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# Shaped by Steel: Landscapes, Lives and Legacies of a Global Industry

Editors

Louise Miskell and Gemma Almond



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## The Future of Teesside's Steel Manufacturing Past: Closure, Loss and Recognising Heritage

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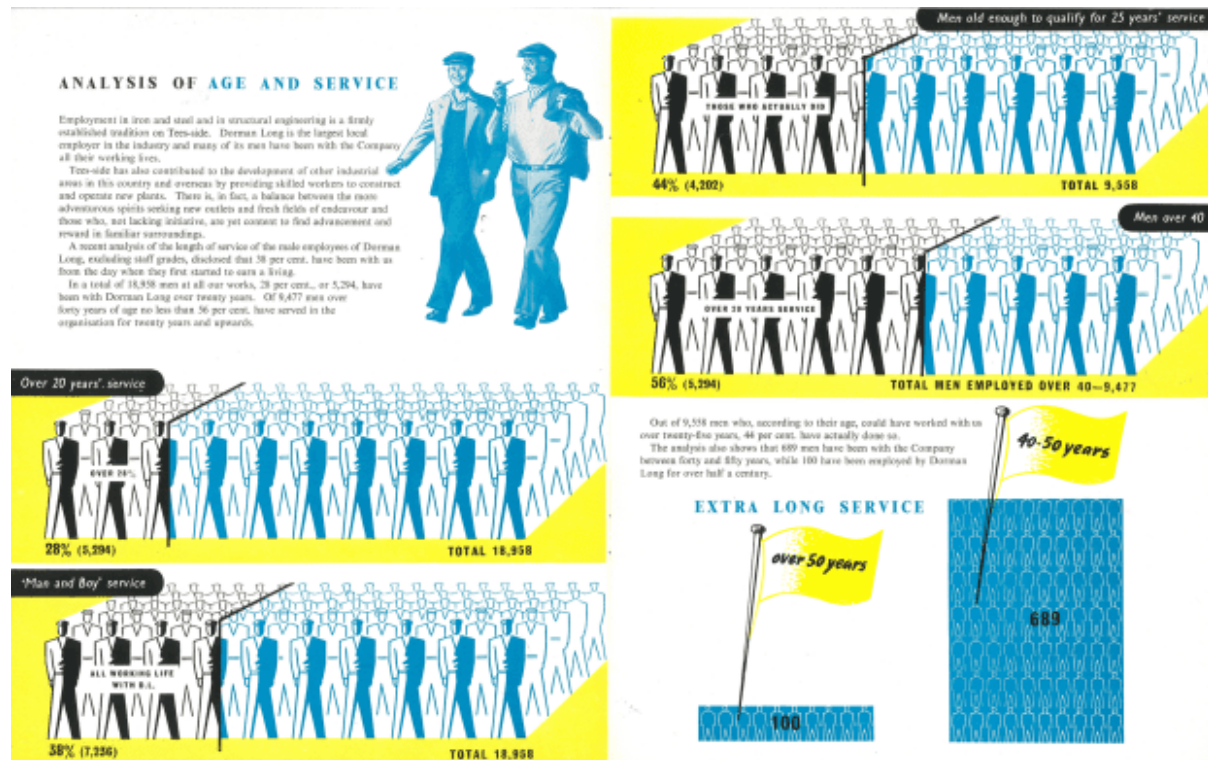
**Keywords:** steel; heritage; regeneration; closure; memory

The past decade has heralded seismic shifts in the industrial, social and political fabric of Britain's steel communities. With many of the former steel manufacturing heartlands switching political allegiances to the Conservatives in the 2019 General Election the traditional alignment with the Labour Party has seemingly diminished, not least in the former industrial heartlands of the Tees Valley whose very essence has been shaped by the iron and steel industries of the area. The shift in political alignment has coincided with, and been informed by, the decline of steel manufacturing: in 2015 Teesside Steelworks, then owned by the Thai Company SSI, closed for the final time.



The British Steel South Teesside Works, 1971 © Teesside Archives, British Steel Collection.

As well as identifying the significant political shift, this essay explores the broader cultural, heritage and social implications of the loss of steel manufacturing that has helped shape every aspect of life in industrial communities (both positively and negatively) for over a century. For people living and working in Teesside – not just those who worked in the industry – steel continues to hold deep meanings and attachments, whether it be through familial connections to Dorman Long (the region’s major steel producing firm, founded in 1875), pride in the use of Teesside steel in the construction of Sydney Harbour Bridge, or reminiscence of the sights and sounds of industry. The closure of the works represented the severing of a connection with an industry where fathers and grandfathers had in some cases spent their entire working lives.

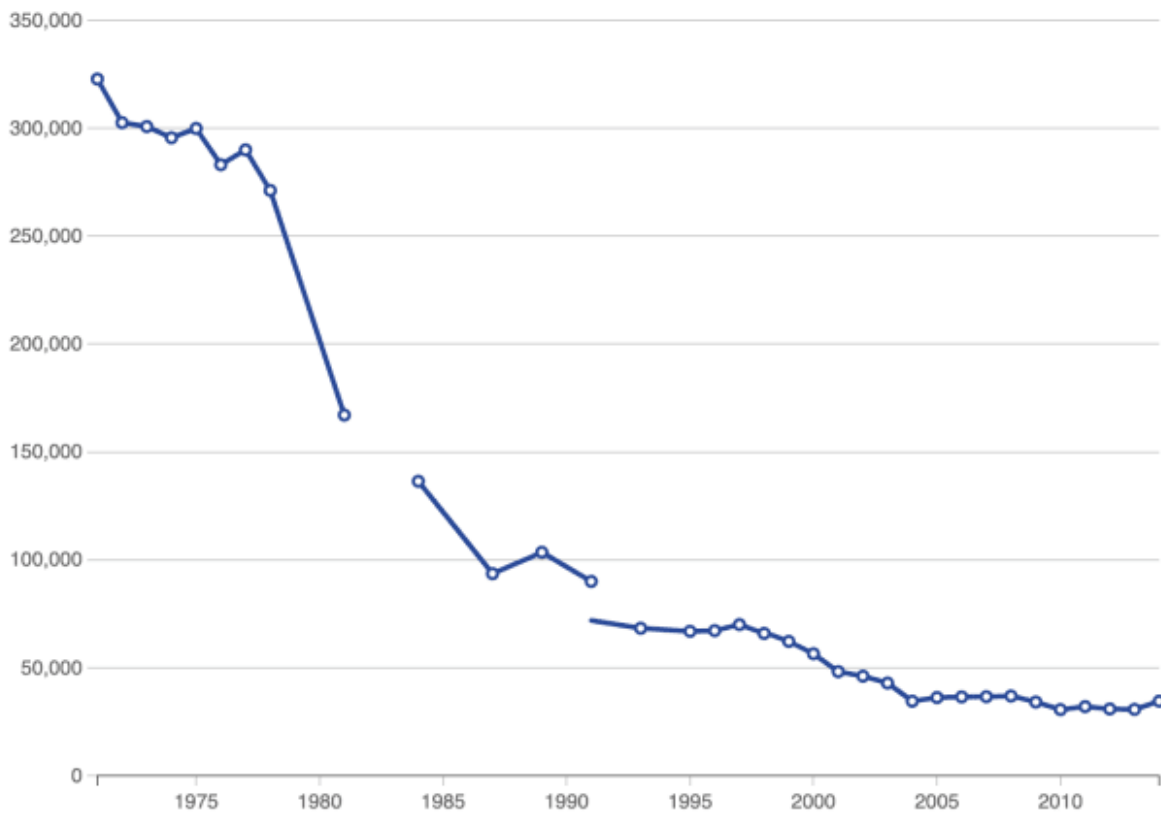


An image from Dorman Long Illustrated, 1955 one of the major steel manufacturers in Britain and a leading employer in Teesside. © Teesside Archives.

### Remembering Teesside’s iron and steel heritage

Thousands employed in Teesside’s steel industry and associated industries lost their jobs following the closure of the SSI Teesside Steelworks at Redcar in 2015 in one of the highest profile closures in the industry’s history. It represented a continuation of four decades of precipitous decline in the UK steel industry as a whole that had come to characterise the economic fortunes of thousands of Teessiders.

## Employment in the steel industry, Great Britain, 1971 to 2014



Employment in the steel industry, Great Britain, 1971-2014 © ONS, Source: Census of Employment (1971-1991), the Annual Employment Survey (1991-1998), the Annual Business Inquiry (1998-2008) and the Business Register and Employment Survey (2009-2014).

In a [Social History blog](#) in the aftermath of the death of steelmaking on Teesside, I highlighted both the strong presence of heritage in the obituaries of the steel industry found on the front pages of the local press and the challenges posed by losing much of this key part of the area's identity. The BBC's [The Mighty Redcar \(2018\)](#) offered an insight into the turmoil faced by local communities in the aftermath of the closure as the abandoned plant loomed large across the Teesside skyline as a reminder of a lost world. The future of the site, now known as Teesworks, is now at the heart of the economic vision for the Tees Valley led by the area's Conservative metro mayor Ben Houchen, comprehensively re-elected for a second term in May 2021.





‘Save Our Steelmakers’, *Teesside Gazette*, 29th September 2015 © *Teesside Gazette*.

As well as looking to the future, and with it the demolition of the former steelworks, Houchen acknowledged the need to ‘recognise Teesside’s long and rich iron and steelmaking heritage before demolition work begins’. As a result, the [Teesworks Heritage Taskforce](#) was established in Summer 2020 – which included my own appointment as an ‘industrial heritage expert’ alongside arts leaders, politicians and former steelworks staff working alongside local authority officials.



A lone worker is dwarfed by the 'Dorman Long Tower' © Teesside Archives, British Steel Collection.

The Taskforce set about inviting and reviewing suggestions made by members of the public through an online portal and in follow-up engagement with interest groups to decide on ways to commemorate the site and help ensure the area's iron and steel history and heritage is accessible for future generations.

[The form that this will take is yet to be decided](#), but there is potentially much to learn from previous projects that have looked to contextualise and make accessible the area's iron and steel heritage. The British Steel Collection at Teesside Archives is a rich resource of company records. Enhanced accessibility and embedding in broader cultural, educational and heritage platforms, spaces and venues offers an avenue to explore the history of the industry and see the plans and photographs of the works that have shaped the area.



Construction of Sydney Harbour Bridge © Teesside Archives, Cleveland Bridge Collection.

One example of using this material has been in the [‘Steel Stories’](#) exhibition at Redcar & Cleveland’s Kirkleatham Museum (discussed elsewhere in this collection), which showcased some of the area’s steel and industrial heritage. Against the backdrop of closure, the exhibition attracted around 10,000 visitors within a month of opening. Alongside an overview of the industry on Teesside over two centuries, the exhibition also attempted to look to the future, with narratives of how the SSI Taskforce has enabled many to find new opportunities after losing their jobs – the exhibition having received support from the SSI Taskforce no doubt informing the inclusion of the more positive stories around industrial decline. Indeed, the steel industry’s stories present cultural venues and heritage professionals with difficult challenges of presenting competing narratives around a highly emotive, contemporary issue with strong political undercurrents still active.



Dorman Long Tower and industrial heritage trail artist impression from the STDC Master Plan, 2019 © South Tees Development Corporation.

Debates about the future of the site have raged in the local and national press with advocates for retaining elements of the site making the case for utilising Redcar's blast furnace and South Bank's 'Dorman Long Tower' coal bunker. There has also been those who have argued for the entire demolition of the site and the need to move on and not to commit significant investment in the heritage of the steelworks site, including those who worked in the uncomfortable and dangerous conditions of the steelworks.

### **Shaping the future of the past**

The closure and remediation of the former steelworks site has highlighted the highly emotive nature of the question of what to do next in remembering the steel (and iron) industries that once saw the industries on the banks of the River Tees dubbed the 'Ironopolis' and the waterway itself the 'Steel River'. In the coming months and years, the Teesside skyline will change beyond all recognition akin to the shifts in the area's economic and political identity. Today's funders, local authorities, heritage groups, local people and politicians will ultimately determine the future direction of Teesside's steel heritage and with it face difficult decisions alongside significant opportunities.

## Further Reading and Resources

British Steel Collection, Teesside Archives

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