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THE BANNER AS REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

BANNER | ST. CUTHBERT | DURHAM MINERS | TEXTILE DESIGN | LOCAL COMMUNITIES

ABSTRACT

THIS PAPER NARRATES THE CONTEXT FOR FURTHER RESEARCH INTO THE SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CEREMONIAL BANNER. IT ALSO CONSIDERS THE CONTEMPORARY ST. CUTHBERT'S BANNER AND ITS DESIGN DEVELOPMENT BY THE AUTHOR.

According to Dobson (1973: 27), by the end of the Middle Ages, St. Cuthbert's original banner was 'the most popular, and on the whole the most effective, battle ensign in England'. The Rites of Durham (Fowler 1903: 26) record how it 'afforded victories' where it accompanied the armies of Richard II, Henry IV and Henry VIII into battle. The sacred relic was destroyed in the sixteenth century during the Reformation of England.

The parading of a banner to represent a cause or movement draws parallels with the miners' banner; another significant North East artefact. Once a year, the contemporary St. Cuthbert's banner, permanently displayed in the Cathedral, witnesses the dedication and blessing of new miners' banners as part of a service for the Durham Miners' Gala (DMG). The emblematic power of the miners' banner to represent the resilience of former mining communities, is borne through the enduring DMG, which has received a revived attendance over the past few years (Farhat 2015). In considering both the St. Cuthbert's banner and the resurgence of banner groups in

the region, it was important to understand historic and contemporary textiles and their ability to connect to a community. Tilley (1994: 67) recognises that material culture can be an individual activity, but that 'it is always a social production'.

As a result of a cross-disciplinary interest in North East mining banners, academics from Northumbria University's Faculty of Arts, Design & Social Sciences have initiated a research collaboration to explore a multi-disciplinary approach that embraces methodologies from social science and creative practice. This intended research has the potential to shed new light on ideas about representation and identity, and to offer opportunities to engage communities in new ways. The hope is to increase understanding of how and why banner groups have formed, what the likely impact of that will be on communities, but also to support groups in the development of lasting cultural legacies relating to the meaning they attach to community, banner and miners' gala.

INTRODUCTION

This paper represents the onset of a research journey that seeks to explore the concept of 'identity' realised through material culture. This particular study uses 'the banner' as a specific medium to debate current definitions of identity in North East England, where mining communities through re-engaging with the annual Durham Miners' Gala, are 'seeking to use their cultural and traditional heritage as a form of 'emotional regeneration' (Stephenson & Wray 2005: 175).

ST CUTHBERT'S BANNER

This research journey started with a commission to design the new St Cuthbert's banner. Earlier papers narrate the context and creation of

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this contemporary textile (Raeside-Elliott 2014; 2013). The life of St. Cuthbert (c.635-687), Patron Saint of Northumbria is widely documented, with his original banner was posthumously created to be taken into English wars, fought mainly with the Scots. *The Rites of Durham* (Fowler 1903) narrates such battles, where victories were believed to be 'afforded' by the mere presence of this sacred artefact. The original banner was destroyed in the mid 1500s during the Reformation, and to redress this loss, registered charity the Northumbrian Association raised £35,000 to produce a new 'contemporary banner'. The impetus for the creation of the banner was twofold: Firstly it would represent a broader North East community who rallied to campaign for the return of the Lindisfarne Gospels (widely acknowledged to have been written to celebrate Cuthbert's beatification): Secondly as a showcase and celebration of North East craftsmen and women who, whilst working discretely on the project,

functioned as a 'virtual' community. The focus of the banner's design centred on the production of meaning; the banner was to be a 'logo' to represent the effort to reinstate the Gospels. It is timely here to introduce a parallel with the Miners' Lodge banners, whose pictorial design narrative inclines towards a 'visual representation of religious scenes, iconic union leaders or simply the depiction of a life that could be' (Gorman 1973: 13). In contrast, the design process for the St Cuthbert's banner was based around photographic wildflower research, hand-rendered pencil drawings and the digitisation and colouration of floral pattern, as shown in figure 1. The banner was intended to be a symbol of a narrative, rather than being a narrative in itself (Raeside-Elliott 2013). At its completion and inauguration, the new banner was paraded through Durham to the Cathedral for a dedication ceremony (figure 2). The banner now hangs at the entrance to St. Cuthbert's Shrine as shown in figure 3.

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Subsequent reflection on the banner creation process has raised questions around the value and worth of a recreated historic textile and what it represents to the community or spectator who views it. The North East of England is pivotal when considering the recreation of historic textiles. As this paper reports, the miners' banners of the Durham Coalfield are experiencing resurgence; both in the preservation of the original banners; and the commissioning of replicas to parade in the annual Durham Miners' Gala.

NORTH EAST EX-MINING COMMUNITIES

Although the last pit closed in the Durham Coalfield in 1993, the 2015 Durham Miners Gala, or 'Big Meeting' (figure 4) as it is affectionately known, attracted over 150,000 people (Farhat 2015); the largest number since the 1960s. At a time when a detachment between politics and people is widely reported and socialist ideals have been marginalised by the rush to consumerism, Professor John Tomaney (in Walton 2015: unknown) reflects on the impressive attendance figures:

Primarily what it is these days is an expression of the value of community. These are communities which have been through a lot but maintain this strong sense of identity.

According to Mellor and Stephenson (2005: 343) in their paper; 'The Durham Miners' Gala and the Spirit of Community', a policy agenda attempt to rekindle social confidence and communal infrastructure after the pits closed, had been incorporating issues of individual and community empowerment via regeneration strategy, but were largely concerned with property refurbishment. However, such regeneration according to the authors 'has not proved easy particularly on the basis of place'. Their paper goes on to discuss issues of community and identity in ex-mining communities; assumptions regarding social exclusion and unemployment, affecting social cohesion within these marginalized communities are opposed by the authors, who have learned that community solidarity is

based on a shared emotional link to the industrial past.

One of these strong ties with the past is via the Big Meeting where evidence points to some of these communities 'regenerating themselves using the cultural capital accrued through tradition, and maintained by festival and exhibition' (Stephenson & Wray 2005: 175). These economically disadvantaged communities are using the banner and the Gala as a focus for their regeneration and as a result, bids are regularly submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) to renovate and create replicas of the original Durham Miners' Association (DMA) banners to use for the Big Meeting and beyond as shown in figures 5 and 6. Norman Emery (in Tallentire 2014: unknown), one of the foremost writers around the DMA banners, states:

Banners are the miners' battle-standards, proclaiming graphic messages of hope and calls for social justice; recording more vividly than any other art form the history of the struggle for working-class rights.

THE POWER OF THE BANNER AS A COMMUNICATIVE OBJECT: THE DURHAM MINERS' BANNER

Schatz and Lavine (2007), studying 'the flag' as symbolism, identity, and political engagement, argue that the flying of powerfully symbolic colours have the ability to rouse emotional behaviour directed toward the symbol as opposed to the nation itself. Jarman (in Miller 1997: 140) believes that is it the banner itself, not the individuals underneath, that gives an identity, and communicates the group to the wider public: 'It is therefore the banners that give order, structure and meaning to the parade'.

It would appear that flag flying and banner bearing is experiencing something of a revival in general. In 2014, the BBC reported that according to the Flag Institute in the UK, more than half of England's thirty historical county flags have been registered since 2000, with six new county flags being registered in 2013 (the highest ever yearly number) and fifteen more in the pipeline (Bell 2014). 'Sense of identity' and 'belonging' are cited as motives behind the impetus of such a flag revival (Casey in Bell 2014). Mellor and Stephenson (2005) state

that many of the individuals involved in DMA banner groups resonate with the words 'identity' and 'belonging', but also connect with the idea of 'history' and 'community' as motivating principles for engagement.

During the creation of the contemporary St. Cuthbert's banner, the question arose regarding how a new textile, made discretely by artisans during the different making phases, could come to represent either a 'community' of makers, or rally a community underneath it. In communication with Carol Stephenson (2013), a Social Scientist at Northumbria University, she was able to explain that functioning as a 'virtual community' is still viable as an authentic activity. Discussing how to develop a community, she promotes the notion of fundraising (£35,000 was needed to subsidise the St. Cuthbert's banner project) and developing of the ideas as being key:

> The process of the production and the creation of the banner in itself created common purpose, builds skills, creates 'community'. Here I am thinking of 'community' as a verb not a noun – community is something that is done, people are bound together in a common purpose.

Mellor and Stephenson (2005: 347) have observed networks come together through activities such as coffee mornings, fetes and Karaoke nights to fund-raise for the conservation of old and recreation of new banners in these post-mining communities, and that these are providing a focus for communication 'to be built and re-built following a period of decline and crisis'.

It is useful to report on activities around banner conservations and replication. The banners represent an important and emotive icon of the legacy surrounding the collieries. However, the physical activities of parading, displaying and storing the textiles has taken its toll on the banners. Since 2000, many mining communities have used fund-raising to mend, store and recreate DMA banners. Once conserved, the original banners are stored safely in display cases in village communities, or in institutions such as Redhills (Headquarters of the DMA), Woodhorn Museum, or Beamish open air museum (North East England) and replicas made for parading. The first Miners' Lodge to go through this process was Trimdon Grange in Durham, and since then, many lodges have followed their paradigm. Rendell et al. (2010: 126):

> The group was passionate about the project and believed the original banner, held in the museum's collection, to be a catalyst for improving Esh Winning's community focus and spirit. Throughout the project they expressed their belief that the banner was the heart of the community and a physical representation of the pride in Esh Winning as a place. From these statements it seems that the industrial pride and shared experience of past has been

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mapped onto these objects as a way of attempting to reawaken that pride which they believed to have disappeared.

In an interview with Hugh and Lotte Shankland (2015), who have produced over 100 banners and worked in over 50 schools in County Durham, they confirmed the passion needed to see banner projects through. They believe that it is only very committed communities who will take conservation and replication projects on board, often driven by one charismatic individual who understands the process ahead of them. Applications to the HLF, and the supplementary fundraising activities take time, commitment and determination. The cost of raw materials, the artist's craft, the banner furniture, harness and display cabinets means that funds required to complete the project are often in the tens of thousands. Rendell (2015), a Textile Conservator who has worked on banner preservation projects, has taken an advisory stance when communities have applied for HLF monies. To raise funds for banner projects is difficult when considered exclusively under the guise of heritage, but the case is strengthened with the capacity and assurance of community involvement.

NEW COMMUNITIES. NEW BANNERS

There seems to be a central theme of nostalgia and secondary memories when considering the original lodge banners. Bennet (in Smith et al. 2009) argues that secondary memories (the memories of others) can be developed into a sense of nostalgia in our own memories via the sharing of stories, photographs and other objects. Bennet suggests that nostalgia tends to reveal more about current circumstances than it does about the past. She continues to define it as an emotional engagement with the past which,

THERE IS REFLECTION AMONGST COMMUNITIES ON HOW THESE WONDERFUL OBJECTS COULD BE MADE RELEVANT AND MEANINGFUL FOR A NEW GENERATION.

when juxtaposed with present feelings, gives a sense of continuity for the sake of identity.

It can be assumed then, that continued identity in pit villages is dependent on the sharing of experiences, which often tends to be via educational programmes in schools.

We want a proper history written, a people's history, the truth. We have to keep it alive ourselves because no one else will tell the kids what our lives were about and how those lives have changed. The Banners and the Gala are just representations of what our lives, our heritage if you like, is all about. We are talking about educating the kids, so that they will know what it was like to live in a mining community.

(Stephenson & Wray 2005: 191)

As such, Wray (2009: 162) reports how communities and organisations have created education programmes to provide an understanding of their heritage, but they put the lodge banner at the centre of this educational process. He believes the banner has become embodied as a 'collective memory', and that in some ways, it is a more significant ensign in the community than it was when the mine was open.

Many examples of children's banners exist, including those from Bowburn and Esh Winning communities. The latest project has been with a school in Ushaw Moor in collaboration with The Forge, a participatory arts organisation in Durham. The Forge have recently offered arts programmes to schools inspired by a coal-mining past including clog dancing, rug-making, banner-making, ballad-writing, writing and singing folk-songs to help Key Stage 1 and 2 pupils gain a better understanding of their regional history. In an interview at The Forge with creative producer, Bev Briggs (2015) and operations manager, Heather Cameron, discussions considered the relevance of pupil engagement in banner projects. Briggs and Cameron felt whilst schools in general were enthusiastic in engaging projects using traditional crafts, the depth of this engagement depended on the heritage background of that school community and their identity with the mining industry. The pupils themselves, who are acutely aware of this mining heritage, have actually initiated some projects. Briggs and Cameron also reported that schools welcome input that constitutes British values, so the banner has become a popular context to discuss democracy, law, stoicism and political beliefs. Many of the schools engaged in The Forge projects

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NEW TEXTILES: NEW ENGAGEMENT

Recent initiatives in textile creation show different approaches to engaging audiences by: co-creation (Gant et al. 2015); exploring multisensory experiences (Karanika 2014); or simply an artist's oeuvre that has found new ways of communicating 'identity' (Perry 2012).

Gant et al. (2015) seek to engage young individuals as 'architects and designers' in the co-creation of their neighbourhoods through their project 'Encouraging 'young digital citizenship' through co-designed, hybrid digi-tools'. The Localism Act has encouraged enhanced participation in decision-making regarding communities, and once sanctioned, forms a legal planning reference for that community. The research question was two-fold; how to engage the politically disengaged and disenfranchised youth in dialogue around local decision-making and; how to make tangible the abstract concept of a future community.

In the creation of their 'Talking Techno Tapestry', Gant et al. (2015) report that the use of accessible technologies was an obvious choice to engage their young audience. These social and mobile tools, integrated into their daily lives, provided a familiar device with which to interact, and the researchers reported how these young participants' approach to ideation through tasks was enhanced through its use. Interestingly, with reference to the discussion above regarding the importance of the miners' banner to a community, Gant et al. (2015: 5) augmented their research with a physical tapestry as a part of the project outcomes, citing the use of a

are mining communities, where banners can be an emblematic way of connecting that mining community to both the youth and 'migrants' of these villages who have not experienced colliery life.

A factor of interest in these projects with The Forge, is that the artists and the pupils have control over the content, as they are operating independently from the mining community's 'structured' banner groups. Rendell (2015) and Shankland (2015) report that many banner committees, comprising of the older generation of ex-miners, have quite strong ideas regarding the comforting, literal replication of images from original banners to replica ones. However, this is certainly not a general rule, with some committees considering iconography relevant to a contemporary community. Two such

examples according to Shankland (2015) were their commissions for Easington Lodge, shown in figure 7. This banner features the modern-day primary school with playing children against the legend 'Education is our Future'. Figure 8 shows the Horden Lodge banner, which depicts an old retired miner giving 'thumbs up' to a passing family, where the parents are dressed in jeans and their son sports a football strip. Shankland (2015) reports on a well-mannered dispute amongst the Horden community; which side of the banner should be considered as the front? The traditional imagery of two miners shaking hands, or 'the new family'. The Shanklands welcome such debate and feel there is reflection amongst communities on how these wonderful objects could be made relevant and meaningful for a new generation.

physical artifact to ignite interaction between community members, as a hub, 'for debate, communication, exchange and dialogue' and the construction of new knowledge:

Constructive design research entails the construction of an artefact, product, system or media, which takes centre place and becomes the key means of constructing knowledge, in this case the digital tapestry. The value lies in the construction and also the "doing things", where observations made possible (sic) through viewing people interacting with the artifact in a specific environment (Koskinen et al 2011), which enables problems to be identified and discoveries to be made, that may have otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Gant et al. laud the use of a hybrid of digital tools and physical artifacts for engaging communities in co-creation. Another project that has taken this hybrid approach has been one that created the object prior to its public display. The embedded technology was then used to gain feedback from the user to enhance the object itself. Karanika (2014) takes a different approach to engaging audiences in her tactile and audio-haptic practice in creating a touch-sensitive, sound-generating responsive textile interface in the form of a rug which, through a technology-based sensory surface, generates an evolving soundscape which responds to people's interaction with it over time. Discussing her methodology, Karanika (2014: 91) believes an environment with this immersive and responsive textile will present:

Possibilities for enhancing people's understanding of the ways in which they perceive, relate and respond to their environment by attuning to the multisensory information it affords them.

Of interest to this research, is the ability for an audience to interact with the artifact in a tactile manner to generate an outcome. The new St. Cuthbert's banner and replica miners' banners are in essence 'display media'. The idea of creating an artifact that is a 'living thing' which records sensory responses is an interesting concept for the exploration of identity and community. This would almost make the artifact a physical 'lived experience', where the miners' banners are considered to be the 'visual memory of a movement' (Williams in Gorman 1973: 19).

The final example in this paper, considered for its methodology is Grayson Perry's 'The Vanity of Small Differences', a series of tapestries based around the concept of taste. Perry was influenced by Hogarth's depiction of 'modern moral subjects'; using his topical and journalistic style to record his findings as he goes 'on safari through the taste tribes of Britain' (Perry in Boulton 2014). Perry records issues of taste, social aspiration and consumption habits of today to explore identity. The cultural and societal references, class, visual culture and industrial history are included through visuals of:

Davy lamps, football shirts, Astroturf lawns, books, AGAs, "Penguin Classics" mugs, organic veg boxes, iPhones and iPads, tweed, Cath

Kidston hold-alls and Louis Vuitton handbags.

(Boulton 2014: 852)

Perry, as curator of the imagery used for his tapestries, can only display his work and await the audiences' response or debate as to what they see as its meaning. To consider 'meaning' with regards to textiles on display is a useful point to introduce the concept of material culture and product semantics. Biggs (2002) suggests that the interpretation of an artefact is not purely established by its intrinsic properties, but how it is consumed and understood. Andrew (2008: 42) attempts to understand the communicative capacity of textiles in terms of shared perception of object and context, quoting Krippendorf & Butter (1984) to define product semantics as 'the study of the significance and the symbolic qualities of an object with regard to the psychological and social context of its use'. Jackson (in Andrew 2008: 44) gives another particularly useful definition when he moves the focus of material culture from the maker's meaning of the object to the viewer's interpretation:

This is informed by how the object is actually used and consumed in relation to other objects and the context in which it is viewed, considering the social and cultural signifiers that accompany the object's use and the physical context in which it is placed.

It is also interesting to consider the banner as an extension of the body. Symbolism via tattoos, or brands and logos on garments is

ubiquitous in everyday life in terms of communicating identity and belonging, but banners are ceremonial and ritualistic and therefore not permanent or used in everyday life. Both tapestries and rugs considered in this paper can be considered generally as being sited 'below the body', but once the work is mounted above the head and paraded with a group under an identity, how does that change how the work is viewed or communicated?

THE BANNER AS REPRESENTATION OF IDENTITY AND COMMUNITY

Research suggests the banner has a key role to play in ex-mining communities; both as a symbol of the history and struggles of its industrial past; and as an emblematic link between old and new communities. Amongst the older generation at least, the banner appears to take on the role of an actual member of the community, and with four to five commissions for replica banners per year (Shankland 2015), the need to create a living memory seems set to continue for a while at least (figure 9).

Rendell (2015) reports that it is not always the fine craftsmanship that gives weight or voice to a community. Working on a number of banners for the North East pit village of Ashington, she came across a small banner used during the 1980's miners' strike, which was a homemade pennant; a couple of lengths of doweling rod, a piece of cotton stretched between it, and a legend. Also attached were the lapel labels the miners and their supporters had worn during the strike and a couple of muddy footprints were also in evidence. She reported her amazement in people's reactions and genuine strength of feeling towards this simple artefact, and felt in essence, that it remains an abstract way for the community to channel their feelings.

RESEARCH SUGGESTS THE BANNER HAS A KEY ROLE TO PLAY IN EX-MINING COMMUNITIES; BOTH AS A SYMBOL OF THE HISTORY AND STRUGGLES OF ITS INDUSTRIAL PAST; AND AS AN EMBLEMATIC LINK BETWEEN OLD AND NEW COMMUNITIES.

As a practitioner, identifying and defining a 'community' to enable the research to move forward is key. A group of individuals already have their own discrete sense of identity, but by coming together either voluntarily, or being a community already (for example, school children), this sense of identity will change. New communities in ex-mining villages are well established, but it would appear that the new way of life affects the identity of the community:

> *...the newness of neighbours is not the issue: pit villages have always being familiar with the flow of people in and out to service the demands of the colliery. Perhaps what is more significant is the lost sense of identification with others who no longer take part in the rituals and practices that revolved around the pit.*
>
> *(Bennet in Smith 2009: 200)*

This lack of ritual and practice is perhaps why the Big Meeting has become so pivotal again, albeit just once a year. A community of academics from Northumbria University's Faculty of Arts, Design & Social Sciences intend to use methodologies from social science and creative practice to explore the questions; how can a banner represent the individual identities of participants in these new communities, with their new ways of life? How can a banner support and communicate any shared sense of 'self' which is identified through research?

This on-going research intends to fully explore current issues around community identity using textiles as a medium to explore, experiment and debate a sense of 'community', be it through a physical location, or the notion of 'community' via social media. In asking these questions, it is hoped than an understanding of historic and contemporary textiles and their

power to connect, can be expanded. Additionally it will be explored, how, in the role as a practitioner-researcher, textile practice can play a part in rallying a sense of community spirit in the North East of England.

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FIGURE CAPTIONS

Figure 1: The creation of assets for floral pattern development for the St Cuthbert's banner design

Figure 2: The parading of the banner through Durham City Centre

Figure 3: The St Cuthbert's banner displayed over the entrance to his shrine in Durham Cathedral

Figure 4: Miners' Lodge and Trade Union banners marched through Durham City Centre (Photograph by Alan Sharp)

Figures 5 & 6: The parading, dedication and blessing of new banners in Durham Cathedral (Photograph by Alan Sharp)

Figure 7: The Easington Lodge banner (Shankland 2015)

Figure 8: The Horden Lodge banner (Shankland 2015)

Figure 9: Edgar Ameti of Durham Bannermakers painting a replica banner (Shankland 2015)