so much fun to talk about the Leeds Corn Exchange *in the Corn Exchange*. Afterwards, several people remarked on the same moment in the talk, something that brought this thing home to me.

The talk was part of Bettakultcha, a series of lightning talks, each with 20 slides in five minutes. When I reached the part about the amazing domed roof, there seemed little point showing people a PowerPoint slide of the inside of the Corn Exchange *in the Corn Exchange*. Cuthbert Brodrick’s masterpiece speaks for itself. So I blanked the screen and asked people to look up. They looked up at the Spartan, modern-before-its-time structure above our heads. It turns out this was the point of maximum attraction, the moment people were as one with place, the point most remarked on in conversations about it ever since.

Actually being there increases exponentially the return on just a small leap of imagination. We can picture the protagonists standing beside us, under the same sun, breathing the same air. For this reason the micro-content of heritage blue plaques – tiny snippets of information attached to important and interesting buildings – can be so powerful.

Local stories need not be static, parochial stories. As I hinted in my Corn Exchange talk and argued explicitly in ‘The Makers of Leeds’, our city owes its dynamism to outsiders and their connections with other great cities around the world. Without Egypt, we would have no Egyptian-style Temple Works; without France, no immigrant cinematographer Louis Le Prince.

These unexpected links with other places, these wormholes, only open up when we open our imaginations to the things that happened in the past, in the places where we now find ourselves.

An oft-remarked characteristic of the internet is that it erases distance and difference, that it allows a script kiddy in Kazakhstan to cripple a business in California. In this account it seems local differences will be erased by the swelling ranks of the Republic of Facebook.

But this emerging medium must surely also power a resurgence in situated storytelling. The location-aware dimension of the mobile internet is uniquely well placed to bring stories to people where they need to know them most.

The hyperlinked web dimension makes it possible to leap through the wormholes from one situated story to its entangled quantum twin. Without this way of traversing, I could not have stood on stage at Leeds Town Hall with a bait-and-switch talk that drew the audience’s attention to Mount St Mary’s Church – built the same year as our venue, less than a mile away, yet in so many ways its antithesis.

All of which presents a problem in attempting to translate these assorted talks and blog posts accumulated over four years into a single satisfying volume that you could read in an hour or two. I didn't set out on this voyage with a plan in mind, but have seen a thesis emerge through a series of chance encounters with buildings, stories and ideas. If in places it seems rough around the edges, that’s because its natural habitat, the world wide web, has no edges.

The first part of this collection gathers together stories about heroes – the “makers of Leeds,” its industrial and scientific pioneers. Part 2 expands on the concept of “narrative capital,” the stock of stories that a city has to draw on. And part 3 takes a tentative look to the future, wondering if the heritage of the city and its wider region could be a foundation for a new, forward-looking “idea of the north.”

In places I have added explanations for readers unfamiliar with the places in question, while trying not to labour the point for the many others who know the city of Leeds far better than I do. I have tried to preserve some of my capricious hyperlinking in the form of footnotes.

Which brings us to the map. If you want to test out the hypothesis about situated stories, why not take this book for a walk. I’ve marked on a slice across town that roughly mirrors the journey of discovery I’ve been on with these talks and blog posts. This is no country ramble. You will not find the peacefulness of Newton’s Woolsthorpe here. But if an apple happens to fall, or a penny to drop, please do let me know.

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# 1. The Makers of Leeds

## Temple Works 3.0 Alpha

This journey begins with a collapse. Once the “largest single room in the world,” with innovative air conditioning under the floor and sheep grazing on a grass-covered roof, Leeds’ Temple Works had fallen on hard times. In the early hours of Monday December 8, 2008, one of the massive stone pillars of the Grade I listed Egyptian-style building gave way. The road outside was blocked with shattered masonry while a gaping hole had opened up in the roof. From my desk on the fifth floor of next-door Marshall’s Mill, I had a ringside view of the damage. Over the months that followed things started to happen. Repairs began and plans were afoot for reuse of the building. Thanks to Culture Vulture Emma Bearman, I was privileged to get a peek inside.

Here in the heart of the world’s first industrial nation, it’s not unusual to see old places learn to serve new purposes in response to people’s changing needs. As traditional manufacturing has moved offshore, countless mills, factories and warehouses have been regenerated as offices, retail, flats and hotels. At Salt’s Mill, near Bradford, you can find art and electronics under one roof.

Yet Temple Works stands out from the crowd for so many reasons. At first sight there’s the weighty Egyptian facade, modelled on the Temple of Horus at Edfu, looming incongruously over edge-of-town Holbeck. Going inside for the first time, we can appreciate the sheer scale of the place. And in its stripped-out state the innovative construction is easily visible. The sun streams in through 65 circular skylights.

Scratch the surface for something still more fascinating: in two distinct incarnations Temple Works tells the story of the past 160 years of working life, and with a third it poses tantalising questions about where we go next.

Temple Works 1.0 was a flax spinning mill, built by John Marshall, just as British manufacturing powered into the Victorian Age. Marshall’s first mills had been functional red-brick boxes constructed rapidly to house the innovative spinning frames that made his fortune. Joseph Bonomi’s stone facade signalled a new confidence, authority and permanence.

Despite his political opponents’ accusations of abuse of child-labour in his mills, Marshall was regarded as one of the most liberal factory owners of his time. In his factories, overseers were not allowed to use corporal punishment on the workers. Younger children were encouraged to attend day school, and older children were given free education on Monday afternoons.

Marshalls ceased production there in 1886, but the textile use continued, moving up the value chain from spinning to clothing manufacture for James Rhodes and Co. This was Britain as a maker of things, the Workshop of the World.

Temple Works 2.0 was the northern distribution depot of Kay’s, the mail-order catalogue.[[3]](#footnote-3) After the Second World War the historic manufacturing sectors were undercut by industrialisation elsewhere in the globe, where people could produce at lower costs and in greater variety. Now Brits wanted a piece of America’s consumer revolution, and Kay’s were ready to oblige. Think of 1950s catalogue shopping as the e-commerce of its day, and Kay’s as Amazon.com.

Just imagine Temple Works’ vast single-storey open space filled with clothing and consumer goods ready for dispatch to home-shoppers across Northern England. Kay’s is well within living memory, and in parts the mill we found was much as the warehouse people left it when they moved out five years ago. The regeneration plans entail the demolition of an unloved 1950s extension, but I really hope the new uses will connect as much with this era as with the distant rattle of Marshall’s spinning frames.

Temple Works 3.0: What does post-industrial, post-consumerist Britain look like? The days when we defined ourselves by our industrial production have long gone, though the making of things could yet stage a comeback. It would be great to see products stamped with “Temple Works” again. It’s unlikely to be mass production on John Marshall’s scale, so we’ll have to make up what’s lacking in quantity with quality in handmades and one-offs.

We have more stuff than ever before, but it’s no longer fashionable to define ourselves by what we buy. By the time of the Temple Works collapse – at a time when Governments around the world were busy propping up the world’s financial system – Leeds’ carefully cultivated image as the shopping capital of the North was already looking anachronistic. As well as things, we will spin experiences, authentically anchored in time and place, but also shareable as multimedia, cast out upon the web. For the first time in its life, Temple Works will be open to the public on a regular basis: people in, instead of goods out.

Despite (or perhaps because of) the economic climate the people behind the scheme to turn Temple Works into a major cultural venue went out of their way in those early days to connect with all interested parties to make this vision a reality. The overall scheme was to proceed painfully slowly, but some parts of the building were made usable within a few months – a Temple Works 3.0 Alpha.

## How to get ahead in business the Boulton and Watt way

At a low-fi Temple Works Christmas party just a year after the collapse, I argued with Ivor Tymchak about the pace of technological change. A few weeks later Ivor and Richard Michie invited me to talk at the first ever Bettakultcha event, to take place in the Temple Works boardroom. How could I resist? The story I chose to tell was that of Matthew Murray, one of John Marshall’s most trusted employees, and his run-in with one of the biggest names of the industrial revolution.

Dirty tricks among high-tech businesses? I recently came across the original Machiavellian play book for start-ups, and it’s more than 200 years old.

Our hero is Holbeck engineer Matthew Murray; his nemesis steam pioneer [James Watt](http://matt.me63.com/94/inventors/). Both made engines for the textile mills of northern England – in effect the processing power to transform raw wool, flax and cotton into finished cloth. Later, their inventions went mobile to haul the first railway trains.

But the villain of this piece is Watt’s son, also called James, who in 1794 joined his father’s partnership with Matthew Boulton. Within a few years the upstart Leeds foundry of Fenton, Murray and Wood proved a serious competitor to Boulton & Watt’s more famous Soho works in Birmingham.

The stories of Watt’s feud with Murray are the stuff of Leeds legend, but to understand just how blatant it was we must revisit the original sources, the letters and newspaper advertisements of the protagonists themselves.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Here, in his own words and those of his contemporaries, we can piece together the business wisdom of James Watt Junior.

1. Reach out to your competitors – In 1799, Watt’s employees Abraham Storey and William Murdock visited Leeds and called on Fenton, Murray and Wood, whose purpose-built Round Foundry was under construction just across the road from John Marshall’s mill. Murray recounts in the *Leeds Mercury* of 20 July 1803:

“Mr. Storey, Manager of their Foundry, and Mr. Murdock, Superintendent of the Workmen at Soho, some time back visited our Works at Leeds, and from their assuring us of Messrs. Boulton, Watt & Co.’s friendly disposition were admitted into every part of the Manufactory by Mr. Wood and myself; they were permitted to take Patterns and Specimens of our Workmanship, and we know that upon their return to Soho many of our Improvements were immediately adopted, and the engines made after that by them were in part constructed on our Plans.”

Boulton confirmed this in a letter to Watt Junior: “Murdock & Abraham are now returned from their excursion highly delighted and full of panegyricks upon Murray’s excellent work.”

2. Be generous with your hospitality – Boulton goes on: “They were admitted into every part of Murray’s manufactory & spent two evenings with him and by virtue of a plentiful dose of ale succeeded in extracting from him the arcana and mysteries of his superior performances.”

The return visit, according to Murray, was not so cordial:

“Mr. Murdock, upon taking his leave of us, expressed a wish that as they and we were certainly the best Engine Makers in the Kingdom, we should always be upon good terms, and that if ever I should go to Soho, they would be very glad to show me all their Works.

“I did go to Soho, and was refused admittance into their Manufactory of Steam Engines.”

3. Be a flexible employer – There seems to have been a flow of workers between the two rival businesses, and when one of Boulton & Watt’s finest moved from Birmingham to Leeds, Watt Jnr travelled north to lure him back into the fold with an offer of increased pay. Yet having re-engaged the defector he was in no hurry to have him back at Soho:

“Halligan has signed the agreement… If I mistake not he has it in his power to benefit us most materially, as he has been extremely attentive to all that is going on in the Foundry here and has picked up much valuable information. He is to remain with Murray as long as we may direct and to make application to try his hand at the green sand [the casting method at which Murray works clearly outdid Watt's].”

4. Steal with pride – Watt had a further task for Halligan: to obtain the private correspondence of another defector, named Hughes:

“He has promised to endeavour to get at old Hughes’s letters upon Wednesday night when the youth goes to the play and it is supposed may leave his letters in his working clothes. I confess that this is not very probable from the caution he observes and if it does not succeed, must have them examined whilst he is drunk or sleeping to ascertain whether they are worth taking.”

A later letter reveals that Watt did get sight of the correspondence, but found nothing in it of use.

5. Expand into adjacent industries – as in those industries that happen to be adjacent to your competitor’s premises. Watt to Boulton on 12 June 1802:

“I have been surveying the environs of this rival Establishment & making enquiries respecting the property & tenure of the neighbouring lands, with a view to seeing whether we could purchase anything under their very nose that might materially annoy them & eventually benefit ourselves. I find there are about 2 acres of Land next to Murray’s works, which may be purchased, but the price probably will be £5 to 600 per acre. I shall learn the exact terms. There is a Malthouse which projects into their premises, which they have in vain endeavoured to purchase at a moderate rate. It is in the possession of a Widow, who is aware that it would be of some advantage to them & therefore asks a high price. This would enable us to overlook their whole Yard & holding it we might dictate our own terms.”

Boulton & Watt eventually bought a 1.5 acre plot next to Murray’s works in order to prevent them expanding, though the widow at the malthouse asked too high a price.

6. If you can’t innovate, litigate – Murray had patented a number of improvements to steam engines, but Boulton & Watt challenged these, claiming that some were not original. It seems that Murray made the mistake of packing too many innovations into a single patent, so that when one element was questioned the whole patent would be lost. Murray declined to defend the Boulton & Watt challenge, saying he “did not think proper to defend it with such rich and powerful Opponents”.

Instead Murray kept his focus on his customers: “But the World I believe cares very little about Messrs. Boulton and Watt stealing my Inventions, or my stealing theirs; what people want of us are good engines…”He offered a 100 guinea wager that he could build a better engine than Boulton & Watt, to be judged by a jury of 12 other engine makers. The challenge was not taken up.

In the long run both businesses prospered. Murray went on to provide the engine for the World’s first commercially successful steam railway, at Middleton Colliery, near Leeds. He died in 1826, his firm outliving him until it went out of business in 1843. Boulton and Watt lasted 120 years, making steam engines until 1895.

## The Other Fourth Plinth

Curiously, James Watt Senior, not Matthew Murray, is commemorated by a statue in Leeds’ City Square. In a guest post on the Culture Vulture’s blog, I called for this to be put right.

On a Sunday morning in February 1926, a delegation assembled around a cast iron obelisk in the yard of St. Matthew’s Church, Holbeck. Led by John Arnott, the Lord Mayor of Leeds, the city’s civil, mechanical and electrical engineering organisations were well represented, employers and trade unionists united in a common endeavour.

They were there to mark the centenary of the death of steam engine pioneer Matthew Murray, whose grateful workers had cast and erected the obelisk in his honour. It still stands today.

The incumbent Rev. R. J. Wood preached a sermon on a text from the Book of Proverbs (“Seest thou a man diligent in his business? He shall stand before kings; he shall not stand before mean men”) and after the service there were talks on the life of Murray, including one by the Leeds engineer E. Kilburn Scott who was to edit a centenary biography.

Murray arrived in Leeds as an uneducated journeyman blacksmith in 1789, and went on to build the world’s first integrated engineering works, the Round Foundry; to make the locomotive for the first commercially successful steam trains on the Middleton Railway; and to train many apprentices who took the city’s engineering prowess to new heights. All this he did in spite of the bully-boy tactics of one of the biggest names of the industrial revolution, Boulton, Watt and Sons. In particular the Sons ran a campaign of dirty tricks to stop Murray’s start-up in its tracks.

In his talk Kilburn Scott listed Murray’s many achievements in spinning, steam engines and boring machines (as in, machines for making holes in things). He gave a lurid account of Watt’s campaign of persecution. But there was one final injustice that Kilburn Scott felt especially keenly.

In 1899 Leeds councillors had chosen statues to adorn their brand new City Square. As the centrepiece subject they picked Edward, the Black Prince, who despite having no personal connection with the city symbolised the virtues they hoped to uphold: democracy and chivalry. For supporting roles they chose three Leeds worthies: scientist Joseph Priestley, merchant John Harrison and clergyman Walter Hook. For the fourth plinth they picked a famous engineer: none other than Matthew Murray’s nemesis James Watt.

Surely, said Kilburn Scott, this could not have been a deliberate rebuff of a favourite son? If the city fathers had known then of the story of Watt’s subterfuge, it might be Murray, not Watt, gazing down on arriving passengers at the new City Station.

As a newspaper letter-writer, W.J. Barker, put it at the time: “Matthew Murray, who with exceptional skill and high reputation, founded the locomotive industry in Leeds, lies in a neglected and half-forgotten grave in Holbeck Churchyard, while the memory of the man who became so jealous of him that his firm bought land next to Murray’s works with the object of preventing extensions, is commemorated in City Square.”

But the victors write the history, and James Watt Senior still stands on his plinth today. While the other statues reinforce morality and genius as our Victorian predecessors intended, the presence of the Watt statue sends quite the wrong message about the nature of power. I don’t want my children believing they can scheme and strong-arm their way to the top. Something must be done, and even after all these years it is not too late.

With the price of metal not now what it used to be, melting down James Watt would seem a wanton waste, so perhaps one of the places with which he’s more associated – his birthplace of Greenock or adopted home of Birmingham – could be persuaded to give him a more fitting home? After all a weed is only a flower in the wrong place.

The righting of this century-old injustice would leave us with an empty spot in a prize City Square location, and I accept that in these straitened times it may not be possible to do Matthew Murray full justice in bronze.

So what if Leeds were to take just one lead from London, where a Trafalgar Square plinth has become famous – the most famous of all plinths - for it lack of a permanent occupant? What better place to give new work a platform? People of Leeds, what would you put on City Square’s fantasy fourth plinth?

## The Makers of Leeds

Not far from Temple Works stands the Mint, an eight-storey new build office block with commanding views across the city. Imran Ali’s spectacular panoramic photos from the building were the starting point for my talk at the TEDxLeeds event that Imran organised with Emma Cheshire, on the top floors of the Mint.

It starts with the amazing view from the top of the TEDxLeeds venue, the Mint, which looks out over Leeds on all sides. The American architect Hugh Newell Jacobsen said: “When you look at a city, it’s like reading the hopes, aspirations and pride of everyone who built it.”

And where better to illustrate this than in one of the world’s oldest industrial cities? The new cities springing up in Asia, Africa and South America have 200 years to wait before they have such depth of stories.

Looking down towards Leeds Bridge, we can imagine the scene where Louis Le Prince shot one of the world’s first ever movies. Together with his wife Lizzie, who trained in ceramics, Louis started a “school of technical arts” in Leeds. This marriage of arts and science is still alive today among the poets and sketchers of the Leeds Savages and the makers and hackers at the Leeds Hackspace.

While we think of new media as bits and bytes, digital content, the new media of the late Victorian period was chemistry – specifically the actions of light and chemicals on ceramics, brass, paper and celluloid. The Le Princes had to combine these things to come up with a whole new artform.

But to make his design a reality, Le Prince needed a way to reliably move the film through the gate of his camera or projector. He turned to an inventor who had something every city needs – tickets (just think of all those football matches and theatre performances). James Longley had invented a machine for dispensing tickets. Le Prince commissioned him to combine this know-how with his own work on photography to create his camera-projector.

And the result is a snippet of [traffic moving across Leeds Bridge](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CSd1CLhFKlk) – commemorated on a blue plaque as “probably the world’s first successful moving pictures”. If you don’t believe how important this is, you can look it up yourself in the Internet Movie Database where Le Prince dominates the movie charts for 1888. There are no entries for 1887.

Just down the road from Leeds Bridge is Meadow Lane where hacker Joseph Priestley moved in near Jakes and Nell’s brewery. He noticed bubbles on the vats of beer and wondered what they were. This led to a series of experiments that isolated the gas we know today as oxygen. Priestley shared his discoveries of the effect of this gas on plants and animals with his coffee-house friend Ben Franklin who, in a startling leap of imagination, suggested that we should stop chopping down trees. The green movement began with a mint plant in a bell jar in Joseph Priestley’s kitchen. Steven Johnson also tells how Priestley invented a process for making fizzy drinks. He open sourced the method and Johann Schweppe cleaned up.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Speaking in Shanghai, the writer Charlie Leadbeater set out six C’s that determine a city’s capacity for innovation: combination, conversation, co-evolution, challenge, commitment and connection.[[6]](#footnote-6) I think we can see plenty of all six C’s here in Leeds. The Le Princes combined art and science, mechanics and chemistry to make moving pictures. Priestley’s exchanges with Ben Franklin and his French rival Antoine Lavoisier give us conversation.

For co-evolution – the ability of suppliers, manufacturers and customers to develop solutions together – we look across the city to the three Italianate towers of Tower Works. Thomas Harding who built the towers was a maker of pins, not dressmaker’s pins but the pins used by billion in the textile industry. He understood that the business would prosper if his customers could rely on standard sized pins from multiple suppliers, so he worked with his customers and competitors to develop a range of standard pin sizes, called the Harding Gauge. For a modern parallel, picture those pins as angle brackets and the Harding Gauge as HTML, a standard language facilitating endless innovation and efficiency improvements.

Co-evolution was also central to the parallel developments of coal-mining, manufacturing and consumption in our city. In Holbeck, Matthew Murray built the Round Foundry, possibly the world’s first integrated engineering works. But he faced challenge in the form of competition from Boulton and Watt, a much bigger name in the steam engine trade. James Watt Junior stole Murray’s ideas, recruited a spy at his factory and bought up land to stop Murray growing his business. But the competition spurred Murray on, and he built the steam engine for the first commercially-successful steam railway at Middleton Colliery.

It seems unjust that the engineer commemorated by a statue in City Square is not Matthew Murray but his nemesis James Watt.

Murray’s mentor John Marshall faced challenges of a different kind. He was a flax spinner and flax spinning was a flammable business. When one of Marshall’s wooden-framed mills burned down he partnered with a designer of a different kind of mill, one made of cast iron and brick. That’s commitment! The resulting fire-proof mills, like Marshall’s Mill in Holbeck are an important step in the evolution of the skyscraper. So it is fitting that Leeds is the home of the best new tall building of 2010, the “rusty tower” Broadcasting Place on Woodhouse Lane.

We can list a series of start-ups and businesses grown in Leeds:

* Marks & Spencer, founded on Leeds Market
* Burtons, which mass-produced suits for de-mobbed soldiers after the Second World War
* Freeserve, which revolutionised the business model for ISPs in Britain, enabling millions of households to get online for the first time.

But what’s left as we move from the industrial to the post-industrial? At St Aidan’s former colliery near Garforth a five-storey-high giant walking robot stands marooned in a Teletubbyland of grassy hills and lakes.

What’s left, I think, is narrative capital, the wealth of stories we can draw on to make sense of our present and inspire our future, it’s the power people have to tell stories about their places and lives. And unlike coal, narrative capital never runs out. It’s a rich seam that’s getting deeper all the time.

Stories belong to everyone, so as well as the great innovators, the dead white men, it’s important to remember the contributions of ordinary people, like the thousands of women who laboured over spinning machinery in Temple Works, in its heyday the biggest room in the world.

And stories can be slippery when we try to grab hold of them. Of the heroes listed here:

* Louis Le Prince was a Frenchman who had to go to New York to commercialise his invention
* Joseph Priestley was from Leeds but ended his life in exile in the United States, having been hounded out of the country due to his radical political views
* Matthew Murray was a Geordie so the North East has as much claim on him as we do here in Leeds.

All of those people bear out Charlie Leadbeater’s sixth C, connection to the wider world. As do the buildings that our Nineteenth Century predecessors have left us. Squint and you can see:

* The Temple of Horus at Edfu in Temple Works on Marshall Street
* Renaissance Florence, Verona and a Tuscan hill town in Harding’s Tower Works on Water Lane
* The Alhambra in John Barran’s warehouse on Park Square
* Paris at Cuthbert Brodrick’s Corn Exchange

So when I hear that people want to make Leeds “the best city in UK” I wonder whether that’s ambitious enough. Our predecessors saw themselves not as better than, but certainly equal to, any great city anywhere in recorded history.

Which makes me optimistic for the future of the city. As the American writer and campaigner Jane Jacobs put it: “Lively, diverse, intense cities contain the seeds of their own regeneration, with energy enough to carry over for problems and needs outside themselves.”

## Finding Lizzie Le Prince

For several years I’ve been pleased to take part in Ada Lovelace Day, an international day of blogging to celebrate the achievements of women in technology and science. From my reading of the Le Prince story, Louis’ wife Elizabeth is equally deserving of the honour, not as the tragic, devoted wife and mother that she clearly was, but as an artist, technologist, educator and advocate. This Ada Lovelace Day post was intended to raise her to her rightful place.

Cutting edge artists have always looked to advances in science for new materials and techniques. But where our innovations centre on digital media and information technology, the crossover science of the Victorian era was chemistry. We owe today’s rich visual culture to the pioneers who mastered the interactions of chemicals, minerals, ceramics, celluloid and light.

Lizzie Le Prince was the daughter of Sarah and Joseph Whitley of Leeds. She trained under Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse at the Sèvres pottery in France, and in 1869 she married Louis Aimé Augustin Le Prince, also a student of pottery. Louis had been instructed by Louis Daguerre, inventor of the Daguerreotype, and specialised in applying photographic techniques to pottery and brass.

The Le Princes settled in England where Louis started work for the Whitley family brass-founding business. It’s clear that the marriage was a true partnership. They both joined the Leeds Philosophical and Literary Society. Together they ran the Leeds Technical School of Art from their townhouse in Park Square, providing training in materials that were literally the new media of their age. Lizzie records that in Park Square Louis began experimenting with “moving photographs” and the best materials for films.

In 1881 the couple moved to New York where Lizzie taught art at the Institute for the Deaf. Louis is said to have projected his first moving pictures on the walls of that building. Lizzie is described as “a splendid helpmate”. In October of 1888, back in Lizzie’s parents’ garden in Roundhay, was recorded the world’s oldest surviving motion picture. The dating is precise because the pictures show Lizzie’s mother who died just a few weeks later.

By 1890, the Le Princes were ready to go public with the invention, well ahead of rivals including the Lumière brothers and American Thomas Edison. Lizzie had by this time founded the New York Society of Ceramic Arts and held regular meetings in Manhattan’s Jumel Mansion. Assisted by her son Adolphe, she began preparing for a public unveiling in New York. It should have been a grand occasion securing Louis’ place in history as the inventor of the cinema.

But Louis never arrived back in New York. He was last seen at Dijon, boarding a train to Paris. Wild rumours surrounded his disappearance and Lizzie suspected foul play. She believed competitors including Edison himself had wanted her husband out of their way.

Lizzie Le Prince spent the following decades in America trying to prove Louis’ claim to be the inventor of cinema. Her tragedy was compounded by Adolphe’s unexplained death in 1901, shortly before a judge delivered a verdict in favour of Edison’s motion picture patent that the Le Prince family had contested.

A number of articles have sought to posthumously restore Le Prince to his rightful place in cinematic history. One of his cameras is in the National Media Museum at Bradford, and Leeds has not one but two blue plaques commemorating him. “Roundhay Garden Scene” is listed in the Guinness Book of Records and can be seen on YouTube. Sarah and Joseph Whitley are the oldest born actors to be credited in the Internet Movie Database.

Fittingly, the wonderful Sydney Padua illustration for Ada Lovelace Day showed the world’s first computer programmer in Victorian dress holding up a string of punched cards. Replace those punched cards with a reel of celluloid (the first reel of celluloid!) and you have Lizzie Le Prince. Should the credit for the first moving pictures really go to a husband and wife team?

## Reflections on Reading of Mr. Joseph Priestley and M. Antoine Lavoisier While Travelling by Air Plane Between Leeds and Paris

Steven Johnson’s book ‘The Invention of Air’ sparked a delightful reverie on the pivotal role of 18th Century scientist, non-conformist minister and political thinker Joseph Priestley.

Living in Leeds, I was vaguely aware of Joseph Priestley from local museums and the blue plaque at Mill Hill Unitarian Church on City Square. What schoolchild could fail to be impressed by the tale of Priestley inventing fizzy pop after studying the bubbles in a brewers’ vat on Meadow Lane? He open-sourced the method, leaving one Johann Schweppe to make a fortune.

But until I picked up Johnson’s book I hadn’t grasped that Priestley’s years in our Northern English city included experiments that shaped scientists’ understanding of gases, plant and animal life, and ultimately our planetary ecosystem.

Johnson tells how, after various gruesome experiments resulting in the suffocation of spiders and mice by placing them in sealed containers, Priestley wondered how long it would take a sprig of mint to succumb to the same fate. (Mint grows like a weed in gardens round us!) To his surprise, the mint lived, thrived even. What’s more, a flame could be lit in the sealed container, something that had not been possible in the containers where animals had expired.

Priestley wrote of his discovery to his friend Benjamin Franklin who almost at once made the further leap that, “I hope this will give some check to the rage of destroying trees…”

Serendipitously, I read this section of the Invention of Air on one of my increasingly regular flights from Leeds to Paris. Across southern England and the Channel, I was engrossed in Steven Johnson’s account of how Priestley made his experimental breakthrough, yet got the explanation wrong. He believed that the animals and flames emitted a noxious substance known as “phlogiston” and identified the gas “mended” by the plants as “dephlogisticated air”.

Then, literally as my plane broke through the clouds on the descent to Charles de Gaulle Airport, the action switched to Paris where the English hacker Joseph Priestley shared his discoveries with French aristocrat Antoine Lavoisier. It was Lavoisier who, after absorbing the implications of Priestley’s discovery, proposed a theoretical framework, correctly identified that a gas was used up in burning and respiration, and named that gas oxygen.

The English hacker, the French theorist, the combination of the two in innovation. The thought made my day, so apologies to the various colleagues upon whom I inflicted this convoluted story.

Sadly neither country was eternally grateful: years later Priestley was forced to flee to the United States after a Church and King mob burned down his Birmingham home and laboratory, while Lavoisier was beheaded in the French Revolution.

Many people read while travelling, yet “airport” has become a pejorative term in relation to books. Can someone create a service that helps match reading to travel and create more serendipitous moments like mine?

## Rev. Dr. Priestley in the Library with the lead type

“Si j’etais bien en fonds, j’achèterais une presse !” – Camille Desmoulins[[7]](#footnote-7)

The role of the printing press as transformational communication technology is so powerful a commonplace that it is frequently invoked as a parallel to the Internet.

We think of it in terms of the spread of ideas, of bibles hitherto copied laboriously by monks now churned out for the newly literate middle classes of the Reformation; of cheap-as-chips chapbooks spreading gossip and popular culture in Pepys’ London; and of the great Enlightenment figures, such as Joseph Priestley and Tom Paine, able to disseminate their works of science and politics halfway across the world in a matter of months.

But listening to a lunchtime talk by Geoffrey Forster of the Leeds Library[[8]](#footnote-8) I was struck by another way of thinking about the press, as a tool for group formation and organisation.

Forster is the 18th Leeds Librarian, a role dating back to 1768 when a group of 105 founders, of whom Priestley was the fourth, came together to establish a private subscription library. Each paid a guinea to join, a substantial sum in those days, but books were dear: a copy of Priestley’s 700-page ‘The History and Present State of Electricity’ could cost as much.

The founding subscribers – Nonconformists, Anglicans, one Roman Catholic, four of them women joining in their own right – modelled their library on that at Liverpool, established 10 years earlier, and were part of a movement that saw subscription libraries spread across the country.

They had responded to an advertisement in the Leeds Mercury, a newspaper re-established in the city only the previous year, and the founding 105 were named in a prospectus listing the first titles that the library would acquire.

They set out to accumulate an ever-growing catalogue, buying regularly from a suggestions book kept by Priestley, their secretary. By 1772 they had 1200 volumes at the Kirkgate library. 243 year later there are 140,000 books housed in a purpose-built Victorian building on Commercial Street, above shops whose rents help to finance the library to this day.

In ‘The Invention of Air’, and latterly ‘Where Good Ideas Come From’, Steven Johnson tells the story of Priestley’s discovery of oxygen, after a chance visit to Jakes and Nell’s Brewery on Leeds’ Meadow Lane. Priestley chewed over his discoveries with his friend Ben Franklin, who according to Forster almost certainly visited the Kirkgate building, now a branch of Superdrug. Johnson talks about the importance of leisure-time and literacy in enabling 18th Century geeks like Priestley to develop their ideas, and coffee shops as venues to share them.

To this now I think we should add Forster’s theory that the printing press enabled large-scale associations like the Leeds Library to function for the first time.

In a city without a press, someone proposing to start a library had first to attract the interest of fellow citizens. He or she might write letters, laboriously by hand, requesting their attendance at a public meeting. Supposing they could be gathered together, those people would need prospectuses, membership cards, notices and minutes of annual meetings, all things impractical to write out repeatedly in long-hand.

Through its natural associations with booksellers, newspapers and printers, the Leeds Library had ready access to technology to automate all these dull but necessary functions. The press was not just a means to spread ideas; it was an organisation tool through which groups of people could make stuff happen together.

In the medium of ink on paper, Joseph Priestley and his fellow citizens were pioneer social networkers.

## A railway that runs on coal and love

Another guest post on the Culture Vulture blog, this time under the topic ‘home tourist,’ a bid to get Leeds people exploring their city as if it were new to them.

A hundred years from now will volunteers grease the wheels of lovingly restored lifts in London’s Gherkin? Will Chinese children go on trips to ancient factories where their ancestors once assembled iPhones? Will our own descendants thrill to the sounds and smells of recreated call centres and server farms?

If so, I hope they do these things with as much love and wonder as the workers and visitors at the Middleton Railway Trust. For in an unobtrusive building tucked away in south Leeds’ motorway tangle you can experience more than 200 years of railway history, or if you prefer, just buy a ticket and ride on a steam train.

Of course other steam railways are also available, and all good at what they do. But the Middleton Railway, successor to the World’s first commercially successful steam railway, can also claim to be the first such service to be completely run by volunteers. It’s still going strong after 50 years.

As a parent with primary school-aged children, I find the Middleton Railway is just enough train museum – perfect home tourist material. You can go in, buy a proper ticket, and walk through a hall of engines and straight onto the Moor Road platform where the train is waiting to whisk you away to Middleton Park. There, at Park Halt, the engine is uncoupled and hitched back to the other end of the train for the uphill journey home. It’s a proper train trip, but not too long: you’ll be there and back in half an hour.

My four-year-old liked it so much that we stopped for a snack in the cheap and cheerful cafe and then went back for a second go on the train. For days afterwards he carried his little cardboard ticket everywhere and pestered to have his birthday party on a steam train.

And as a history graduate with an unhealthy obsession over Leeds’ industrial heritage, I find a wealth of detail wonderfully presented. There’s a map of the city showing how steam engine manufacturing started at Matthew Murray’s Round Foundry in Holbeck before migrating to the Jack Lane area of Hunslet. And a map of the world showing how Leeds-built locomotives found their way across the continents. They’re also starting to use QR codes to link the static displays to more online information. Lots of possibilities here, I think.

There’s an ever-present risk with volunteer-run heritage of a descent into self-indulgence, of convoluted over-interpretation, passive aggressive signage and dotty personal hobbyhorses. The Middleton Railway shows no sign of these – a great return on investment of National Lottery players’ cash.

A sign by one of the engines says it all: “Please visit the cab but mind the mucky bits, the oily bits and the sticky-out bits”. It’s the statement of confident people who care passionately about the museum and its contents, want to share it with the public, and to keep them safe as they do so.

## Why Didn’t Anyone Tell Me There Was A Giant Walking Robot?

What Temple Works needed, Imran Ali tweeted, was [a giant robot](http://www.boingboing.net/2009/08/26/gundam-themed-weddin.html). As a fan of Miyazaki’s [Laputa](http://www.flickr.com/photos/mattedgar/2387607001/), I thought this sounded quite cool. A few weeks later, I discovered that Leeds already has a giant walking robot. If you’re in the area for one of its rare openings to the public I strongly recommend you go and see it.[[9]](#footnote-9)

Meet Oddball, a US-made Bucyrus Erie 1150, which worked the open cast coal mine at St Aidan’s, Swillington, near Leeds, until 1983.

Its sheer scale is impressive enough: the largest preserved walking dragline excavator in Western Europe, 1200 tons, the size of 60 double decker buses, apparently.

But the thing is, it walked, the whole thing, backwards, a metre per earth-shaking step, up to a maximum speed of half a mile per hour. Imagine that. Imagine that stomping towards you across an open-cast colliery.

The machine has been saved and maintained by volunteers, the Friends of St Aidan’s BE1150 Dragline, who open it as part of the excellent Heritage Open Days series. They’ll even let you sit in the driver’s seat and have a look around the belly of the beast, which was powered by electricity, and also by the look of the relics left behind, by tea.

The strangest thing is the setting. While Leeds and Bradford retain at least some of their mills and factory buildings, Yorkshire’s coal mining heritage has been almost entirely erased from the landscape. Where once the Bucyrus trod, ripping fossil fuel from the ground, we now see lakes, trees, wild flowers and grass.

Teletubbyland itself has appeared from far away, leaving the machine an alien in its own country. Its walking days are over, but it’s a joy to know that this robot won’t be left to rust.

# 2. Narrative capital

## Corn and Grit: Notes from a talk at Bettakultcha VII

*London has Christopher Wren; Barcelona Antonio Gaudi, and Leeds, well Leeds has* Cuthbert Brodrick*, the Victorian architect who left us just a handful of public buildings including the amazing, elliptical* Corn Exchange*.* *So when Ivor and Richard secured it as the venue for their latest Bettakultcha event I didn’t take much persuading. I wanted to give people a little context to the building, why it came to be here, what went on in it, and what might happen there in the future.*

The French Agriculture Minister recently warned that rising food prices risked sparking riots in cities around the world. But it is hard for us to understand just how important corn, or wheat, was to people in the industrial cities of the 19th Century. At Peterloo in Manchester in 1819, troops massacred a crowd protesting against trade restrictions, the Corn Laws, which kept prices artificially high. When those Corn Laws were finally repealed they split the Tory Party and pushed half of them into coalition with the Liberals.

Leeds sits at the boundary between Yorkshire’s industrial west and agricultural east. In the old corn exchange at the top of Briggate the farmers and corn traders (or “factors”) would bargain and make deals. The outcome of these deals governed whether the poor of the town, crammed into yards just a short walk from the corn exchange, could feed themselves and their families.

By the start of the 1860s Leeds needed a bigger space for these deals to be done. For the design, like the corn, the city fathers looked east, to the Hull-born architect Cuthbert Brodrick. Brodrick was already well-known to Leeds. At the age of 29, he designed the Town Hall, the acme of municipal magnificence. He also left us the Mechanics’ Institute, now the City Museum, and the Oriental Baths, now sadly demolished.

The critic Jonathan Meades describes Brodrick as: “the greatest French architect to be born and to work in the Département of Yorkshire.”[[10]](#footnote-10)

For the Leeds Corn Exchange, he certainly took his inspiration from Paris’ Halle au Blé.

Even today the Corn Exchange looks like an alien arrival, this Parisian form in the middle of Leeds, an agricultural incursion in an industrial city.

But it’s not wholly alien, because Brodrick was working in local stone, the millstone grit quarried from West Leeds. And millstone grit, like Brodrick, does not do subtle. Every external surface is decorated, including many agricultural motifs in keeping with the building’s purpose.

Now come inside and look up! The interior is plainer but all the more striking for it. The space makes me want to fill it with jelly and lift off the lid.

And it’s an egalitarian space. The offices around the upper floor are carefully arranged so that all their doors have the same status. In an oval building, no one gets a corner office.

After its opening in 1864, the journal ‘The Architect’ found: “No roof that it has ever been our fortune to see has impressed us more then this one, as a work of original genius and thorough practical utility, and the degree of dignity and spaciousness which it confers upon a very simple interior is hardly to be believed without being seen.”[[11]](#footnote-11)

The farmers and corn factors were less complimentary. Despite the amazing roof light they complained that it was too dark: “We are assured, and we regret to have to state it, that the unanimous opinion of those present was, that, in order to judge of samples, those who frequent the market will find it necessary to go outside the building.”[[12]](#footnote-12)

The traders made their peace with the Corn Exchange. More glass was added to the roof. On this board we can see the names of the companies that frequented the Corn Exchange, East and North Yorkshire firms prominent among them.

And here they worked on market day. Samples would be places on the tables for inspection, prices haggled over, and deals done.

In preparing this talk, Louise, the Corn Exchange manager, dug out a list of Bye-laws for me.[[13]](#footnote-13) I love a ruleset like this because we can learn so much about what went on here from all the things that were not allowed.

Inside, only authorised persons could engage in shewing, exhibiting, soliciting and touting. Outside we might find others hawking, loitering, smoking and with dogs.

But rules are there to be bent. There’s even a photo of a dog show inside the Corn Exchange, because the building was always used for a multitude of things. I talked to several people who grew up in Leeds in the 1970s and 80s who remember coming here for model railway shows and the like.

As Jane Jacobs said: “Old ideas can sometimes use new buildings. New ideas must use old buildings.”[[14]](#footnote-14)

Which brings us to the Corn Exchange today. It’s still a place for shewing, exhibiting, soliciting and touting. And Bettakultcha turns it into a place for exchanging stories.

## You wouldn’t burn a book, or some reflections on narrative capital

I moved offices down the River Aire from Holbeck to Clarence Dock. The stark contrast between the two areas has set me thinking about a city’s built environment and how it can make a difference to people’s lives.

Holbeck Urban Village and Clarence Dock are two districts to the south of the River Aire. Both played important roles in the city’s commercial past. Holbeck, at the terminus of the Leeds to Liverpool Canal, was a manufacturing district rich in textiles, engineering and pin-making. Clarence Dock was, from 1843, the city’s main dock. By dock I do not mean a place to charge your iPod but rather, in the archaic sense of the word, a big basin of water in which ships stopped to unload and take on goods.

Both areas have been developed in the past 15 years, but with very different approaches and results.

The designers of Holbeck Urban Village have deliberately reused as much as they can, breathing new life into even the humblest old buildings. Where new build has been more practical it follows original street patterns to create small, interlinked public spaces with pubs and cafes. New media businesses pump pixels in the Round Foundry complex where once Matthew Murray’s men cast steam engines.

Across the road, Grade I listed Temple Works is at the start of an exciting revitalisation. The amazing Tower Works site will be next so long as the promised funding comes through.

Holbeck was a magical place for a historian to work in a high-tech business. I self-indulgently imagined that the world-changing importance of Industrial Revolution pioneers like Murray, his mentor the flax magnate John Marshall, and pin king Colonel Thomas Harding could rub off on my own work as a spinner of the mobile web. I was not alone. In the last few years Holbeck has inspired many others to create art and literature based on its multi-layered history. Granary Wharf now boasts Candle House, one of the best of the rash of new tall buildings, not to mention its own urban storyteller.

A mile down the River Aire, Clarence Dock is a different story. Cleared for redevelopment earlier in the Nineties but only recently completed, it seems there is literally nothing of the Dock’s historic fabric left above ground level, though occasional warning signs hint at something more interesting below the waterline. Compelling though it is on the inside, the Royal Armouries Museum is an alien arrival. Before it came to Leeds, it was meant to go to Sheffield where its magnificent Hall of Steel would presumably have had more resonance.

Clarence Dock is all bread and circuses, the ultimate blank canvas for the retail spectacle. I took my sons for a canter round the Armouries and to watch the Dragon Boat races where teams of workmates rowed for charity in vessels emblazoned with their logos. A good time was had by all, and in a good cause, yet there was a randomness, disconnected from any sense of why the water was there, or how it played a part in the life of the city.

The history of the Dock is acknowledged – literally beneath the visitors’ feet - on dockside flagstones. These words seem to add insult to injury, like sticking plasters applied to a gaping wound of the collective memory. A paving slab that says “20 Tonne Crane” is not the same as a 20 tonne crane.

I don’t mean to knock everything that’s happening at Clarence Dock. The “ghost town” tag applied by some seems overblown. And I don’t know enough of the back-story. Maybe not a single building was fit for reuse. Maybe every crane had rusted beyond repair, even as a heritage totem pole. But it seems to me that at Clarence Dock, Leeds has squandered a huge amount of its narrative capital.

By narrative capital I mean this. When a building is first made it belongs to the builder, the architect and their paymasters. They alone can tell stories about why and how it came into being in its pristine form. But over time, the balance tips in favour of the place’s users, its neighbours and even to passers-by. Their stories become the building’s stories and the building’s stories become inspirations, symbolic of the city’s authentic character. Past achievements become our achievements to be equalled and bettered. Shared memories of past sins and humiliations can be just as valuable.

In the part of the city where I live, there is a Victorian police station. A few years ago the police sensibly moved out to a corrugated fortress with ample car parking. Local residents came together to campaign to turn the redundant building into a community centre. They lost the battle but got a half-happy ending when some new-build flats were developed nearby with a space for community arts. The new-built space is great, yet a world away from what would have been had they won the old police station. It would have been less convenient, messier, but more truly owned by the community from day one. The old police station had accumulated narrative capital that the new arts space will take years to put by.

Just about the most shocking offence against cultural life is the burning of books. Totalitarian regimes burn books to erase traces of dissent, not just to prevent transmission but also to deny the existence of inconvenient ideas. To destroy a book is to destroy a story and to destroy a story is to rob human life of a little piece of its meaning. I know that buildings are not books. For one thing they take up more space. But I do believe there’s a parallel that should give us pause for thought before destroying places high in narrative capital. It’s not the long-dead architect’s freedom of expression that’s impoverished but the story-telling and meaning-carrying capacity of the whole community.

A rich environmental fabric makes a city resilient. By all means tug at loose threads, patch it up and reuse it as has happened in Holbeck. But it seems a wanton waste for any city to cut a clean swathe as big as Clarence Dock.

## Down with Façadism: a provocation for Culture Hack North

I was honoured to be asked to do a short talk on the opening afternoon of the brilliant Culture Hack North event.[[15]](#footnote-15) For one thing, it was a chance to appear alongside Rachel Coldicutt’s dream team of Rohan Gunatillake, Natasha Carolan, Lucy Bannister, Helen Harrop, Frankie Roberto and Greg Povey. Also, I got to try out a half-baked thought about an unexpected way in which situated stories could lead to long-term, physical changes in our cities, even better, to do so with some people whose Culture Hack projects could be pivotal to bringing that change about.

What if the interior lives of buildings were as exposed as their exteriors? I ask because I think we’re heading for a profound change in the way we experience our built heritage.

We’ll start by considering a heritage concept that got a bad name in the latter part of the last century. There was a trend for ripping out the hearts of old buildings but leaving the shells intact. Critics called this trend “façadism” – the privileging of the exterior or front to the detriment of the building’s deeper character.

Wikipedia says: “Façadism (or Façadomy) is the practice of demolishing a building but leaving its facade intact for the purposes of building new structures in it or around it.”

Victorian architects and builders sowed the seeds of this practice themselves in the way they put their emphasis on the public face of a structure, while skimping on the unseen parts.

Take, for example, Temple Works in Holbeck, Leeds. In front, it’s a grand millstone grit temple; round the back, nicely detailed but workaday red brick. That tension remains today. The building’s blue plaque focuses on the spectacular facade, the industrialist and architect who erected it. But if you listen to local people, the complex is important to them as something else, the unglamorous Northern Distribution Depot of Kay’s Catalogues, the Amazon.com of its day. Slung Low’s Original Bearings project[[16]](#footnote-16) sought to capture some of those real Holbeck stories and expose them on the street.

Fittingly, Reality was the name of the last company to occupy the complex. Now it’s possible to see inside buildings through time and space. The inside of Kay’s as we found it a couple of years ago was a pre-digital data centre abandoned by its previous occupants. The pun is too good to miss – if we geo-tag pictures of the interior and super-impose them on a street view of the building, we get Augmented Reality.

All this would be academic if it wasn’t for the fact that planning law is shifting, away from purely national, architectural significance, towards a system that gives weight to local people’s views of what’s important in their environment.

The Draft National Planning Policy Framework says “heritage assets” should be: “identified by the local planning authority during the process of decision-making or through the plan-making process (including local listing).”[[17]](#footnote-17)

According to English Heritage, local listing is: “… a means for a local community and a local authority to jointly decide what it is in their area that they would like recognised as a ‘local heritage asset’ and therefore worthy of some degree of protection in the planning system.”[[18]](#footnote-18)

And while the Tory-led government seems to use localism as cover for an attack on communities’ rights to resist inappropriate developments, the National Trust is leading the fightback by positioning heritage in terms of dialogue between people and places. It’s Planning for People petition asked signatories to state: “I believe that the planning system should balance future prosperity with the needs of people and places – therefore I support the National Trust’s calls on the Government to stop and rethink its planning reforms.”[[19]](#footnote-19)

The upshot of this focus on local significance is that the images and stories of use that we expose through geo-location and augmented reality could influence which buildings are preserved and reused and which are demolished. Historic buildings won’t just stand or fall on architectural merit, but also on local residents’ attachments to them.

Those attachments tend to arise from the activities carried on inside buildings as much as what they look like on the exterior. I visited the old Majestyk nightclub on City Square because it was on Leeds Civic Trust’s Heritage at Risk list.[[20]](#footnote-20) Drawn with care in chalk on the side of building I found a spontaneous display of affection for a derelict building. Someone had written: “We loved you.”

And while it’s a striking building in a prominent location, I don’t think whoever wrote that loved it for its architectural merit. They were remembering the good times they had at Majestyk’s – the laughs, the drinks, the music, and the snogs.

And then there’s an unassuming late 90s box, called the White House, on Melbourne Street It has its own Facebook page! Or rather the people who worked here do. In this building they launched Freeserve, the UK’s first free ISP which got millions of Britons on the net for the first time. If anywhere deserves local listing for its historic significance surely this does.

But I think the real potential is for places like the Leeds district of Chapeltown.[[21]](#footnote-21) Currently buildings get protection for their contribution to the Edwardian streetscape. But the really interesting stories are ones like the launderette started as a co-operative in response to the needs of the immigrant community in an area that many had written off as a slum.[[22]](#footnote-22) Such narrative capital is fragile and often completely disregarded in the name of regeneration. If stories like the laundry co-op’s were better known, they might count for something in decision-making about the district.

Finally, there is the Mandela Centre, also on Chapeltown Road. I stopped to take a picture because I loved the big sign commemorating Nelson Mandela’s visit to Leeds in which his drove through this area. But then I noticed a row of gold and silver trophies in the window. I have no idea what they’re for, but they speak volumes about the activities that go on in a community centre and the pride of the groups that meet there. What if those stories were as obvious as the sign on the wall? The great thing is that, for the first time, they could be.

Maybe in the future buildings will no longer need to shout for attention with elaborate architecture. In fact, to do so will be useless, as nobody will see their peacock finery through the data smog. Instead, places will be recognised for the richness of their inner lives, meaning we preserve a fuller, messier cross-section of structures for their historic significance. Just as in quantum theory, the act of observing changes the outcome. Facadism is dead; the future is all about interiors.

## History is the handrail

With this blog post, we make a diversion 200 miles south to the Museum of London, where an exhibit set me thinking a bit more about narrative capital, and how, like financial wealth, it becomes attached to privilege.

History is the handrail for which we reach when knocked off balance by the present day.

Therefore it seems apt that at the Museum of London a “timeline handrail” runs from 1688 to 2012, around the new Galleries of Modern London.

At first sight this is a cute way to lay out the span of years through the expanse of the gallery, surrounded by some excellent exhibits that bring past generations of the capital’s people back to life. But the handrail left me feeling queasy, unsteady on my feet, because here London’s past is for sale. [[23]](#footnote-23)

I don’t mind the principle of sponsorship so much as the way it is done. Critically, for £5000 corporations and wealthy individuals can not only affix their names to a year, but also dictate the very events with which that date should be associated.

It’s a strange price, £5000 – beyond the reach of mass participation by ordinary Londoners, yet chickenfeed for the City’s many firms and institutions. And, the website boasts, it counts as gift aid so: “if you are a 50% higher rate taxpayer, your donation could cost you even less at £2,500.”

In other words, the rich may occupy a year of London’s narrative for half the sum that their history-loving cleaners or chauffeurs would have to scrimp and save.

Regular followers of my ramblings will know that I have a special thing for the year 1794. I wondered which of the various happenings of that eventful year might have made it onto the timeline.

The hounding from Hackney of the nonconformist minister and scientist Joseph Priestley?

The trial and acquittal of radical leaders after a massed rally of the London Corresponding Society?

The composer Haydn, writing and performing in the city?

Publication of Mary Wollstonecraft’s ‘Origin and Progress of the French Revolution’ or William Blake’s ‘Song’s of Experience’?

From the latter…

*“London*

I wander through each chartered street,

Near where the chartered Thames does flow,

A mark in every face I meet,

Marks of weakness, marks of woe.”[[24]](#footnote-24)

You’ll see where this is leading, for the handrail entry for 1794 reads: “Robert Charsley is admitted to the Court of King’s Bench and founds international legal practice Norton Rose.”

Now I know nothing of Norton Rose LLP and their business, sponsors of that eventful year on the timeline handrail. Well done them, I say, for 217 years of lawyering in London.

Yet this entry inadvertently speaks volumes  – more even than those lines of William Blake – about the nature of power in the City of London. The structure of this sponsorship scheme guarantees a history written by the victors. It underwrites the narratives of the already powerful.

When you place your hand on a rail it does more than offer support; it also guides your direction of travel. Where do you want it to lead you?

## Five minutes, one year, two buildings, a thousand stories

Notes from a presentation at Leeds Town Hall, on Wednesday 9 January 2013. Thanks to Richard and Ivor for giving me yet another five minutes on the Bettakultcha stage.

What an amazing venue. I could spend the next five minutes just talking about this building. I could tell you how the Leeds Corporation raised a special tax and set a budget of £35,000 to build a grand new town hall.

I could tell you how an unknown East Riding architect named Cuthbert Brodrick won the competition with his Classical Baroque design, championed by Charles Barry, architect of the Palace of Westminster.

I could tell you how, part-way through construction, rivalry with surrounding towns spurred on the architect and his clients to add a tower and bust their budget, finally completing the structure at a cost of £125,000. But you know all that stuff, right?

I could tell you about the year construction began, 1853. A year of industrial strife in which Preston cotton workers were locked out of their mills, inspiring novels by both Charles Dickens and Elizabeth Gaskell.

A year of innovation. Dr John Snow anaesthetised Queen Victoria with chloroform during the birth of her eighth child. The year Sir George Cayley’s terrified butler flew across Brompton Dale, near Scarborough, and resigned as soon as got back down to earth. But that’s not what I want to talk about.

Because while the great and the good of this city were signing the contract to build this town hall, a mile across town, a very different group of people were laying the foundations of another remarkable building.

The area on Richmond Hill known as “the Bank” was populated in early Victorian times by Irish weavers and labourers, drawn to the city to work in factories and construction. Their numbers were swollen in the 1840s by refugees from Ireland’s Great Famine. The Bank was a slum, with badly-built housing, poor drainage, overcrowding and disease.[[25]](#footnote-25)

Yet in this place, the poor Catholic congregation, with their priests and an order of Oblate nuns, found the resources to replace their makeshift church with a massive cathedral-scale Gothic creation known as Mount St Mary’s. They called it the Famine Church.[[26]](#footnote-26)

It took four years to build. In that time, workers were killed and injured in a lightning strike; the order of nuns faced financial ruin, and due to old mine-workings the foundations below the ground cost as much as the structure above.

The church’s first architect was York-born Joseph Hansom, inventor of the horse-drawn Hansom Cab. Later additions were by Edward Welby Pugin, whose father gave us the rich interiors of the Palace of Westminster.

In Bradford in 1858, John Ruskin asked why it was that the churches of the period were so often Gothic, while the mills and mansions were Classical: “But now you live under one school of architecture, and worship under another. What do you mean by doing this?”[[27]](#footnote-27)

This was more than just a question of taste. Ruskin hated Classical buildings because every detail had to be specified according to the laws of proportion and precedent – that pesky golden ratio. Symmetry trumps practicality. Perfection frustrates adaptation: “If you… make their fingers measure degrees like cog-wheels, and their arms strike curves like compasses, you must unhumanize them.”[[28]](#footnote-28)

With Classical, it’s all big design upfront. Adding the Town Hall tower was costly and disruptive. At St Mary’s it was natural for Pugin’s transepts to blend into Hansom’s nave. A tower was planned, but, no matter, it never got one.

Mount St Mary’s Church was in use for more than 130 years. But since 1989 it has lain empty, stripped of its contents and allowed to decay.

“A sign on the vaulted front door said, ‘Keep Out, Private, Danger’ – a warning, a threat and a promise.” – Bernard Hare, ‘Urban Grimshaw and the Shed Crew’[[29]](#footnote-29)

The English Heritage Grade II\* Listing for Mount St Mary’s says it is “An important building on a prominent site,” with “fine proportions and remains of important features.”[[30]](#footnote-30)

Developers now have planning permission for “a scheme that preserves the most important parts of the buildings and creates an innovative and exciting new residential development.”[[31]](#footnote-31) I really hope it succeeds.

It’s worth reflecting on the differences between these two buildings, Leeds Town Hall and Mount St Mary’s. Both begun in the same year, but on different sides of the tracks. One Classical, the other Gothic.

One built by civic power, the other by the faith of an immigrant community. I am neither Irish nor Catholic – I was married here in the Town Hall. But both buildings have provided a stage over the years for marking our city’s countless births, marriages and deaths.

One well-maintained and in use to this day, the other neglected now for two dozen years. What do their parallel stories tell us about the kind of city we want this to be? [[32]](#footnote-32)

# 3. A new idea of the North

## The past is a platform from which we launch into the future\*

In 2011, I was fortunate enough to be invited to California for O’Reilly’s Foo Camp, the original “unconference” on which Barcamps and the rest are based. It was an amazing experience, the highest density weekend of stimulating and enlightening conversations that I have ever experienced. I wrote this post on my return to England.

In my day job, mobile media, we spend a lot of time talking about platforms. Curiously we like to think of these platforms as eternally new and shiny. “Legacy” is not a windfall from the preceding generation. It’s a pejorative term. Sometimes we even set our old platforms on fire,[[33]](#footnote-33) which is strange, because as a historian I find the biggest platform of all is the past.

I wanted to use some of my time at Foo Camp to test out a long hunch about the past as a platform: that every one of us comes from somewhere with a past which shapes the innovation that’s possible in its future. It was harder than I thought.

Yes, we captured some great examples of the grand and generous legacies of industrialists who shaped European and North American educational institutions – tour any great campus and you cannot help but wonder at the wealth of history beneath your feet.

Then there were the unintentional cast-offs – the recycling of cheap spaces in marginal locations that bear out Jane Jacobs’ aphorism, “New ideas must use old buildings.” We have no shortage of either in West Yorkshire.

But what struck me most, on asking this question in Northern California, was how many seemed to see history as ballast to be jettisoned, rather than raw material to build foundations. The dominant old world image was of modern-day Rome, littered with the doom-laden ruins of an ancient empire.

In Singapore, so I learned, they erase the historic built environment but keep the gardens.

At Toronto’s historic Maple Leaf Gardens arena, passion for what the place once was impedes the search for a viable future even though the hockey teams have long since upped sticks and gone. New media could help – someone suggested – by decanting cherished memories from their bricks and mortar body into a digital casket, freeing the building itself to be demolished without guilt.

Technology certainly seems to facilitate such outcomes. We discussed online initiatives to link stories to places, such as Open Plaques which maps the locations of blue (and other coloured) heritage plaques, and History Pin, a community collaborating around history. We talked about tying archive material to place; relocated, contextually relevant stories; discovery of stories, with a phone augmenting the place you’re in; history layer through all location based services; and curated paths through a neighbourhood versus random voices passing through.

We are busy, as experience designer Ben Cerveny so beautifully put it in another Foocamp session, building a data-based model of the world which we may soon choose to inhabit in preference to the real one. Why should the past be exempt from this dissociative space-hopping?

And there’s a loaded phrase at the back of my head as we shovel our past into the big data sausage machine: “Since records began.”

I love stuff like the Old Weather project in which citizen scientists transcribe World War I naval data to help improve predictive models of our future climate[[34]](#footnote-34). I love that Iceland’s genealogy data goes back to the 9th Century, enabling the charting of long-range genetic trajectories. But I worry that “big data” by definition privileges quantitative insight over the qualitative. So many value judgements are embedded in what we choose to measure and to encode.

People in California told me that they came “from the future”; that their parents moved west in a spirit of optimism where anything was possible. America still thinks of itself as a young country, yet there are roads in upstate New York following paths that people have trod for more than 1500 years.

Maybe this is an inevitable blind spot in an entrepreneurial culture. As Will Davies wrote of Britain’s Big Society cheerleaders: “Entrepreneurs, by definition, find it plausible that things can be built out of nothing.”[[35]](#footnote-35)

But I reckon Britain’s planners have it right: “HE12.1 A documentary record of our past is not as valuable as retaining the heritage asset, and therefore the ability to record evidence of our past should not be a factor in deciding whether a proposal that would result in a heritage asset’s destruction should be given consent.”[[36]](#footnote-36)

When I bemoan the loss of whole swathes of a city’s historic fabric it’s not because it was more picturesque than what comes after: the past can sometimes be ugly. Rather, those old buildings represent a resource from which to tell stories, a platform of accumulated pride and achievement which makes the future less daunting.

Communities robbed of their stories have to reach further, and are readier prey to false, easy narratives: the past can sometimes be inconvenient. Entrepreneurs may appear to benefit, at least in the short term, from the proprietorial control these fairy stories give them, but they’ll soon find out that all that extra lifting and stretching outweighs the work of accommodation to unexpected truths. These are the grains of sand around which pearls will form.

Conversely, looking at Leeds, I see a city remarkably rich in history which its people can use and reuse in unexpected ways. It’s the opposite of “Londonostalgia”, a rose-tinted version of a city’s past to boost a conservative agenda that ossifies inequality. Rather it’s a dynamic use of the old as springboard for the new.

The past is the platform from which we leap to the future.[[37]](#footnote-37)

## The Dissolution of the Factories, or Lines Composed a Few Days After Laptops and Looms

*Laptops and Looms was a gathering organised by Russell Davies and Toby Barnes in Derbyshire’s Derwent Valley.*

In the corner of an attic room in one of Britain’s oldest factories a small group are engaged in the assembly of a Makerbot Thing-O-Matic. They – it – all of us – are there for Laptops and Looms, a gathering of people whose crafts cross the warp of the digital networked world with the weft of making and holding real stuff.

It’s a privilege to be here. Projects are shown, stories shared, frustrations vented. This is the place to be if you’ve ever wondered how to:

* Get funding for projects not considered “digital enough”
* Break out from the category of hand-craft without entering the globalised game of mass-scale manufacture
* Create a connected object that will still be beautiful when the Internet is switched off
* Avoid queuing at the Post Office
* Make a local car.

The inspired move of holding Laptops and Looms in a world heritage site dares us to draw parallels with the makers, hackers and inventors of the past. We are at once nostalgic for the noble, human-scale labour of the weaver’s cottage and awestruck by the all-consuming manufactories that supplanted it.

The nearby city of Derby has just hit the reset button on its Silk Mill industrial museum, mothballed for two years while they work out what to do with it. Rolls Royce aero engines rub shoulders with Midlands railway memorabilia on the site of a silk mill with a claim to be the world’s first factory.

Like Derby itself, the museum needs to find a way to build upon these layers of history, or be crushed by the weight of them. Water wheels, millstones, silk frames, steam locomotives, jet engines – they all go round in circles.

Skimming stones on the river at Matlock Baths, someone mentions how the beautiful Derwent Valley reminds him of Tintern Abbey. And I realise that to understand where we are now, 30 years on from the last great Tory recession, we need to twist the dial back another whole turn, to the age of the English monasteries.

Abbeys such as Fountains, Rievaulx and Kirkstall began humbly enough, as offshoots of the French Cistercian movement. Their needs were simple: tranquillity, running water and some land for agriculture. But over time they grew, soaring higher, sucking in labour, expanding their estates, diversifying their industries and dominating their localities. Imagine the noise, imagine the power! Until a greedy monarch who would brook no opposition made a grab for their riches and sent the monks packing.

England’s monasteries were washed away in a freshwater confluence of printing presses and Protestant ideology. The clergy who had used the Latin tongue to obscure the word of God were cut down to size, disintermediated by the Bible in English. They still had a role, but no longer a monopoly on the invention of new meanings.

In the shadow of the Gothic ruins, sometimes literally from their rubble, arose smaller vernacular working class dwellings, cottage industries. Among the cottage-dwellers’ most prized possessions was the family Bible, not as grand and illuminated as the monks’ Latin one, but *there,* accessible to anyone who could read.

To our modern eyes, there was much wrong with the cottage industries: patriarchal, piecework-driven and still at the mercy of merchants higher up the pyramid. But economically this seems closest to the model to which some laptops-and-loomers aspire, (dread phrase) a “lifestyle business” bigger than a hobby but smaller than a factory.

It was 200 years before Britain’s gorges would see the rise of new monsters: water wheels and spinning frames and looms and five storey factories. Something in the cottage industries had got out of kilter. With the invention of the flying shuttle, home-spinning could no longer feed the weaver’s demand for thread. The forces of industrialisation seemed unstoppable, pressed home by a new ideology, Adam Smith’s invisible hand and the productivity gains from de-humanising division of labour. The pattern was repeated elsewhere in Europe with local variations: Revolutionary France threw out its monks and turned the Abbey of Fontenay directly into a paper-mill.

By then the ruined abbeys had lost their admonishing power; some became romantic ornaments in the faux-wild gardens of the aristocracy. Gothic became the go-to architectural style of the sentimental idealist. I’m still a sucker for it today.

There were warnings, of course. Just six years after William Wordsworth’s *“Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey”* we got William Blake’s *“And did those feet in ancient time”.* But still the dark Satanic mills grew. They outgrew the valleys and by means of canals and steam engines dispensed with the need for water power. They swept aside the Arts and Crafts objections of Ruskin and Morris, who fought in vain to revive a labour theory of value.[[38]](#footnote-38)

Until one day some time in the second half of the 20th Century, the tide turned. And here we are today picking our way through the rock pools of the anthropocene for glinting sea-glass, smooth abraded shards of blue pottery and rounded red brick stones. Look closely in those rock pools – the railway arches, hidden yards and edge-of-town industrial parks – and you’ll see that Britain is still teeming with productive life, but on a smaller scale, more niche than before. No longer the workshop of the world.

What comes after the dissolution of Britain’s factories?

That 3d printer in the corner could hold some answers. Despite its current immaturity, 3d printing seems an emblematic technology – perhaps as powerful as the vernacular Bible. It may never be the cheapest way to make stuff, nor turn out the finest work. But it speaks powerfully of the democratisation of making, now within reach of anyone who can use a graphics programme or write a little code. Factories still have a role, but no longer a monopoly on the invention of meanings.

These things move slowly. A straw poll in the pub reveals that many of us already come from the second generation of geeks in our families. Some of us are raising the third. A child who grows up with a laptop and a 3d printer knows she can make a future spinning software, hardware, and the services that bind the two.

This time around the abbeys and the factories should stand equally as inspirations and warnings.

Their makers’ inventiveness and determination have left us a rich seam of narrative capital. And for all the current Western angst over the rise of Chinese manufacturing, the Victorians were nothing if not outward-looking. Leeds’ engineers willingly gave a leg-up to Germany’s Krupp Brothers and motorcycle pioneer Gottleib Daimler.[[39]](#footnote-39)

Yet the overbearing influence and precipitous declines of monasteries and mills should make us wary of future aggrandisements. Want to know how that last bit pans out? Ask me again in 200 years’ time.

## The future beneath our feet

Another talk, another of Cuthbert Brodrick’s landmarks. But this one at the Leeds City Museum was different, because the organisers asked me to talk about the future. I chose to begin in 18th Century London.

In 1763, the Corporation of London, wishing to make way for bigger boats on the Thames, ordered the removal of a central pier of the old London Bridge to form a wide arch near its middle. What could possibly go wrong?

As with more recent innovations in the City with a Capital C, there were… unintended consequences. Torrents of water were now concentrated at one point under the bridge. They started to tear away at the other piers making the bridge unstable. Many people now refused to pass over or under the bridge, bringing the city to a standstill.

So they sent for a Yorkshireman. John Smeaton, of Leeds, designer of the famous Eddystone Lighthouse who worked in a way so novel that he had to make up his own job title. He coined the term “civil engineer”.

Smeaton hurried from Leeds to London where he quickly assessed the situation and made an urgent recommendation. It was a Sunday morning, but the citizens got to work straight away. They had recently demolished the gates of the City as part of a road-widening programme. Smeaton told them to buy back the rubble of the gates and throw it into the River to stem the flow and protect the remaining piers of the bridge. This they did; the bridge was saved and remained in use well into the following century.

I started out as a history student, telling stories about the past. I became a newspaper journalist hunting down and telling stories in the present day. Now I’m a service designer. I help businesses to imagine and create the services of the future, by working with their current and potential users and the people who deliver services for them.

I’m fascinated by the interplay between our past, present and future. All the more so given the accumulated narratives in a place that was one of the world’s first industrial cities. Those pioneers, like Smeaton, Matthew Murray at the Round Foundry, Thomas Harding at Tower Works, they worked with the stuff the city had in abundance – mainly rocks, coal and water.

It’s no coincidence that this session called “the future” takes place in a 150-year-old former mechanics’ institute and features not just me but Tom Woolley, a museum curator, and Steve Peel, whose company, IBM, celebrated its centenary last year.

The past is a platform from which we can launch more confidently into the future. To understand what’s possible, we need to understand what we inherit from the past and what we have in the present. So when the organisers of the Leeds Digital Festival asked me to do something as part of last year’s programme, I wanted to get people away from the screens out onto the streets, to see what was lying around in the present day, the raw materials with which we can solve our problems and build for the future.

Pixels aren’t just on our computers and phones; they’re everywhere we go, leaking out into the environment. Adam Greenfield and Nurri Kim of Do Projects provided the template in a booklet called “Systems/Layers”.[[40]](#footnote-40) They looked at the interplay of the city and the network and proposed a simple hack. Instead of a workshop, a walkshop: a half-day stroll to looks for tangible evidence of the network collecting and feeding information in the urban environment.

Many of my friends from the Leeds service design community had already done some of this as part of the Global Service Jam, an international weekend of practicing service design methods around a common theme. They got out of the building to go through litterbins and interview people about transport to help create new services to turn citizens into superheroes.

There had been walkshops in other cities – London, Bristol, Barcelona – and these had typically been on a summer’s day, ideally in dry, settled weather. We decided to push the technique by going for a November evening in Leeds.[[41]](#footnote-41)

The brief contained three questions:

* Where is the network collecting information?
* Where is information being displayed?
* Where is information being acted upon?

In the hours before the walkshop we got the worst weather of the month, which thinned out the field a bit. But then the sun came out, just in time to set over Millennium Square. Our hardy group of walkshoppers met on the steps of this building with the German Christmas Market in front of them. After about an hour of walking and talking within the area on our map, everyone got back together in a room at the top of the Leonardo Building, kindly provided by Leeds City Council.

And this is what we found.

A lot of infrastructure. Visibly, there are cameras everywhere. Also alarms, wind speed sensors, traffic sensors, footfall sensors. And screens – in bars, shops windows, and the granddaddy of them all, the BBC’s big screen overlooking Millennium Square.

Phone boxes have morphed like Superman from kiosks for calling into internet terminals and now into wireless access points. Some phone boxes and cabinets also seemed to be taking up prime pavement real estate despite being completely redundant. In the spirit of these straitened times, we wondered what else we could do with them.

Then there was the invisible. Ground-level lighting betrays cables and ducts buried underground. And layer-upon-layer of wifi blanketed the area we walked. There’s no formal citywide wifi, but, for those in the know, a patchwork of access points spills out from educational and public institutions, covering the area with connectivity inside and out.

Dotted around the Christmas Market we found signs (literally signs) of the cheap and ubiquitous connectivity that enables temporary stalls to affect the trappings of permanent retail. Mobile phone numbers, credit and debit cards welcome, even a fast-food stand with Twitter and Facebook IDs.

Much of this stuff is apparently under-used or unused…

The iconic memory of the walk for me was the sight of a lone, hooded texter, face illuminated by a screen, standing in front of the Henry Moore Institute. On one side of the building stood a brace of Giles Gilbert Scott phone boxes, on the other a Royal Mail pillar box: several tonnes of bright-red painted cast iron disintermediated by a hundred grammes of smartphone.

We saw screens blazing, needlessly bright for the time of day, yet unheeded by passers-by. QR codes went unscanned (though unlike many of the walkshop group I still have a personal soft spot for them).

Smokers lit up in front of the Post Office oblivious to the comprehensive display of foreign exchange rates just inches from them through the plate glass window.

An LCD display tucked inside the entrance to a shopping centre reported alarming malfunctions in the building’s security systems; no one seemed concerned.

Low-fi is high impact. The utility of the screen tended to be in inverse proportion to its resolution. The two most successful public screens we encountered were the illuminated signs showing numbers of empty spaces in nearby car parks, and the displays at bus stops with real-time departure information.

While people were making real, time-saving, money-spending decisions on the strength of these mono-colour LED matrices, nearby HD TV screens frittered away their millions of colours on drinks promotions and national news tickers. Even parking ticket machines can tell you the time.

And the old still dominates the new. From our vantage point at the top of the Leonardo Building the most striking visual presence was the clock on Cuthbert Brodrick’s Town Hall. Its trustworthiness enhanced by synchronisation with the smaller clocks on the nearby Civic Hall. I suspect this trick is achieved the old-fashioned way, without the aid of a network time-servers.

And then the sound of bell-ringing practice wafted over from St Anne’s Cathedral. These effortless assertions of authority by church and state have gone unchanged and unchallenged over more than a century. Together they set a high bar for the new media that aspire to a place in the cityscape. Nothing I saw on our walk came close to clearing that bar.

I say these things not as criticism but as opportunities.

Never in the history of the city has so much infrastructure been so under-used. Our walkshop group came back frothing with what-ifs of connecting this stuff just a little more smartly, to itself and to the needs of the people who use the city. The raw materials for fun, useful and engaging services now litter the streets for the taking.

I’m inspired by everything to be found in this old city, not just the built environment but also the ways of doing things, of getting on with other people and of living together at scale. This has to be some kind of competitive advantage for Leeds, for Yorkshire and the wider region.

A new idea of the North. Manufacturing has long gone; the people of Brazil, Russia, India and China are no slouches at software; soon they will also excel at marketing and design. But our rich legacy of infrastructure and stories gives us a head start to pioneer new people-centred services and civic technology.

When I speak of the “North,” I do not just mean the North of England, but also the wider, “global North”. When its old world certainties are torn away by the raging torrents of change, what new solutions will we here have to offer?

## Three machines made in Leeds

For my wife’s family it is the crockery. Staffordshire-raised, they can’t resist upturning plates and bowls to check their makers’ marks - Doulton, Wedgwood and what-have-you. And my own father grew up near Sheffield, so in restaurants I also study the knives and forks – David Mellor was a Noughties Brit cuisine staple.

But Leeds, well Leeds made all sorts of stuff, and much of it too big and heavy for fine dining. So here I present three machines that have recently caught my familiarity-biased eye – all of them survivors still making their marks on the world in different ways.

Thing 1. I’m loving Chris Thorpe’s series on “Preserving the past with the near future”[[42]](#footnote-42) – the story of Winifred, a Hunslet-built steam engine that has travelled to Wales, the USA and back before being recorded as part of a unique project with lasers, 3d-printers and stuff. The work is beautiful, and so are Chris’s blog posts describing the project at the Bala Lake Railway, especially like the bit about how future generations might view the recording.

Thing 2. On the first Sunday of many months, I had my Remember The Milk app pop up a repeating reminder, if in London, to visit the Kirkaldy Testing Museum a block inland from the Tate Modern at Bankside.[[43]](#footnote-43) Last Sunday we did, and were not disappointed. David Kirkaldy was so convinced of the need for independent testing of construction materials that he commissioned at his own expense a massive testing machine from Greenwood and Batley of Armley. The machine served for 99 years through three generations of a family business, crushing, pulling and bending metal girders, concrete beams and much more – literally testing to destruction. Now it is cared for by knowledgeable and enthusiastic volunteers. You should visit too.

Thing 3. At the back of my mind since our summer holiday in Scotland, a Leeds-built John Fowler & Co. steamroller upcycled into play equipment in a park at Aberfeldy. I guess there must be a few of these in playgrounds around the world. With a bit of imagination, you can flatten anything.

## How’s it going to end?

For the past four years a story has accreted on this blog. It’s a meta-narrative, a story about stories.

Looking back, I believe the arc began with the partial collapse of Leeds’ Temple Works. That’s what led me to encounter the people who made this city, and then to talk about them in pixels, in print and in person.

Along the way, I have questioned what it means to tell a story in the place where it happened. I have celebrated the often overlooked asset of narrative capital, the capacity of a population to imagine and make a future out of the stories they inherit from the past.

And for a while now I’ve felt as if this arc is drawing to a conclusion, only I don’t know how it ends.

It’s something about England’s North. Not the North of cliches, of ‘Wuthering Heights’ and flat caps and “Good Honest Broadband from Yorkshire”, but rather the *future* of the North. Not the future of economic development and high speed rail and devolution of power, though all of those things make a difference. It is something about a new *idea* of the North, a social and cultural and technological way of being that grows out of all that has happened here thus far.

As evidenced by the paragraph above, I am rather better at saying what it isn’t than what it is, so in a bid to hasten the moment of closure, I have taken two steps.

First, I have begun to collate my talks and blog posts into the structure of book, which I plan to release under the same Creative Commons license as this blog. It will be a tentative, provisional book, one with version control and footnotes, but I feel this will help me to get the ideas in my head out of alpha and into some shape where others can engage more easily with the emergent arc.

Second, with Imran Ali and Andrew Wilson, I started to collect examples of what the New Idea of the North might look like. We made a Tumblr[[44]](#footnote-44) and started to throw in stuff that seemed relevant. We’ve had a couple of sessions where we tried to wring meaning out of all the stuff we’ve collected. I think it’s helping but we’re still not there.

## Make mine a messy city

If you live in, work in, or occasionally visit a city, any city, but especially one in England’s North, please set aside half an hour or so some time soon to watch and read two powerful critiques of the prevailing techno-determinist vision of the so-called “smart city”.

All 11,000 words of Dan Hill’s post on his City of Sound blog repay an extended reading, but the title also says it all: “On the smart city; Or, a ‘manifesto’ for smart citizens instead.”[[45]](#footnote-45) Dan asks: “Can a city be ‘smart’ and inefficient at the same time? Perhaps this is a fundamental question, un-voiced by smart city advocates.”

Then there’s Adam Greenfield’s more clinical dissection of the smart city missions of leading enterprises moving in on the space, such as Siemens’ somewhat sinister “the goal of such a city is to optimally regulate and control resources by means of autonomous IT systems.”[[46]](#footnote-46) Adam speaks of: “All that messy history caused by an infinity of small acts… It’s not just any city, it’s this city, wherever this city happens to be, with all of its texture, all of its history, all of its people…”

Mess, texture, history… all things Leeds, Bradford and their northern neighbours have in abundance. No more so than in the city districts that have been home to successive waves of immigration, making new dishes out of past occupants’ leftovers, as in Caribbean/Jewish Chapeltown or South Asian/Jewish Manningham.[[47]](#footnote-47)

When I look back over the glinting shards that Andrew, Imran and I have collected on our New Idea of the North Tumblr, one of the themes I see crop up repeatedly is that of the messy city, the celebration of small acts, randomness, spontaneity, lack of control.

I see it in the positive, creative activities like Emma Bearman’s Playful Leeds events, a series exploring play and playfulness for all ages in Leeds city centre. My favourite of them was Scott Burnham’s Urban Mischief playshop, and among its results, a pair of sticky tape legs which appeared to have dived just that second from a half-finished shopping centre walkway and into the tarmac below. A beautiful piece of trash in the middle of a street that had itself been trashed by piecemeal development for as long as I could remember.

The smart city could not tolerate this. Development would be too well coordinated, the flow of pedestrian traffic too precious to permit even a temporary perturbation. Only in the messy city can such creativity flourish.

Of course the messy city has its dark side too. Take Tony Robinson’s ‘V’, the powerful and profane poem written at the time of the Miners’ Strike. Or the sad fact that the city that gave the world practical steam locomotion also grew the terrorists who bombed London’s underground railway.

But in contrast to the sterile efficiency of the mythical smart city, the messy city is real, and there’s always hope. To understand how the smart and messy cities see things differently, consider responses to the summer riots of 2011.

Exhibit A is the most egregious example at a recent smart city “social” sciences demo event at Leeds City Museum. The “Riot Sim” installation seeks to gamify law and order. Participants take the role of police commissioner, moving cute Lego officers across a projected city map to quell computer-generated outbreaks of violence.

In the movie world of the Matrix, the authorities are software agents, but here in the smart city, the computer assumes the role of the citizens. It’s tidier that way; even the riots are tidier. Riots are presented as inevitable, an apolitical phenomenon to be modelled and controlled. Tellingly, the high score is a financial one – how many thousand pounds of damage to property could the user/police chief/god-like viewer mitigate?

Meanwhile in the messy city, real people were determined to change the narrative. In London they rejected the myth that Blackberry Messenger caused the riots and organised on Twitter to start the clean-up.

And in Chapeltown, there’s another story, one that the Riot Sim is incapable of imagining. In this story the police, community leaders and rioters are all humans, who look each other in the eyes and refuse to conform to stereotypes and computer models. After a gang-related shooting at the height of the ferment, police agreed to hold back while youth workers went in to calm tensions and call on parents to enforce an informal curfew. Because, not in spite, of the district’s troubled history the people of Chapeltown chose a different August 2011.

I’ll see your #riotcleanup and raise you, against all provocation and expectation, the City that Didn’t Riot.[[48]](#footnote-48)

## A New Idea of the North



1. James Piercy explains what happens if you find yourself in a lift and the cable breaks. <http://youtu.be/BJ8PgxSztOA> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Wikipedia – Newton’s Laws of Gravitation <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Newton%27s_law_of_universal_gravitation> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Kay’s Heritage Group http://www.kaysheritage.org.uk/10797.html [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The letters and advertisement are published in full in ‘Matthew Murray: Pioneer Engineer’ or in book form from Tee Publishing. I wrote them up in more detail in a newspaper, ‘Good Engines’ - http://matt.me63.com/engines/ [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Steven Johnson, ‘The Invention of Air’ http://www.amazon.co.uk/Invention-Air-experiment-scientific-discovery/dp/0141044357 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. http://www.charlesleadbeater.net/archive/shanghai-iblac-speech.aspx [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Desmoulins arguably sparked the French Revolution by leaping on a table in a Parisian café and calling for the crowd to storm the Bastille. For his pains, his old school-friend Maximillian Robbespierre had him executed in 1794. He is the subject of Hilary Mantel’s ‘A Place of Greater Safety’. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. http://www.theleedslibrary.org.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. The walking dragline is at St Aidan’s Open Cast Coal Site, Astley Lane, Swillington, Leeds, West Yorkshire, LS26 8AL. It is open to visit on a few open days per year, as advertised at http://www.iarecordings.org/dragline/ [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b007l3zm [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. http://books.google.com/books?id=UczlAAAAMAAJ&dq=leeds corn exchange brodrick&pg=PA315#v=onepage&q&f=false [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
12. http://books.google.com/books?id=G2MoAAAAYAAJ&dq=leeds corn exchange&pg=PA480#v=onepage&q=leeds%20corn%20exchange&f=false [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
13. http://matt.me63.com/2011/02/05/corn-market-bye-laws-history-in-the-negative/ [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
14. http://www.pps.org/articles/jjacobs-2/ [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
15. http://culturehacknorth.co.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
16. http://www.wyp.org.uk/events/event\_details.asp?event\_ID=5652 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)
17. http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/planningandbuilding/draftframework [↑](#footnote-ref-17)
18. ‘Good Practice Guide for Local Listing’ http://www.english-heritage.org.uk/caring/listing/local/local-designations/local-list [↑](#footnote-ref-18)
19. https://www.planningforpeople.org.uk/ [↑](#footnote-ref-19)
20. http://www.leedscivictrust.org.uk/view.aspx?id=241 [↑](#footnote-ref-20)
21. I owe a debt for many of the ideas in this post to my wife Caroline Newton who had just completed her MSc in Historic Building Conservation, studying the development of the Chapeltown Conservation Area. Ask her about it if you get the chance. [↑](#footnote-ref-21)
22. http://www.experiencechapeltown.com/?p=257 [↑](#footnote-ref-22)
23. http://www.museumoflondon.org.uk/Corporate/Support-us/Year-of-Londons-History/ [↑](#footnote-ref-23)
24. http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/gcsebitesize/english\_literature/poetryblake\_lon/1blake\_londonsubjectrev1.shtml [↑](#footnote-ref-24)
25. http://www.untoldstories.co.uk/ie\_intro.do [↑](#footnote-ref-25)
26. http://www.lihcs.org.uk/mtstmarys.html [↑](#footnote-ref-26)
27. http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/ruskin/traffic.html [↑](#footnote-ref-27)
28. Stones of Venice reference [↑](#footnote-ref-28)
29. http://www.amazon.co.uk/dp/0340837357 [↑](#footnote-ref-29)
30. http://list.english-heritage.org.uk/resultsingle.aspx?uid=1255558 [↑](#footnote-ref-30)
31. http://www.rushbond.co.uk/projectDetails.asp?ID=27&pageID=current\_developments.asp [↑](#footnote-ref-31)
32. Thanks to Phill Davison for the many wonderful photos of Mount St Mary’s which I used in my presentation. For more on the history of church, head over to the Leeds Civic Trust bookshop and buy a copy of Pat Gavan’s ‘Mount St Mary’s Church 1851-2000’. [↑](#footnote-ref-32)
33. http://www.engadget.com/2011/02/08/nokia-ceo-stephen-elop-rallies-troops-in-brutally-honest-burnin/ [↑](#footnote-ref-33)
34. http://www.oldweather.org/ [↑](#footnote-ref-34)
35. http://potlatch.typepad.com/weblog/2010/09/bigsociety.html [↑](#footnote-ref-35)
36. http://www.communities.gov.uk/documents/planningandbuilding/pdf/1514132.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-36)
37. Ironically, I have been unable to find the source of this phrase, though I do not believe it to be original. All suggestions gratefully received. [↑](#footnote-ref-37)
38. John Willshire, ‘Making things, and the Labour Theory of Value’ http://smithery.co/making/making-things-labour-theory-of-value/ [↑](#footnote-ref-38)
39. https://secure.flickr.com/photos/johnnyg1955/3816880203/ [↑](#footnote-ref-39)
40. http://diffusion.org.uk/?p=2364 [↑](#footnote-ref-40)
41. http://leedswalkshop.pbworks.com/w/page/45726266/FrontPage [↑](#footnote-ref-41)
42. http://blog.jaggeree.com/post/36201798235/preserving-the-past-with-the-near-future [↑](#footnote-ref-42)
43. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirkaldy\_Testing\_Museum [↑](#footnote-ref-43)
44. http://newideaofthenorth.tumblr.com/ [↑](#footnote-ref-44)
45. http://www.cityofsound.com/blog/2013/02/on-the-smart-city-a-call-for-smart-citizens-instead.html [↑](#footnote-ref-45)
46. http://youtu.be/9keDwTBmZ3o [↑](#footnote-ref-46)
47. http://theculturevulture.co.uk/blog/hometourist/a-soundwalk-through-jewish-manningham/ [↑](#footnote-ref-47)
48. http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2012/jul/02/how-leeds-avoided-riots [↑](#footnote-ref-48)