

MELTDOWN

**“I’m a foundry man me
Molten metal in my veins
I’ve sweated and I’ve toiled
But I’ll not change
Smoke’s in my throat and
swerve’s in my skin
The metal’s my life and my living”**

Gas flames and populist poetry leap from the very first pages of MELTDOWN: Words and Images from a Yorkshire Foundry. Here, Ian Beesley and Heads Together introduce us to the men and women at Hydro Aluminium Motorcast Limited, once known as the West Yorkshire Foundries in Leeds, England.

This is a vigorous tribute, flexing muscular verbs like *melting*, *casting*, *fettling* and *quenching* alongside colorful snapshots that walk us through an imaged production sequence of cylinder heads and engine blocks for powerful V-8 motors. But even the cachet associated with Bentley, Aston Martin, Rolls Royce or Range Rover isn’t enough to protect the working life and heritage of the furnacemen, core makers and moulders. For after 50 years of talented toil, the corporate raiders and traders have arrived carrying their own disingenuous chapbook from which they recite the dreaded, familiar verse of:

“Over capacity in the marketplace
Cheaper foreign-made products
Stiff global competition”

It is a closure we are about to experience; but also a page-turner that will transform the roster of “final redundancies” into laughing, thinking, spirited human beings. Defy the inevitable by celebrating accomplishments rather than mourning their loss. Choose to be in charge of destiny, even as the winds of economic change threaten to reduce your career to smoke and ash – this is the brave message of MELTDOWN.

“Well, now I’ve got the chance, so I’m going to change my life upside down and go for it – and I aren’t going to tell you about it; you might laugh or publish it in that book.”

Contemplate changing life upside down, actually changing one’s life from the inverted posture. Everything steady and familiar is suddenly up-ended and from this head-rushing position, new dreams and directions must be crafted. Someone better publish the method and the madness required when mastering this meltdown because it is the only discipline that will serve us well at the onset of our own multi-national, peak oil misery.

We see the curve ahead but we ignore it, preferring to accelerate our sleek, smooth riding, gas-guzzling machines straight into the global salvage yard. When we finally do put our heads together and begin to plan our way through the coming planetary calamity, we will require the wisdom of our West Yorkshire passengers, now quite proficient at riding shotgun and holding on for dear life with a white-knuckled grip

“When they tie the can to a union man,
Sit down! Sit down!
When they give him the sack, they’ll take him back,
Sit down! Sit down!
When the speed-up comes, just twiddle your thumbs,
Sit down! Sit down!
When the boss won’t talk, don’t take a walk,
Sit down! Sit down!
American CIO Sit Down Song, 1937 by Maurice Sugar

In the early days, West Yorkshire Foundries was an alphabet soup of organized labor: TASS, AUEW, EETPU, ASTMS, the Pattern Maker’s Union, and others competed for the time and energy of front office and floor, alike. Strikes, wildcat or premeditated, were commonplace in the mythical territory where the work went on forever but by the 1980’s, the iron foundry had permanently closed and a new owner had arrived, the German company Bruhl Eisenwerk. Fresh infusions of capital followed and expansion of product lines for GM and Ford, strengthened annual sales, and a steady stream of new hires. Both management and workforce settled into an amicable alliance where profit and professions hung in a clearly defined balance. Then a change up was thrown March 2002, in the form of a takeover by the Norwegian, corporate hydra known as Norsk-Hydro. After that, Hydro Aluminum Motorcast Limited surfaced, but eighteen months later came the announcement of murky, economic margins and a decidedly unambiguous phase-out.

Heads Together’s creative team was invited in during early 2004 to discuss publishing a commemorative booklet on the Forge. By then, a legally-structured plant run down procedure was unfolding and even as severance packages and outplacement services were being activated, employees persisted in a pointless, institutional dance of quality audits, operational performance improvements, production deadlines and charitable donation fund drives. Were they staying or were they going? They were going all right, but with the support from a generous grant, MELTDOWN became an ambitious project, percolating with poets, photographers and filmmakers. One book, a touring exhibition, a DVD, a website and a school education pack emerged as the testimony and are now available by visiting www.fettling.com.

. On page 148 of the Meltdown manual, three silhouetted men walk through a dark passageway - toward something but at the same time, away from something. It is this simultaneous movement that Heads Together seems most keen on capturing. Far from home, a one-time Motorcast mate mails back a photo to Leeds. He has relocated to Mallorca, is still fumbling the requisite Spanish, but loves his reincarnation as the new owner of a “brilliant busy” pub named *Whispers*. “It’s great; I wouldn’t come back for a gold pin!”

But even as his new identity takes shape on the shores of Magaluf, many more remain behind, alive and pulsing. Theirs is a legacy of great stories - precisely what is stolen from every industrial culture in the rational and mathematically calculated act of something so wasteful and commonplace as a shutdown.

We read it and weep but also come to realize that our own ability to hang tough, to improvise, to remain buoyant and to stand tall upon the shoulders of others, absolutely depends upon the preservation and proliferation of tough and tender tales like these. A weathered, black leather belt is contemplated. Over one hundred years old, it is a precious family artifact, about to be retired from duty. Each grommet notch is the chronicle of a workingman – the grandfather/weaver from Holmfirth, the father/collier from Parkhill Drift and the descendant of both, a soon-to-be jobless stiff from a Yorkshire foundry. One toiler looks into the MELTDOWN mirror and catches a glimpse of himself as a green apprentice, who confuses a breakfast request for a *double-decker*, bacon & egg sandwich with a *double-decker* Twix chocolate bar. He is cussed out royally for his trouble and never again sent on a canteen errand by the old-timers.

Work feeds their souls and at work, it is always good to eat well. The food stories in MELTDOWN are the remains of what was once a feast of collegiality. Encountering them is like stumbling onto a vacated campsite where abandoned platters are still groaning with succulent and satisfying.

**“Now the ice cream van tolls our knell
As we sit with our backs against
The cooling foundry wall
And the world watches us go by”**

There is a portrait of a smiling someone squatting in a corner gripping a covered tin tea mug. Another of a weary someone sitting alone in an empty lunchroom, head sandwiched between hands. A hungry night shift someone recalls how the late 1960’s produced an infusion of Asians and with them, an appreciation for the cuisine and the richness of human differences. The tantalizing aromas of homemade curries and samosas wafted out from the die located next to the casting station, serving up an exchange where men could become neighbors, not traumatized strangers confronting each other in terror, across the current armed, global abyss of finite fuels. A canteen lady with a frying pan as big as her heart, is remembered for stoking the physiological furnaces with plentiful portions of eggs, bacon, sausages, fried bread, fish & chips and Christmas dinners, served by management. With a shrunken workforce of 200 by 1982, there was little to offer as a morale booster except the kitchen magic of the canteen maidens.

**“These kind ladies gave all the food I demanded
It’s no surprise my waist has expanded
Once I was a size eight
Now, I can only just squeeze, through the man gate”**

Teacarts, typing pools and troublemakers were just a few of the foundry’s female occupations. Young women in search of egalitarian or emancipatory possibilities needed to look no further than Louise Tomassi, who shoveled sand and lugged base plates tucked under each arm like so many bags of groceries. So, it was no surprise that when pushed out of line and mouthed off to one evening at the factory bus stop, ‘Big Louie’ knocked the cocky commuter into an altered state and then directed the driver to head off, leaving her vanquished foe right where he fell.

Louise was a legend with a devoted following who celebrated her precisely because she embodied the fundamental lesson that genuine recognition, rank and authority are the result of hard-earned competence and never assigned through a phony construction of power, privilege or position.

As you exit this visually rich tour of a Meltdown, be sure to visit the clock faces suspended from contrasting wall surfaces and listen to their song.

Tick tock
The company watch
It ticks to our final day
So, tick bloody tock, bloody tick

After 45 years of service, the tock no longer ticks for Terry Speake or for the Parr brothers with their combined 36. Section crews cluster together for final photographs, recalling an era of seven-day workweeks, double shifts and coveralls bulging with cash from union salary negotiations. Those days have vanished, concluding in a payday of empty pockets, yet the achievement here is the treasure trove of timely reminders that Heads Together has so artfully collected and presented.

You are humanity's most important natural resource and don't forget it.

No matter how bumpy the passage, rely on imagination, determination and the everyday genius of people power.

Inventive, must-do/can-do spirits of struggle and success are being called into our social and economic present.

Lie on the table, grit your teeth, stiffen your spine, curl your toes and resist the adjustment headed our way or release and help the rearrangement begin.

Pay attention to what is crackling and popping with live current right under your nose and associate with communities who combine with others to maximize brains and backbone.

Don't rage at the machine for predictably waiting until the 11th hour to squeeze that last drop of profit out of the bloody turnip.

It is time to ACTIVATE and get with the program...the one that we are here to author.