

Collective Amnesia

By John Billingsley

How far and how long can we trust the memory of a people? John Billingsley stirs the forgetfulness of a West Yorkshire village

Claims are often made for the longevity of oral tradition, and the belief that a people can hold memorable events in their minds and lore for long afterwards. The unspoken and quite Orwellian corollary to this is that a state may control what's in the media, but it cannot control a people's stories (see Ursula Le Guin, *The Telling*), and that the people remember what is important to their community. But is this true?

Here's an example: in Wiltshire there was a mediaeval village called Snap. Today it's no more than a collection of humps and dips in fields. Some time in the 1950s or 1960s, therefore, it was classed as a DMV - a deserted mediaeval village. Until someone found out that it had survived right up till a local butcher bought the village's two major farms in 1905 and denied employment to the villagers; by 1909 only two elderly people were left and by 1914 it was deserted. By the post-war period a place that had been a village within living memory, and the meaning of the bumps in the field, had been forgotten.

Here's another example: Ted Hughes was born at 1 Aspinall Street, Mytholmroyd, on August 17, 1930, and his family moved away in 1937. In 1975 I moved into a house just a few yards away. My neighbours in Jubilee Street were of an age roughly contemporary with Hughes's residence at the bottom of their street, and could remember the family. But when I asked them where the Hughes' house had been, none could tell me correctly - I was told three houses, none of which was the correct one, and I had to wait for *Remains of Elmet* to come out in 1979 before I could work out the birthplace from the poems. But then, the people remember what is significant - and a boy who moved away from a working-class Yorkshire neighbourhood when he was seven years old, to eventually become a Cambridge University student and then a poet, even an internationally famous millionaire poet, may not have been classed as especially significant in the values system of the industrial textile village. Perhaps it is not surprising that, by 1975, many of Ted Hughes' Mytholmroyd neighbours had little more than a vague recollection of his birthplace (a plaque was not put on the house until 1992).

I have no recollection of any fire, and can remember the mill quite clearly standing - and its then demolition!

Nearby, however, is the hilltop village of Old Town, and two mills were the principal employers in the village's history. One does not concern us. The other was Acre Mill, later to achieve notoriety as the home of Cape Asbestos Ltd., and the cause of the local epidemic of crippling and fatal asbestosis among its workers and their family members, an epidemic which of course long outlasted Cape's occupation of the premises. In 1976, when the premises were occupied by other companies, a disastrous fire broke out; although it did not affect the main

I can't believe locals cannot remember it, how local are they?

structure, it did seal the remainder of the mill's fate, which slid into increasing dereliction and was demolished a few years later.

In July 2006 the Hebden Bridge Local History Society was showing old photographs of the area in the local pub, and included shots of the mill under construction and in use as a textile mill. I asked if they had any photos of the fire, and the presenter, and several of the locals gathered in the bar, looked at me askance and said "what fire?". One local went so far as to declare "I've lived around here all my life and I don't remember any fire". Another, with whom I recall discussing the fire at the time, also declared I'd got it wrong. Well, I do get things wrong, but I had my own reasons for being sure about the fire - and this wholesale lack of memory made me wonder if there really was a parallel world I had just stepped into! I sat down, supped my pint and shut up.

I contacted a few more local people after that, asking if they remembered the fire, and the responses I got were equally equivocal - half saying no, never happened, and the other half saying 'yes, I remember watching it'. One person couldn't recall, until I introduced him to someone who had been present - then a faint memory came seeping back.

One woman cried out that she hoped it burned until not one stone was left standing and its flames would roast the souls of the owners of Cape Asbestos for ever.

Meanwhile, I'd found a long article in the *Hebden Bridge Times* (20-2-1976) relating to the fire on Feb. 17. Fifteen fire engines and 65 firemen had turned up, from Hebden Bridge, Mytholmroyd, Sowerby Bridge, Halifax, Todmorden, Elland, Brighouse, Haworth, Keighley, Bacup and Rawtenstall; and hundreds of people had watched as flames rose 60ft and smoke 200ft into the air from the outbuildings that were ablaze. The road through the village was closed, and concerns were raised about the toxicity of the smoke, as the premises that were gutted contained synthetic materials that melted into a 3" stream of resinous lava that required firemen to wear breathing apparatus. The mill, with its asbestosis associations, was so loathed that some of the crowd cheered and shouted abuse as it burned (Malcolm Whalan, pers. comm.). The fire went on for several hours, and the rest of the mill never recovered; it was pulled down a few years later after increasing dereliction.

An irony of the event was that Old Town is in the township of Wadsworth - a Todmorden firemen hospitalised from the fire was Stephen Wadsworth.

How on earth did people forget this event, at a site important to the local community both in terms of employment history and a legacy of personal tragedy, within a generation? And what does it imply for the accuracy of popular memory, and even personal memory? We know we put constructions on things, deliberately or otherwise, that alter the past; but it is usually for a motive. What ulterior reason could there be to wipe this fire from the memory?

The only clue to this instance of rapid collective amnesia is that the fire was halted before it destroyed the monolithic main building, so that, remarkable and destructive as the blaze had been, the main emblematic presence of the mill remained until its demolition. It was a matter of perception: the fire may have been the beginning of the end, but it did not actually destroy the hated mill, and at last it was the demolition of the remains that was remembered locally, not a simple episode in its decline, however significant.

But what about Snap? Well, the village and its tenants had been successfully erased by Wilson the butcher, and there was no one left to whom the community's history mattered. The implications of this enforced amnesia are instructive, but not inviting to dwell upon.