



Sacriston: towards a deeper understanding of place

John Tomaney, Lucy Natarajan, and Florence Sutcliffe-Braithwaite
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Image above: The Sacriston Lodge banner at the Durham Miners' Gala, 1970s

Cover image: Sacriston. Copyright Carl Watson

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Preface

Redhills, the unique Miners' Hall in Durham, is the home of the Durham Miners' Association.

We are breathing new life into the building to create a centre of living culture and learning.

For over 150 years, the DMA has been striving for – and often winning – social reform for the betterment of our communities. After the demise of the largest deep mine coalfield the world will ever see, many of our pit villages would be considered 'left behind'. We cannot accept that label.

Our past is of collective resourcefulness. Our inheritance is a will to realise our potential. Our future is uncertain but we are starting to rebuild it.

There is much work to be done to understand what that future may hold for the people of County Durham and similar communities around the world.

We are, therefore, honoured to partner with UCL to begin the much-needed applied research into the foundational issues which could lead us to a new social settlement – one to make our forebears proud.

As it says on many of the miners' banners: the past we inherit, the future we build.

Ross Forbes

Programme Director

Durham Miners Association

Introduction

In this report, we summarise the results of a small research project undertaken by researchers at UCL in conjunction with the Durham Miners' Association, to explore social and economic change in the former mining village of Sacriston, supported by UCL Grand Challenges.

The background to this project is the long-standing and profound place-based inequalities between and within regions, the product of several decades of deindustrialisation, which have left some places characterised by multiple forms of social and economic deprivation. Typically, such places have been the object of waves of public policies which have had limited impact. Here we report on a pilot project aimed at developing an interdisciplinary, multi-annual, large-scale programme of 'deep-place' research and action in order to obtain a rich, historically-grounded understanding of the long-term trajectory of a particular place. Rather than coming to Sacriston briefly, conducting some research and leaving, we want to work collaboratively with residents, groups and organisations in Sacriston to develop, and put into action, a collective vision for the future of the village.

Wide social and spatial inequalities between and within core and peripheral regions have emerged as an acute political concern in developed economies. This issue has generated growing interest in places characterised as 'left behind' by globalisation and economic and technological change, particularly former industrial areas. This concern has heightened in the context of the Covid19 pandemic. Academic studies have identified a range of social, economic and political conditions associated with these processes including poor health outcomes (including a prevalence of 'diseases of despair'), poor educational outcomes, low levels of skills and business formation and growth, and distinctive political attitudes, most notably reflected in support for Brexit. Such places have been subject to a range of policy measures over many years, measures that appear to have had little impact on underlying social inequalities. The term 'left behind' has become a loose, catch-all signifier grouping together different kinds of peripheral places, and potentially stigmatising their residents as passive, immobile and impoverished.

This project reflects our desire to better understand social and economic conditions in particular places, the nature of their persistence and the way they are understood locally in order to inform better public policies. Our pilot project utilised focus groups and oral history techniques. The project builds on developing networks with local actors and considers how new solutions aimed at improving social and economic conditions can be co-produced with local communities using expertise at UCL and elsewhere.

Our pilot project explores methods for achieving a deeper and multi-faceted understanding of a particular 'left-behind' place rather than a generic understanding of a category of places. What has been the nature of social and economic change? Why have past policies apparently failed? How has change been experienced locally? How have local political attitudes been formed? What are the perceived needs and aspirations of the local community? How might expertise at UCL aid the co-production of new solutions to local problems? Addressing these questions requires insights from a range of disciplines, given the multi-faceted nature of concentrated deprivation.

This study focuses on the village of Sacriston, with a population of 6,000, four miles north west of Durham City. Sacriston Colliery closed in 1985, although employment there and in other pits in Co. Durham had been in decline for some time. The closure of the colliery is situated alongside other social and economic changes, and the complexity of this change is revealed in our research. Loss and decline are an important part of the story, but so too is resilience, a strong sense of community and identity, new opportunities for some and the arrival of new people into the village.¹

¹The conduct of this research was affected by the Covid19 pandemic. Planned activities in the village had to be curtailed and moved online. This delayed the project but, in the end, the components of the research plan were completed.

Research methods

Understanding the past and responding to changes is a collective effort, and work is always underway to make sense of change. We therefore sought out local perspectives on changing priorities from people connected to Sacriston, and who work to support communities in and around Sacriston.

The research team organised two focus groups via Zoom, each lasting just over an hour. Focus group 1 had eight participants working in a formal capacity across diverse sectors, including education, housing, crisis services, policing, and local government; focus group 2 had six people who lived or worked in the village and were involved in SME development, youth groups, churches, and sporting groups, many of which had turned their attention to supporting the community during the Covid19 pandemic.

We also undertook six oral history interviews, with two men and four women, born between 1945 and 1955, and connected to Sacriston in different ways, through residence, schooling, work and family. Their memories reach back to the immediate post-war period, and together they offer a range of perspectives on how the village has changed over that time. Five out of the six interviewees' fathers worked in mining or for the Coal Board for some of their careers; all were manual workers. Most of our interviewees also started off their working

lives in manual work of one sort or another, with the exception of one, who worked in administration. But after the deindustrialisation which swept Co Durham in the 1980s, several went into different work in expanding sectors like the prison and probation services, social work and education. All now live within 10 miles of Sacriston. In oral history, participants are often given the choice to use their real name or a pseudonym, and some of our interviewees opted for the former, while others chose the latter. (Where pseudonyms are used, we place the name in quotation marks.) These interviews lasted between 2 and 3 hours, and covered each interviewee's whole life, from childhood to the present, aiming to develop a *deep* understanding of people's subjective experiences and perceptions of how the village and the wider area have changed over time.

Image below: Sacriston in 2018.
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Findings

Oral history: gains and losses over time

In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s Sacriston, like most of the pit villages and towns in Co Durham, was a thriving place. Economic and community vitality were inextricably linked; most people were far from wealthy, but full-time work for men was plentiful, wages were rising, work – particularly part-time work – was increasingly available for women, and young families were moving from substandard housing into new, modern council and owner-occupied homes. Mining was central to the economy of Co Durham; many men in Sacriston worked in Sacriston pit or, from the 1960s onwards, travelled to work at other pits in the area. This strong local economy was a key underpinning for a strong community.

A common lament in our interviews focused on the decline of Sacriston front street. In the post-war decades Sacriston was packed with small shops – a butcher’s, greengrocer’s, a hardware shop, and the Co-op, among others, where women (shopping was mainly women’s work) shopped for their families. Now many of these are gone, but the village still, in fact, sustains a significant number of shops and other businesses. Bernice, who has lived in the village for most of her life, listed them: two pizza places, an Indian takeaway, a pizza/fish and chip shop and another fish shop; a pet shop; a supermarket/post office and another supermarket, a Tesco and a Heron’s; two barbers and three hairdressers.² What is significant, however, is not just that the type and number of shops and businesses has changed; the whole experience of making use of those businesses has changed: as Bernice explained, in her youth, there were six fish and chip shops in the village, and queues would form outside as people gathered to wait for their meal and to chat. Now people use cars or rely on delivery drivers. Food shopping, too, has changed. “Bernadette”, who spent much of her working life in retail, explained:

shops have changed a great lot, in my book, like. You can get the odd one that’s very nice n’that, but the majority, they just serve ya, hello, goodbye and that’s basically it. They’re just there to serve, that’s all and we sort of made time for people and you got to know your customers, you knew exactly who they were when they came in, where now ... I know places are a lot bigger now and people go to different stores and I suppose, it can’t happen in all places, but no, a lotta things, I think, would do good to come back the way things were, not everything, by all means, but a lot of things, I think, y’know, things like that would do people good to see that that’s the way it was and that, to me, is the way it should have been. It’s very hard to explain actually, what I’m trying to say ...³

Shopping is now often quicker, cheaper and more convenient in self-service and out-of-town supermarkets. For car users, even on modest incomes, Sacriston is conveniently placed, next to the by-pass, the motorway, and the Arnison Centre with big chain stores and coffee shops. Families are much more likely to have a car – or even two – today, in comparison with the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. Married women are also more likely to work, and particularly to work full-time. Married women’s paid labour was growing from 1945 onwards, as the labour of housework grew somewhat easier, and as women’s wages offered the chance to buy things like TVs and holidays. Many women found they valued hugely the chance to do something outside the home, alongside their “traditional” work of homemaking. But from the 1980s onwards, with the closure of pits, women’s work has become more and more necessary to sustain families’ basic standards of living. When women had time to walk around local shops, being served by assistants behind the counter, they were more intimately tied in to local networks. This form of community was hard for “Bernadette” to put her finger on, but its loss is significant. It is tied to changes in the labour market and gender roles, to the expansion of car ownership, and also to related changes in the amount of *time* people have to spend in their community.

In the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, families tended to spend their money and their leisure time mainly in the community where they lived. For men in Sacriston, there was the Institute, a working men’s club with snooker tables, the Catholic Club, a reading room, skittles, a dance hall, a bowling green for indoor bowls, a library, and a cinema;

² Bernice Smith.

³ “Bernadette”.

there was also a further cinema, The Royal Cinema, and several pubs: 'The Robin Hood, George & Dragon, Colliery Inn, The Queen's Head, The Three Horse Shoes'.⁴ These amenities were much-used, though, as Hugh, another resident who has lived in Sacriston for most of his life, recalled, when he was growing up, women would not go unaccompanied into the pubs or clubs. Married women with children tended, instead, to socialise in the streets, in neighbours' homes, and at Church. Children, as Bernice said, 'played out in the streets, all day, all night, your parents never worried about you'.⁵ And younger teenagers attended youth clubs and coffee bars, before graduating to cinemas, clubs and pubs in their local area. Men, women and children thus spent much of their leisure time locally. Now patterns of life are different: women have less spare time for informal leisure in their neighbourhoods; children are unlikely to be given the same freedom to roam; families are more likely to drive to leisure activities further away, and rising incomes mean that for a majority, leisure is more commercialised. A significant transformation in men's approach to fatherhood has also had a deep impact. In the 1950s and 1960s, fathers might play with their children, but the labour of childcare fell mainly to women. Younger generations have shared the work more equally (though not, of course, entirely equally), as women went out to work more, and men, crucially, *wanted* to be more involved in their children's lives. Instead of going around the pubs in Sacriston, men chose more and more to drive their families to a country pub they could all enjoy. Hugh, who has been involved in the Parish Council in various roles since 2012, identified a related shift in community organisations and activities:

*we do try to do things for families now, rather than individuals. It's more for family based things that we try to do in the village. The amount of different groups and activities that we have on, y'know, we try to have mixed groups of different things, whether it be art groups, craft clubs, camera clubs, we've got all these activities going on which have actually run from the community centre. We didn't have anything like that when I was growing up, there wasn't anything such as that. People tended to go to work, come home, get showered or get bathed, go to the club, that seemed to be their life, when I was growing up ...*⁶

⁴ Hugh Dixon.

⁵ Bernice Smith.

⁶ Hugh Dixon.

Family and community have thus been reconfigured together. Once again, there are some gains and some losses and we must acknowledge both to really understand how life in Sacriston has changed.

The pit that once formed the heart of Sacriston's local economy is long-closed, and the pits, steelworks and factories in the area, too, have mainly closed. But it would be too simplistic to say that Sacriston has undergone economic 'decline'. Cars, fitted carpets, and TVs are now common; indoor bathrooms are universal; many people have more money for commercial leisure activities. Yet this increase in material abundance has some downsides. Car use has transformed the spatial patterns of everyday life, making Sacriston Front Street much less of a community space. People increasingly travel outside the village for their leisure, with a similar effect. The dense network of connections made on a daily and weekly basis in the streets, by women in the local shops, and by men in the local pubs and clubs is now gone, and many people feel its loss. Women have more options, but also face more pressures. Men can be more deeply involved in family life, but providing is a more precarious business. Much higher levels of inequality cause anger and resentment. It is not feasible, and nor would it be possible, to suggest we should return to the patterns of life characteristic of the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. But what our interviewees recall as valuable from that time – a vibrant local economy, with 'rooted' local firms that do more than just sell goods, supported by local people earning decent wages and with time, too, to spend in their local economy and community – should be appreciated. Politicians and community leaders should be seeking ways to stimulate the development of an economy that delivers these things. It is not inconceivable that some of these valued aspects of life could be recreated; none of our interviewees believed that people were now selfish, individualistic, and lacking in community spirit. In fact, another of our interviewees, "Sheila", commented on the way that, in fact, in lockdown some elements of the older-style community had returned:

It's funny because we were just saying the other day, since this lockdown, I've lived in this street, where we are now, for 42 year [...] when we first moved in, there was a good sense of community, we'd have street parties and things like that and we all had children young together, but then that sort of like stopped, but since this lockdown, it's funny how it's come back because people along

the end of the street would say, 'I'm going to the shop. Do you want anything?' and asking about you and even me neighbour who we've sort of like grown apart over these years because we were really close when the kids was little, but you all have your own life, now, but it seems to have come back, it sounds strange, do y'know what I mean? The sense of community seems to have come back to what it was years ago.⁷

Focus Groups: lessons on supporting Sacriston

Despite the challenging context at the time (with 'lockdown' in face of the pandemic) the focus group participants engaged enthusiastically online, and generously shared their insights. They all confidently advised on the actions needed, based on their own experience of what had and had not worked locally. Reflections on the pandemic experiences generally reinforced their messages about Sacriston, although it was clear their support efforts had intensified during lockdown.

In both focus groups, participants showed a high level of agreement about the economic challenges faced in Sacriston and the historical roots of these, however there were contrasting views about the nature of social capital, the extent to which it remained intact and the purposes for which it was deployed. There was wide agreement about the negative impact of austerity on life in the village. There was strong agreement across both focus groups on the need for more reliable funding for formal and informal support, and exchanges between them. Participants, particularly in focus group 1, also encouraged us to see Sacriston as a microcosm of County Durham, with socio-economic trends that could be found both in other historical pit villages and in larger settlements.

Both groups highlighted the critical role of community building and continuity in support over local people's life courses. Focus group 2 unpacked dimensions of the locality that helped to maintain a distinctive local conviviality in the community, and the centrality of the local school in cohering provision. We expand on these points below.

Focus Group 1 – key agencies Local issues & historical factors

Participants identified three priority issues, and explained how those had emerged with changes to the locality over time. The pit closures in the 1980s and subsequent disinvestment in the locality were key factors, and they had created a series of interlocking challenges.

Firstly, **the locality had lost its economic core**, or as one participant put it, "there is not much within the centres, it seems to be on the peripheries of them". Thus participants' concerns centred on the lack of employment that could offer 'progression' and was within practical reach.

"...they maybe have gone from doing 16 hours a week, originally, when they got the job, down to four and it's a real jar for them and they go, 'well, what's the point in spending £4.50 return to get to Durham and back now which might be close to an hour's wage, after tax...'"

Secondly, **unemployment over generations was entrenching disengagement**. Participants said people had become "far from the job market", disconnected psychologically as well practically.

"If the families didn't work the children thought they shouldn't work as well, there were not many children went on to university or sixth form."

Thirdly, there was a **decline in local social capital**. Participants extensively discussed "a shift away from what you call a traditional community", with its local systems of mutual support.

"If you had no food that day, it didn't matter because your neighbours used to send a cake or a pie in and when you had money, you had money and you would do the same back."

The causes were way beyond the loss of 'pit village' life. There was a growing disparity of incomes and wealth, which was a direct problem for individuals and hindered community connections.

"...you've got people who are using food banks, then you've also got people driving round in brand new cars, who live in the same street" & "we sort of barricaded ourselves in and slowly, the street, now, is just six foot fences..."

⁷ "Sheila".

Such social divisions were fuelled by a decline in the supply of decent homes for all. The housing market was described as extremely problematic, transformed by the rise by absentee private landlords, and not in step with demographic change, especially the decline in the proportion of working age relative to retired people.

“...people bought the council house, but couldn’t afford to maintain it and then they’ve got old and they’ve got an asset that’s worth nothing or very little. They haven’t invested in it, they can’t manage it anymore ...” & “there’s stairs that they can’t manage anymore... no-one’s built a bungalow in County Durham since 2004.”

Responses & capacity to act

Drawing on their own work, participants highlighted the power of place-based initiatives, engaging people in opportunities and the role of supporting human connections.

Providing housing choice for the locality was key. Participants underscored that this required knowledge of local need and housing tenure types. Efforts to engage young people in the neighbourhood were extremely effective. Participants strongly and repeatedly noted the impact of recent funding cuts.

“...county council cut 90 per cent of youth provision around the county, it was just cutting their nose off to spite their face.”

Participants’ work was oriented towards helping people to take action. It included ‘plugging into’ other organisations and places, as well as maintaining a strong local connection.

“getting them to aspire to university and beyond that and do something with that, rather than flee”

Institutions were seen as hubs to help people along a “continuous pathway” with conspicuous care of the whole community. Strong, trusting relations were critical to success, particularly where people lacked the confidence to take advantage of opportunities, and as a point of call in need.

“you’re like a hub in the families, the families trust you, they go to you for everything”

Focus Group 2 – local residents Local issues & recent trends

As in the first focus group, participants in this group – residents who were involved in SME development, youth groups, churches, and sporting groups in the village – discussed the loss of the historically dominant economic core, and difficulties related to the housing market structure. They noted the loss of amenities, including a school, a bank, pubs, and independent greengrocers, and said the **place risked ‘going dormant’**.

“every little plot of land in the village has been taken up and been developed and they’ve put houses on [...] it just feels like housing, housing, housing.”

Yet throughout the discussions they emphasised **the quality of their lives, and how lucky they felt to live in Sacriston**. They celebrated the local environment, and local relationships that were well established and the social glue that kept people together in Sacriston.

“We’ve got beautiful woods, we’ve got beautiful walks all around the place and I think that’s massive and we’ve got lots of green space”

“I do still think that Sacriston is a desirable place for young people to return to and live as well and that is because of, if you are involved in the community, then it is a bit of a no brainer” & “it feels like a much more real cross-section of life than you get in a suburban estate”

The group spontaneously recalled the Durham Miners Gala and other local festivities, and the joy and sense of collective wellbeing that this brought.

“Christmas Extravaganza and the summer stuff as well, that really does bring the whole community together.” “a music festival that draws people from all over the place”

However in discussion of local issues, their **focus was firmly on a general sense of community wellbeing**. Participants witnessed deprivation through the declining health and wellbeing of their community, and the ability of people to get involved in activities. They noted the isolation of older people, and creeping low-level depression where that existed in all cohorts, when they could not draw on the strength of the local community.

“Most people know each other but some lack confidence and get into a cycle of less and less contact.”

“you only have to look at things like Remembrance Sunday and the Easter Sunday Parade and things like that, people do actually pull together”

During the Covid19 pandemic, the experiences in establishing food banks and other services had enabled participants to discover neighbours with acute and immediate need.

“these people in the interim during Covid because they were in crisis... they were always in crisis, they were just on nobody’s radar.”

A significant historical issue was the loss of a local secondary school, which had provided a ‘ready cohort’ for connecting community. The school had been the heart of the village and closed in controversial circumstances. The inability of local people to join together to keep the school was a matter of deep regret.

“we haven’t got that ready cohort of children, ready to come through because they’re all at various schools within the area now and I think that is a real problem and I don’t know how we’re going to get past that because I think it’s gone too far now”

A holistic & connected approach to support

Participants were powerful first responders in the pandemic. One immediate threat was to connections, and it was vital, in lockdown, to help people overcome barriers to online interaction, by helping to improve skills and providing technology, for instance loaning laptops with WiFi dongles for children to do their homework or meet friends on social media. This was seen as critical as social media was becoming a real platform for local communications.

“connectivity is brilliant and it needs to happen, but Covid came and what we found is a lot of families and parents can’t afford laptops or devices to get the kids online”

Participants had clear social influence locally, and their response to problems was based on knowledge of what was necessary to support their community. They were particularly careful not to introduce fixed charges for participation in sports activities for instance, leaving a voluntary donations box out rather than asking for the usual £2, which would be a barrier to those most in need. Considerable effort went into ensuring that people remained connected and addressing problems of isolation.

There were strong views on the need for more socially responsible business in the village. In particular, the growth of private landlordism was seen as having negative social consequences and requiring an official intervention.

“dilute down all of these bang out of order landlords who are quite happy to give the properties to anyone, they’re not heated properly, they’re not insulated, they’ll give them to whoever comes”

Participants in focus group 1 had indicated the needed for their formal support services to plug into local networks; focus group 2 participants also noted the importance of connections to formal institutions. However, their own work had been **expanding, in volume and scope, in response to shrinking statutory provision**. For instance, there was a desire to provide local community services for new mothers.

“so anyone who’s pregnant in the village, we recognised that health visitors aren’t the greatest, midwives aren’t the greatest and that’s not because they’re not highly skilled, it’s because they’ve got time pressures, like everyone in the NHS, so if we can, in any way, get that intervention system in, literally, pre-birth, we’ve captured them straightaway”

“we’re going to lose a bit of our lifeblood, unless we work extremely hard with the junior school set up”

Lessons from Sacriston

The closure of Sacriston colliery, and of the mining industry in Co Durham more broadly, signalled the end of a long trajectory of development for the village. Although the colliery provided jobs and supported the living standards of families, change has been the order of the day in Sacriston for generations. Broader changes in the labour market, new forms of privatised consumption, shifting cultural attitudes and, more recently, the impacts of austerity have shaped social and economic conditions in the village. Life is hard for many people in the village and was made harder by Covid19 and its economic impacts. Older members of the community lament the loss of a thriving and cohesive village. Younger members of the community value strong community ties and see the potential to rekindle the more appealing aspects of the past.

Much of what gave the village its identity was a kind of social infrastructure that supported an associational life and fostered a sense of belonging, and much of this infrastructure was organised and controlled locally. Key infrastructures that reproduce village life, such as the secondary school, have been lost. Sacriston remains a close-knit community with a rich array of associational life and a strong sense of belonging, but the relationships that support this are stretched, as the state has withdrawn its provision. The spaces and infrastructures that could help nurture and develop the social capital that gives Sacriston its vitality and sense of belonging, have shrunk. Those that remain require investment.

The task of replacing lost jobs is beyond the capacity of the village alone, although there are a number of small enterprises that could grow with the correct support and contribute to the vibrancy of the village. However, a central conclusion of the project is that economics and social networks are closely linked: a strong local economy in the past was a key support for the development of strong community ties and institutions. We should not assume that it is impossible to develop in the present strong, rooted local economies where income circulates locally and wealth, skills and experience are all retained and built up in the area. A strong Foundational Economy that provides better and more appropriate local infrastructure, and the Community Wealth Building approach, working with anchor institution partners in the area, such as Housing Associations, local government, and other institutions, to use procurement spending to build up local businesses, provides one potential way to do this. The approach pioneered in Somerset by the Onion Collective

to develop and attract sustainable businesses to the area is another. This study suggests the importance of such strategies, though implementing them requires a significant collaborative effort from many institutions.

A key task that emerges from this study is to consider further what kinds of social infrastructures could be created or adapted that would foster a process of reconnection, reduced isolation and create spaces for conviviality. Such infrastructures have the best chance of having the most immediate and lasting impacts on wellbeing and enlisting local support. The provisioning of such infrastructure should also provide local employment opportunities. The opportunity for UCL is to assist local actors in determining what social infrastructures are likely to have the biggest impact on the wellbeing of the greatest number. The UCL team is currently developing a series of projects to deepen our understanding these issues, two of which have already been funded by the ESRC and Leverhulme Trust.

Thanks to UCL Grand Challenges and the Durham Miners' Association for supporting this research.



Image above: The Sacriston Lodge banner at the Durham Miners' Gala, 2010s



Image above: Sacriston in 1895 (detail). Reproduced with the kind permission of the National Library of Scotland

