

WIGAN HAS NO PEER.

Born 8 Days after V.E.Day, 1945 in the Scholes area of Wigan, one of the areas castigated by George Orwell in his book 'The Road to Wigan Pier' published in 1937. From a very young age I was aware that Orwell was an anathema in my home town because of his betrayal of Wigan and in particular Scholes and Wallgate, both areas with large Irish communities. Most men worked in the mines and were fearlessly proud on their work. Women too were proud of their homes, both felt they had been besmirched by the imposter from the south. I can't vouch for it but as a child I heard stories of his image being used as target on dartboards, so intense was the feeling of betrayal.

I'm as convinced today as were the people of 1937, that the author came with an agenda to the north. His was not a crusade to help the downtrodden, rather to find those less fortunate and to use them to suite his preconceived prejudices, some less charitable may say to sell his book. Whatever his motivation, his writing did a great disservice to the north in general and Wigan in particular, mainly because of the title he chose, which has hung around the neck of our town like an albatross for the last 80 years. I have lost count of the times I've heard reference to this work always in a derogatory way and each time it does a little more damage almost like the sea pounding the coastline, indiscernibly but taking its toll nonetheless .

My time in my beloved Scholes was several years after the book was written, but I questioned my parents, and countless aunties and uncles at length , all agreed that whilst there was poverty and the vast majority still had gaslight and outside toilets this didn't equate to the filth and squalor as depicted in the book, of course there were homes where cleanliness wasn't the order of the day but they were a tiny minority. I dare say you could find that today in some very affluent neighbourhoods, even among some of our southern brethren! On the contrary, homes were spotless, steps being moped often a daily bases, competitions to get the whitest washing. All this a thousand miles from the picture painted by Orwell.

As alluded to earlier I know that my birthplace was looked upon with some misgivings even among people from the better off areas of the town itself. Much of that is down to this piece of fiction, and that is what it is 'fiction' dressed up to be a serious look at the plight of the working class of the 1930s. To be fair he did some good and some of the observations he makes are to be applauded, highlighting the appalling working conditions in the mines the unfairness of the Means Test, but that didn't give him carte blanche to belittle the people who trusted him. He says in the book "if there is one man I feel inferior to it's the coal miner" and so he should! He came to find squalor and if that was his raison d'être then he succeeded, if it was to give a fair unbiased view of life in the north at that time, then he failed and failed miserably.

In the chapters that follow I try to unpick the damage to Wigan's reputation and in doing so show that we in the north are proud people with a story to tell. However in my story, a collection of essays written over several years. I hope they show the human face of northern England, the humour often in the face adversity. To coin a phrase cut one and we all bleed, Orwell cut us with the sharpness of his pen. In an article I wrote for The Wigan Observer written to coincide with the anniversary already mentioned, I say quite clearly that I don't doubt his prowess as a descriptive and talented writer, I do however doubt his sincerity. For the record this is the article, much of its content is a repeat of the sentences already penned, but I think for accuracy it is necessary to include it in full.

Wigan Observer Article.

As the 80th anniversary of the publication of that wretched book 'The Road to Wigan Pier' nears, there are moves afoot from various quarters to celebrate the occasion. And, while I can see that these efforts are sincere and well meaning, I take completely the opposite view and hope it passes with as little fanfare as possible. Although, I'm sure the author will be lauded as a working class hero, a title he neither sort nor deserves, not insofar as this piece of writing is concerned. I have no doubt that he was a talented wordsmith as much of his other, and some aspects of this work proves.

George Orwell did incalculable damage to Wigan at the time of printing and the harm carries on to this day, an example, American travel writer Bill Bryson wrote: "Such is Wigan's perennially poor reputation that I was truly astounded to find it has a handsome and well-maintained town centre". Much of the blame for its "poor reputation" can be laid at the door of this odious book. Many commentators and politicians often refer to this work as a serious example of working class life in the 1930s nothing could be further from the truth, at least as far as homes are concerned. One of the few times he seems to begrudgingly admit that there is possibly another side to life in the North is when he writes in Chapter 2 " The whole of the industrial districts are really one enormous town, of about the same population as Greater London but, fortunately, of much larger area; so that even in the middle of them there is still room for patches of cleanness and decency. That is an encouraging thought. In spite of hard trying, man has not yet succeeded in doing his dirt everywhere." How's that for for being condescending, it almost takes your northern breath away!

To be a true insight, all aspects of life should at the very least be touched upon, not a mention of visiting what was a main source of recreation and social interaction 'the pub' of which there over 80 in the Scholes and Wallgate areas, six within a stones throw of his lodgings, not a word about the Churches, equally well attended in those days although often by a different clientele! Not even a nod to Mesnes Park, a jewel in Wigan's crown. These may seem trivial points, but they are not, it gives credence to the belief held by many, including myself, that he only saw what he wanted to see, namely squalor and dirt. He does however rage against the Roman Catholic Church in part two. I find it particularly unbelievable that a man who writes about his idea of the perfect pub ten years later, the fictitious Moon under Water, (Wetherspoon's got the the name from his ideas,) would he not at the very least visit a local watering hole, The Preston Arms was only yards from his chosen lodgings. I say chosen advisedly.

I was born in Scholes in 1945, nine years after his visit, and whilst obviously I have no knowledge of life at the time of his writing my Mother, my Father and numerous Aunts, Uncles and other relatives lived in the area throughout the 1930s. I questioned them about the book for an essay I wrote whilst at school, I think in 1957, the twentieth anniversary of the first print, I can't be sure of that date but it does seem a logical conclusion, I remember a kerfuffle at the time. All of them, without exception reacted in the same way, his name being an anathema because of his unfair portrayal of Wigan in general and Scholes and Wallgate in particular. As they pointed out that were undoubtable problems, and some families where hygiene wasn't the first priority but these were a small faction. They readily agreed that poor housing conditions were rife but his description of the way people lived, they felt was deliberately misleading. Orwell's depiction of his sordid lodgings above a tripe shop – with an un emptied chamber pot beneath the breakfast table – makes great copy but tells us little about the living conditions of most Wiganers. It generally believed that he only moved lodgings because his first port of call was too clean, so much for accuracy!

The vast majority of people lived in clean and well kept homes, albeit money wasn't in abundance, many houses still lit by gas light, with outside toilets but this doesn't equate to filth, far from it. Women would take a great pride in their homes often mopping steps on a daily basis and woe

betide you if you walked on their mopping. Home baking was practiced almost universally, especially on Sundays. Washing day Monday, there was a joke that there was a rainbow over Scholes on Mondays. Bedrooms Tuesday and so forth. All this a thousand miles from Orwell's portrayal. He painted a picture of filth and despair. I believe he came to the North with an agenda and a suitcase full of prejudices, he says in the book that he had lost most of the latter, alas he was deluding himself, to be fair to him I don't think deliberately, his canvas already partly painted he sought to fill in the spaces to suite his preconceived ideas. He completely ignored the side of life that didn't fit into his fantasy or that of his paymaster Victor Gollancz. According to Orwell's biographer Bernard Crick, publisher Victor Gollancz first tried to persuade Orwell's agent to allow the Left Book Club edition to consist solely of the descriptive first half of the book. When this was refused Gollancz wrote an introduction to the book. "Victor could not bear to reject it, even though his suggestion that the 'repugnant' second half should be omitted from the Club edition was also turned down. On this occasion Victor, albeit nervously, did overrule Communist Party objections in favour of his publishing instinct. His compromise was to publish the book with an introduction full of good criticism, unfair criticism, and half-truths. Almost like the book itself you might think!

Not only Gollancz and the people from Wigan found the book repugnant, a fellow writer Jack Hilton, who Orwell greatly admired, and who incidentally gave him the notion to visit Wigan, he had originally intended to visit Rochdale, Hilton's recommendation that Orwell concentrate on colliers rather than cotton operatives was also significant, encouraging him at an early stage to see the representative working-class figure as a man engaged in skilled, essential, dangerous and ill-rewarded labour, Hilton described the book as "piffle", Jack Hilton was a writer from a working class background and I'm sure saw through the snobbery of the book. Orwell would be the last person to think himself a snob but even a cursory reading of part two shows that he was, and in large measure at that. He claimed to be a socialist a claim that is spurious at best, again in part two he seems to decry so much of the principal and denounces the would be participants, although in the very last chapter he seems to contradict himself and struggles to champion what in earlier chapters he debunked. He did however join the International Brigade in the Spanish Civil War to fight against Fascism.

On the positive side, and there are some positives, Orwell described graphically the harsh and inhuman conditions in which miners worked and this aspect of the book told a story that needed to be told, as did the harshness and unfairness of the Means Test but this didn't give him carte Blanche

to demean proud neighbourhoods in order to give his work "a shock factor". It is thought in some circles that book led to better conditions in the mines, I disagree with this analysis. The improved conditions, came about because of two factors. World War II, and subsequent need for energy gave them a better bargaining position but by far Nationalisation of the industry immeasurably altered the lot of the miner, and not a moment too soon.

To say Orwell was selective in his choice of lodgings and houses visited would be generous, a generosity that should not be afforded a writer who claimed his work was a factual record, which in some aspects it was, telling some unpalatable truths, but to use the people he used to suite the aforementioned painting whilst almost completely ignoring the vast majority of well kept homes belittles what could, and perhaps should have been a chronicle of great importance. Highlighting the plight of the miner and the appalling conditions in which he worked. Orwell says in Chapter 7 "That the miners of Lancashire and Yorkshire treated me with kindness and curtesy that was even embarrassing" also said "if there was a man I felt inferior to it was the coal miner" and so he should be, they trusted him and in my opinion he betrayed their trust, as surely as if he had slapped them across the face with a piece of "black tripe".

I have thought long and hard before writing this book but on reflection I felt it was not only something I need to do, in fact it was my duty. A duty to my kith and kin and to all the descent people of my beloved, but much maligned Scholes of yesteryear. If there is one paragraph in the work that caused me to rage more than any other it was this, in Chapter 4 - where he speaks of "superior 'types".

"I found that the people in Corporation houses don't really like them. They are glad to get out of the stink of the slum, they know that it is better for their children to have space to play about in, but they don't feel really at home. The exceptions are usually people in good employ who can afford to spend a little extra on fuel and furniture and journeys, and who in any case are of "superior" type. The others, the typical slum-dwellers, miss the frowsy warmth of the slum. They complain that "out in the country", i.e. on the edge of the town, they are 'starving' (freezing).'

This is a bit rich coming from a man who liked to be thought of as an egalitarian. I hope readers don't think I'm over sensitive, it's just that this book is an abhorrence to me, the slum dwellers, a phrase he throws about like confetti, are my parents, grandparents, aunties and uncles, so I hope people will understand why it rankles so very much.

The following chapters are an insight in the life of a working class lad in from a northern town. I had a wonderful childhood in Scholes and wouldn't have wished to be born and raised anywhere else. Wallgate whilst I have only limited knowledge, I'm sure was equally as damaged by Orwell's blinkered observations as was Wigan as a town. Maybe you would need to be born within the sound of St.Patrick's or St.Joseph's bells to fully understand the community spirit and sheer goodness of the residents of Scholes and Wallgate. If there is an afterlife I'm sure George Orwell will feel a need to apologise to the good people of Wigan and the other towns he besmirched in such a cavalier way.