

WHERE DO YOU STAND?

The landscape of the labour movement

A new guide to help identify historic places of the labour movement, to be published shortly, will strengthen local and regional research as well as national thematic projects

The Society for the Study of Labour History, together with English Heritage and the Peoples' History Museum, is preparing a brief guide to help Labour Party branches, co-operative societies, trade unions and local history groups to identify buildings, monuments and landscapes of the labour movement and find ways of managing them for the benefit of future generations. In the main, the procedures that English Heritage uses to protect buildings of historic interest tend to pass over those that grew directly out of workers' movements or that reflect working people's own attempts to improve their physical or cultural environment. In many cases these may have been modest or ephemeral, but where they survive, they are not always recognised for what they are or assessed as having 'special architectural or historic interest'.

Current listed buildings

Buildings relating to working people are not entirely absent from the statutory lists. Examples include workers' housing and model villages, company towns, mission huts and halls, technical and crafts colleges, libraries and churches that have had specific resonance with workers'

movements, such as St Mark's Belgrave Gate, Leicester, a staging post for the Jarrow marchers and home to the remarkable mural paintings of the 'Apotheosis of Labour'. By and large, however, these are buildings provided by others for working people, either through philanthropy (Carnegie free libraries) or commerce (good housing to attract respectable skilled workers) or a combination of the two (Sir Titus Salt's model houses and institutions at Saltaire, a World Heritage site of industrial archaeology). The condition of the working classes can also of course be read to an extent in listed industrial buildings and numerous historic townscapes (many in conservation areas), especially when supplemented by archive material and early photographs.

Lack of a national overview

To date no national or regional overview of the nature or survival rates of workers' buildings has been attempted. Consequently, listing in this area has tended to be *ad hoc*, registering important set pieces such as the planned communities set up by the Chartist Co-operative Land Company or 'shrines' such as the house of Thomas Standfield,

The Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society, Toad Lane, Rochdale, 1844



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Owenite Hall of the People,
Wisbech, Cambridgeshire, 1837

one of the six Tolpuddle Martyrs, the first shop of the Co-op Movement set by the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers Society in 1844 or the Burston Strike School, Norfolk, built in 1917 by public subscription to enable the teachers of the village school to continue teaching after they had been dismissed for supporting the farm workers' strike. Blue plaques schemes are underway in London, Merseyside, Birmingham, Portsmouth and Southampton to commemorate Labour Party pioneers such as Fred Knee and Trade Union leaders such as Will Thorne, but these schemes are similarly *ad hoc* in their coverage. Whether blue is the right colour is a moot point.

A more coherent approach

Where local work has been done, it suggests that we are not too late to make an impact. A case study in the Bolton, Rochdale, Burnley and



Pendle districts indicated that a dozen or so surviving labour movement buildings were still in use but only three – two socialist halls and a Trade Union museum – were in any way linked to their original purpose. It is not at all clear how much of value has been lost.

The production of this guidance document will help us develop a more coherent approach to historic workers' and labour movement buildings and encourage local groups to develop their own research projects on specific areas and building types. While some areas – buildings of the Co-operative Movement, for instance – are reasonably well-known, others such as socialist holiday camps are not. Like the Co-op, the Trade Union movement generated a plethora of buildings – institutes, hospitals and convalescent homes, libraries and headquarters – that are quite well documented, providing a rich seam both for local research and thematic national overviews. While enhancing our knowledge and appreciation of this aspect of the labour movement heritage, the research and fieldwork projects will help inform sensitive management strategies. □

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Burston Strike School,
Norfolk, 1917