

The Changing Face of Shelton Bar

Larone Wilson



LOCAL PEOPLE LOCAL LIVES

A Media Action Group for Mental Health Project

I grew up in Basford in Stoke-on-Trent, overlooking Shelton Bar. At its height, 10,000 people were employed throughout its five coal mines, steelworks and rolling mills, blast furnaces and a bi-products factory. They were very much a part of the industrial landscape of this thriving working area, and remain among my most vivid childhood memories.

I was fascinated by the noises and colours associated with the steelworks. I remember hearing the trains pass through at night and the works siren signalling lunch breaks. I can still recall the red glow that lit up the sky at night when the blast furnaces were in use. My dad explained to me that this was because the furnace doors were being opened, and that during the Second World War the steelworks were a bombing target because it was impossible to black out the light.





Steelmaking began at Shelton Bar in 1841, and the final blast furnace shut down in 1978, despite fierce local opposition. Today you can find the impressive stainless steel statue of a steelworker standing outside the Potteries Museum and Art Gallery, created to commemorate the struggle by the Shelton steelworkers to preserve the future of their works for the community.

A few years later, much of the land was reclaimed and regenerated in preparation for the National Garden Festival, a major project lasting for six months in 1986 that raised the profile of Stoke-on-Trent and attracted over two million visitors from all over the UK and further afield. I was studying

at Keele University at the time and remember feeling very proud as one of the locals to go to the Festival with fellow students from outside the area.



Nowadays the Festival site is mostly maturing garden parkland - much of the original layout is the same as it was in the days of the Garden Festival. The network of paths in the centre of the park resembles a kind of maze, and you can get lost in it quite easily. Much of the parkland, pools and trails, which continue to be maintained by groundsmen, are still open to the public, as is the huge wooden suspension bridge. It's also home to all sorts of retail and entertainment opportunities. You can find everything from a ski-

slope and baby gym to fast food outlets and DIY stores.

But to me, the area now known as Festival Park will always be fondly remembered as Shelton Bar. When I was asked as a child at school to write an essay entitled 'Describe the sights, sounds and general atmosphere of an industrial town at night', I chose to base it on the images evoked from living close to Shelton Bar. I loved doing this piece of work. I can still remember to this day how much I enjoyed capturing the scene.

Doing this essay for school uncovered within me a love of the written word that continues to grow to this day. I'll read pretty much anything and everything, whether it be novels or newspapers, or something that catches my eye online. This is particularly true since I've been through a period of ill health. I started to experience quite severe anxiety and depression in 2002, and as my illness progressed I found daily life difficult to cope with. In time it got to the point where I was unable to work, but at least that meant I could focus all my energy on getting well again.

My confidence took quite a knock during this time, not least from some of the surprisingly negative reactions I had from people when I told them about how I was feeling. This caused my self-esteem to plummet and I stopped going out, lost touch with my friends and I found myself increasingly isolated. Reading enabled me to keep in touch with the life going on beyond my own surroundings; for me it was like a window onto a wider world that helped enormously.





More recently, I've found that putting my thoughts down on paper, whether in the form of a diary, or just writing about how I feel, is really helpful - it's a tool I use when I'm starting to feel anxious that enables me to focus more on the positive things in my life. I also enjoy going out and taking part in creative writing courses here in Stoke-on-Trent. Working on a piece of work that requires commitment in a group setting gives me a real sense of achievement, and has helped me to get back some of my self confidence.

Hopefully, as my writing skills progress, I can use them to help tackle the stigma and ignorance that still exist about mental illness. I really think that by being open about my experience of mental illness and challenging the prejudice in society, I can make it a little easier for someone else in a similar situation to tell their family and friends how they really feel.

Larone Wilson Biography

Larone Wilson was born in 1964 in Basford, Stoke-on-Trent, where she went to school. She has always lived locally. Larone studied for a degree in Applied Social Studies at Keele University, and went on to become a social worker for Staffordshire County Council for 21 years, mostly in the field of child protection.

At the moment Larone is studying for a Community Certificate in Mental Health Care, and is looking forward to volunteering in the mental health field in the future. Apart from her interest in mental health, one of Larone's ambitions is to learn Italian, as she loves visiting the country whenever she can.



LOCAL PEOPLE LOCAL LIVES

Local People, Local Lives is an exciting new project devised by the Media Action Group for Mental Health to challenge stereotypical myths about people who live with mental ill health. Project volunteers, all local people, will utilise stories from their own lives, which will be presented in a variety of entertaining and informative media. Inaccurate public perceptions will be challenged through the telling of real stories of people who live with a diagnosis of mental ill health.

For more information, contact John Gibson on
01782 285800 or email john@magmh.org.uk

Visit www.magmh.org.uk for more information about
the Media Action Group for Mental Health