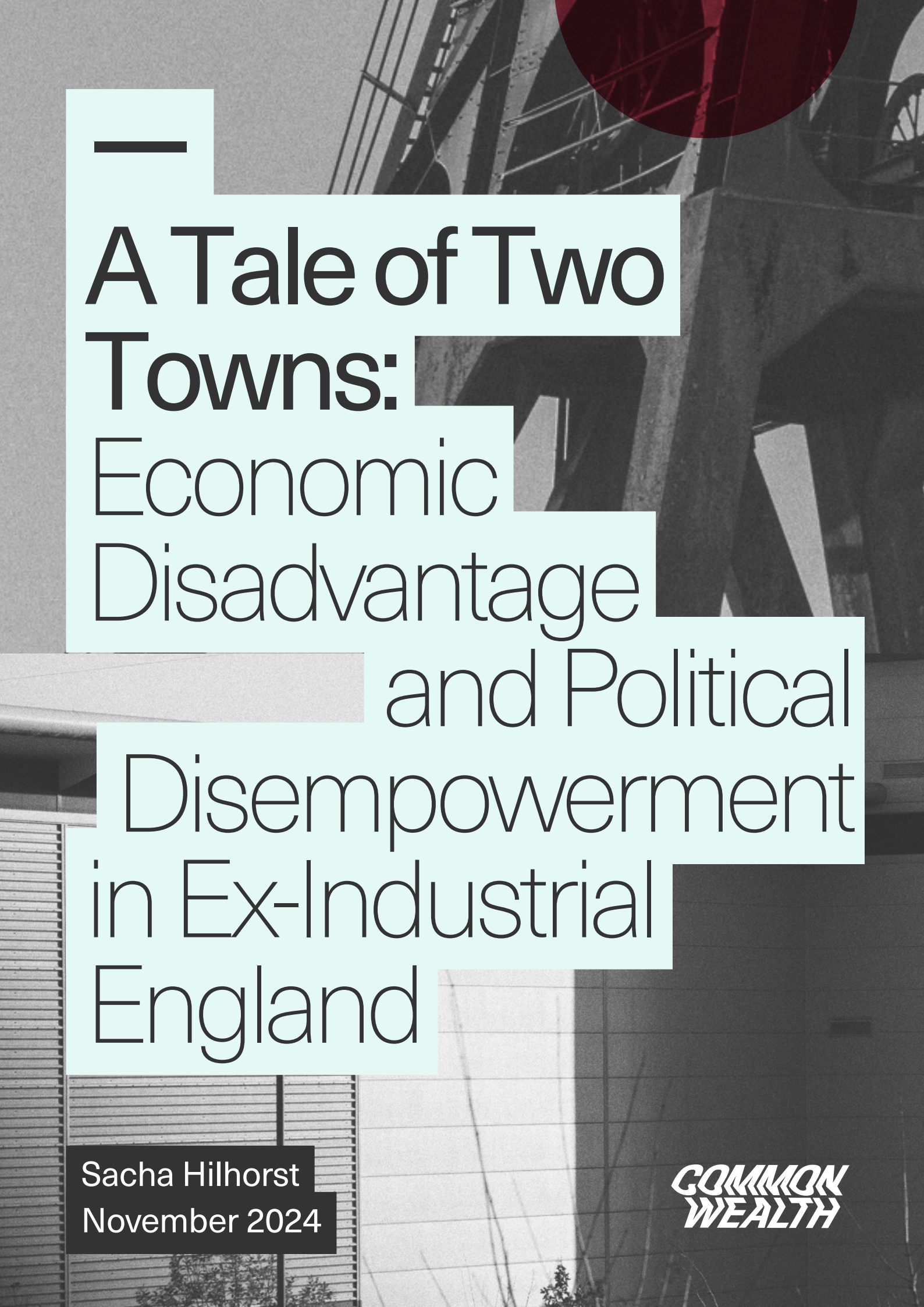

A Tale of Two Towns: Economic Disadvantage and Political Disempowerment in Ex-Industrial England

Sacha Hilhorst

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COMMON WEALTH

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Introduction

Far from being forgotten or left behind, England's former mining and manufacturing towns have been testing grounds for successive waves of neoliberal policymaking. Although these policies have failed at their stated aim of generating well-paying jobs, they were successful at remaking former industrial heartlands into hubs of logistics and care work. Many ex-industrial towns[1] are now dominated by low-paid work, as behemoths like Amazon take advantage of financial incentives, patchy labour rights and cheap land. Although policymakers and commentators continue to refer to ex-industrial towns as defined by the past, the actual economic structures of these areas are marked by cutting-edge innovations in exploitation and financialisation.

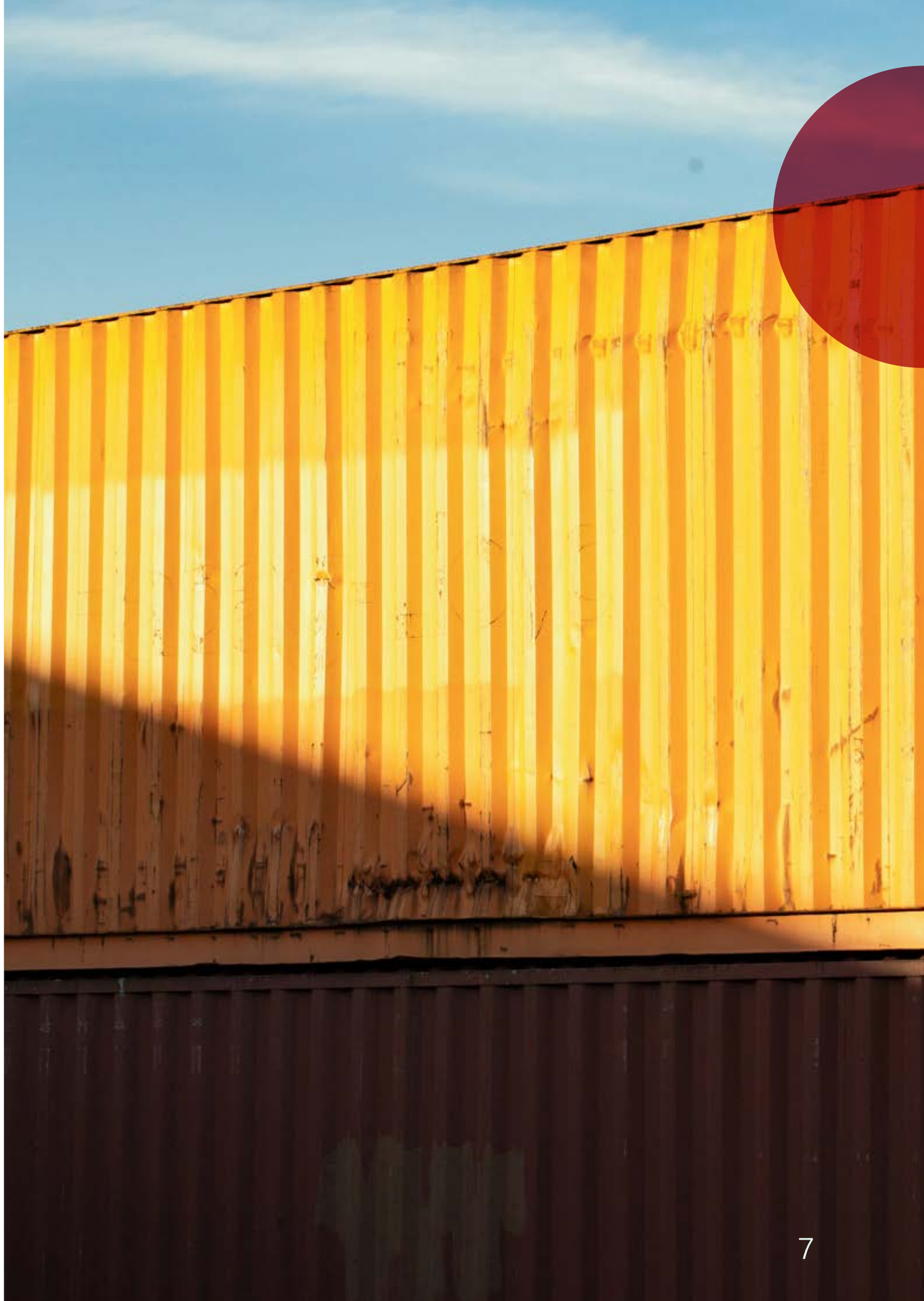
Crafting a progressive agenda for ex-industrial towns must start from an awareness of these histories, which continue to shape people's everyday interactions with economic and political structures. Structural economic shifts have changed the very rhythm of these towns: how and where people interact, how people move through space and where they encounter politics. Even those former mining and manufacturing workers who enjoy good pensions and outright home ownership see their children struggle to find local employment that pays above minimum wage, driving a widespread sense of decline.[2] A deep-seated respect for hard work co-exists uneasily with an economic model dependent on exploited migrant labour. Successive politicians have promised jobs and investment which never came.[3] These socio-economic developments have reshaped the terrain of political possibility. England's older industrial towns have steadily drifted away from Labour,[4] and winning these voters' support for progressive causes requires a more locally grounded understanding of the experiences of economic disadvantage and political disempowerment which shape people's politics.

This project draws on archival research and interviews with 121 residents, civic leaders, union representatives, councillors and regeneration officials in two ex-industrial towns in the Midlands in England. It focuses on two towns: Corby and Mansfield. Where Mansfield is described as "the archetypical 'left behind' town",[5] Corby has received praise for its "phoenix-like" revival, as the town "emerged

from the ashes of post-industrial decay".[6] On several metrics, such as population growth, house prices and average income, Corby seems to be edging closer to larger, more prosperous cities. Once we peel back the surface, however, this tale of two towns reveals the structural forces which continue to mark ex-industrial areas. These histories reveal that it is not enough to provide zones, perks and incentives "so that it makes good business sense for the private sector to invest in areas that have for too long felt left behind."[7] Although now forgotten, these policies have been tried before and have failed. Instead, this report proposes three central tenets for a progressive agenda for post-industrial towns: political renewal, good work and thriving commons.

Key Points

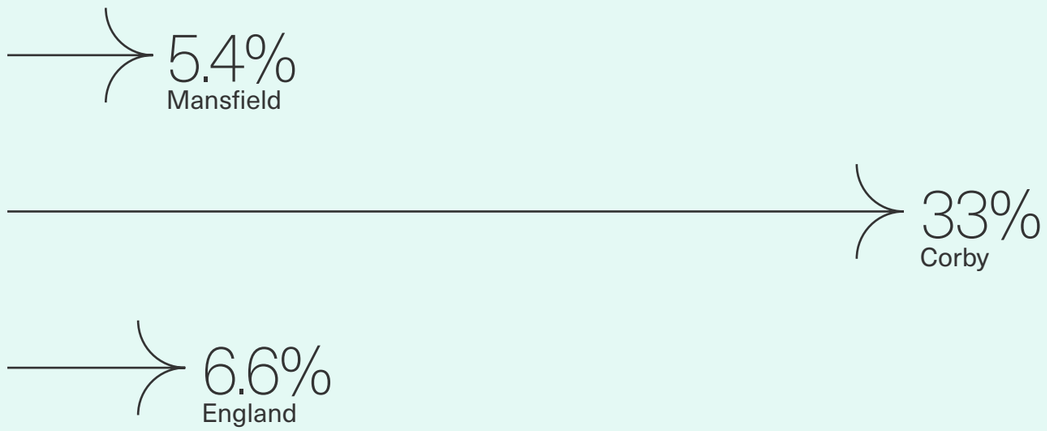
- Drawing on interviews with 121 residents, civil servants and local leaders, the report argues towns like Mansfield and Corby were not "left behind" but actively remade through neoliberal regeneration policies such as enterprise zones, land selloffs and financial perks for large businesses, most of which offered only low-paid, insecure work.
- In Mansfield and Corby alone, policymakers have spent tens of millions of pounds of public money to attract footloose businesses, resulting in a precarious local economy. This has contributed to a deep sense of social and economic decline.
- Although these local economies are often described as laggards, local employers have been in some ways at the very forefront, using complex financial structures and adopting novel and sometimes exploitative labour practices.
- Some of the former civil servants and local leaders interviewed for this report express a sense of regret at the policies they championed, which benefited multinational companies but not the local population.
- To win back support in ex-industrial areas, progressives must confront the failures of neoliberal regeneration efforts — including insecure work and the sell-off of public assets — and the resulting cynicism about politics and the UK economy.



Key Stats

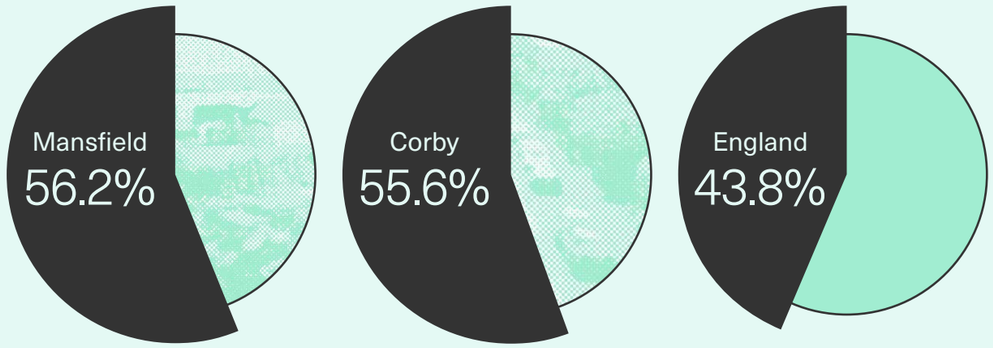
Population

Population growth

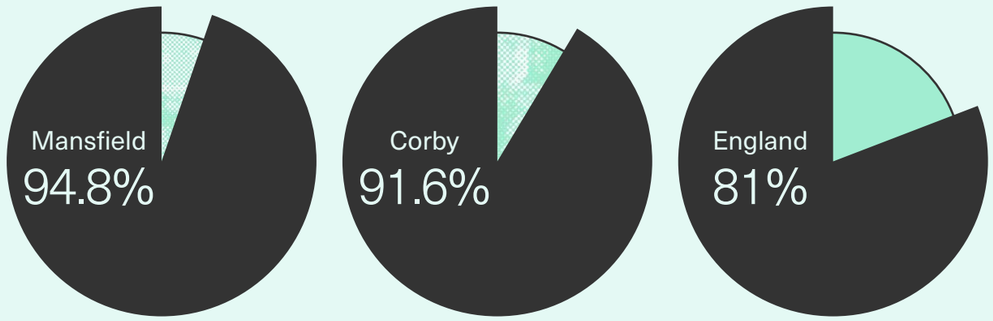


Median full-time income

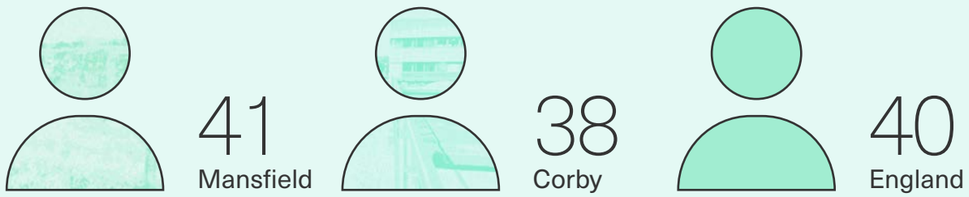
Social grade C2DE



White ethnicity



Average age

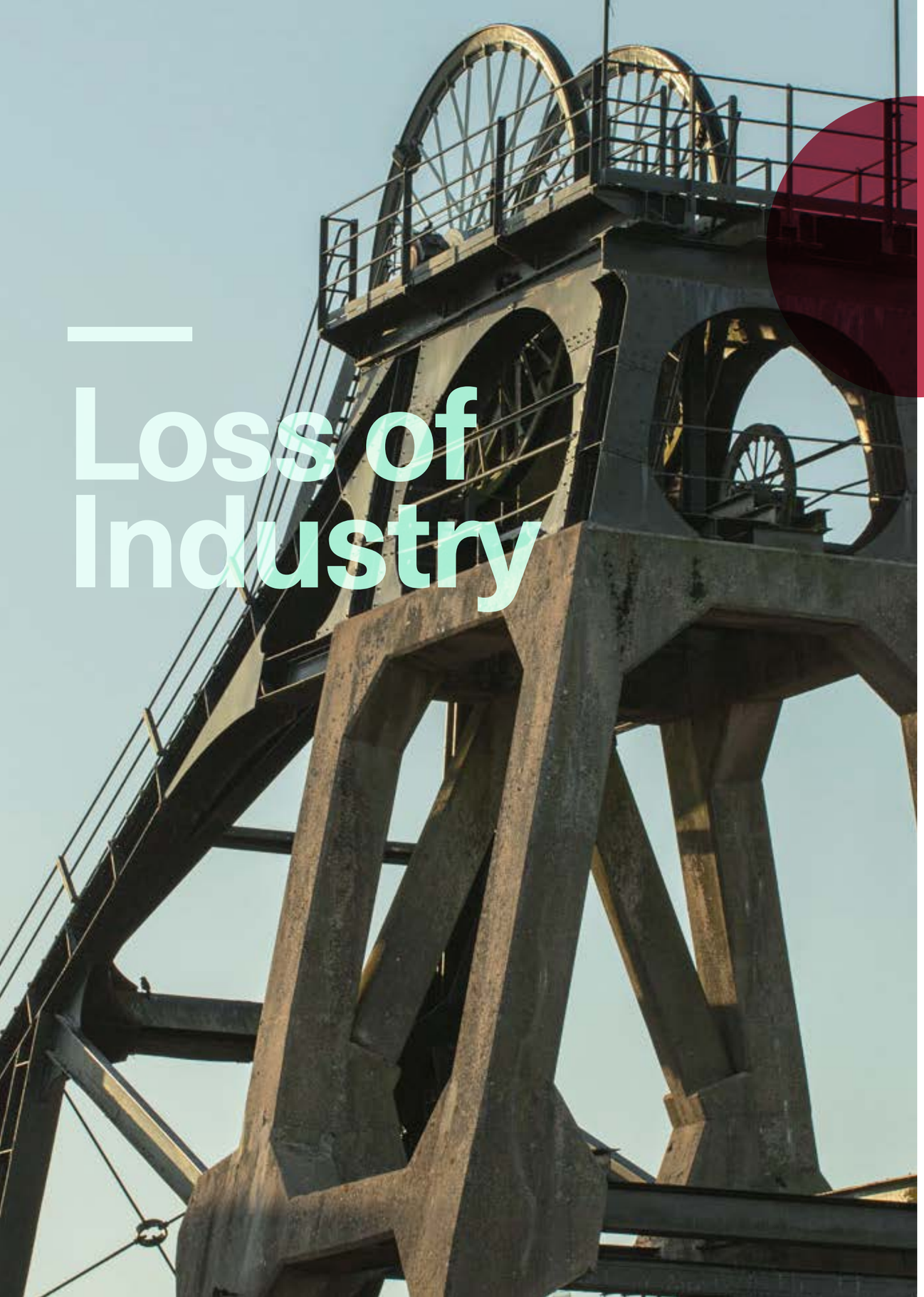


Social mobility index

Mansfield
315
/325

Corby
321
/325

— Sacha Hilhorst



Loss of Industry

In the latter decades of the 20th century, the UK deindustrialised rapidly. While industrial employment peaked as early as 1955, the process of deindustrialisation gathered pace as the century wore on.[8] Commonwealth citizens, many of whom had been invited after World War II to work in booming industries, were among those affected first and hardest.[9] When industrial employment started to decline, Black and brown workers found themselves facing redundancy as employers from Oldham's textile mills to Leicester's engineering firms to Coventry's car factory embarked on downsizing or closure.[10] The process spread out from pockets here and there until, by the 1980s, even the most powerful and organised sections of the working class became unable to prevent job losses.

Mansfield and Corby were initially shielded from these dynamics. After 1945, both towns were at the heart of the post-war project. Both had been crucial to the war effort and as the UK started to rebuild, Corby provided the steel that was required to reconstruct the country and Mansfield the fuel that was to power it, not to mention the role of coal and steel in replenishing stocks of military equipment and projecting imperial power. The two industries depended on one another: British Steel used British coal to fuel its blast furnaces. Coal and steel were afforded a strategic national importance unlike other industries, which provided the rationale for nationalising both industries. Decades of union struggles had forged a highly organised workforce, not just in the pits and steelworks but also in Mansfield's local factories, which were mostly run and staffed by women.

Through a combination of union struggle and paternalist provision, both towns had seen the emergence of a dense civic network of social provision tied to their industries. One interviewee, Marcus, recalls:

> *My father got on his motorbike, came down to Corby. [...] [The steel works] gave him a social life, which was a recreation club, [...] and in the recreation club they had tennis, they had a bowls green, they had cricket, they had football and they had rugby. They had an indoor shooting gallery. And what was really funny, they had a deep-sea fishing club and we're 80 miles away from the sea. So anything they wanted to do as a sort of a hobby [they got].*

Similarly in Mansfield and its surrounding area, the labour movement had succeeded in winning a high level of social provision, with the government at times intervening to mandate further provision to ward off strikes. Interviewees in their thirties remember playing in the pit bands, learning sports on pitches by the state-mandated welfare and attending annual galas funded by and in celebration of the industry.

For Corby, the energy price spikes of the 1970s spelled disaster, as the Corby works were comparatively energy intensive.[11] Amid a wider crisis of overcapacity in steel, the government announced its intention to shut down the steel works in 1980. In the infamous annex to the 1977 Ridley plan, Thatcher's confidant Sir Nicholas Ridley had described the steel industry as an easy target and a favourable terrain to take on the unions. Although the steel unions and the people of Corby doggedly protested the government's plans to shut down the works, they were unable to prevent closure. In a town of some 52,000 inhabitants, up to 20,000 local people lost their jobs in the steel works and the feeder industries according to estimates by the council.[12] Only a small tube works remained.

The showdown which led to the closure of Corby was a prelude to the larger stand-off with the miners that was to follow in 1984. As the miners' strike erupted, Thatcher recognised the importance of the Nottinghamshire coalfield. The coalfield was highly productive and many of its miners were reluctant to go on strike, having been promised by the National Coal Board that they had "jobs for life". As the geographer Jay Emery has documented, Thatcher personally wrote letters to the wives of Nottinghamshire miners who defied the strike, to impress upon them the importance of their husbands' continued work.[13] Housing tenure also played a role, as the historian Jim Phillips has noted, with Nottinghamshire miners far more likely to own their homes.[14] Whereas Welsh and Scottish miners were often council tenants, whose rents were reduced or deferred during the strike, Mansfield miners experienced no such solidarity from their mortgage providers. Their defiance of the strike was a great boon to the government and instrumental in defeating the National Union of Mineworkers, in a decisive blow to the labour movement. The defeat of the strike sapped the energy of the movement,[15] amplified divisions among progressives,[16] and foreclosed

the alternative progressive future which supporters had hoped would grow from the strike.[17]

After the defeat of the miners, the process of pit closures accelerated. Previously affluent areas saw their local economies collapse and many who had held well-paying industrial jobs saw their pay cut by as much as half, if they were able to find new employment at all.[18] Newstead Colliery closed in 1987 and Mansfield Colliery, affectionately known by locals as Crownie, followed a year later. The next year, Sutton, Warsop Main and Blidworth followed all at once. The spate of closures continued at a rapid pace throughout the late '80s and early '90s. It is difficult to overstate the scale of the change. Alongside the loss of coal and steel, other manufacturing was also disappearing, having been rendered uncompetitive through Thatcher's exchange rate policy. In the 1980s, the Midlands lost industrial jobs at a rate comparable to ex-communist nations undergoing capitalist shock therapy.[19]

The job losses in coal and steel from the 1980s onwards hit particularly hard because other industries also faced decline driven by automation and globalisation. To this day, even in industries where outputs have grown on trend, employment numbers have gone down dramatically. For example, outputs of the UK car industry are almost as high as ever, but on a fraction of the workforce.[20] These same processes occurred in the industries around Mansfield and Corby. Just south of Mansfield, the Pretty Polly hosiery factory used innovations in its machinery to reduce the need for labour. Producing tights had required two minutes for each leg in the 1970s, falling by 50 per cent to just one minute in the early 1980s. By 1988, the most advanced machines brought it down to 45 seconds only.[21] Even when former industrial areas managed to attract new manufacturing firms, these soon started to shed jobs due to automation.[22]

By 1990, there were still over 100,000 workers employed in textiles and clothing in the East Midlands alone,[23] more than five times as many as now.[24] Their wages supported many other jobs, from the newsagents by the bus stop to the pub on the high street. "The women were funny, it was good", said Annie, a former factory employee. "Everybody worked hard but we had a laugh at the same time. [At] Christmas, we used to have what we called a fuddle, which is everybody would take something. One would take sausage rolls, one would take cake, one would take mince pies, bottle of beer or wine or whatever and then when the managers had gone back to the offices, we'd just have picnics and have a drink by the side of machines and stuff and have a laugh about that." These narrations highlight that the workers could claim considerable autonomy in the space of the factory, transforming it into a social space for their celebrations.

The women who worked in the hosiery factories fondly remember buses dropping them off in the town centres, which were buzzing with activity as groups of textile workers made their way from pub to pub. Together, the women would sing along to the songs on the radio, celebrate holidays and negotiate their wages. Annie recalls:

> *[T]he women would be going in offices, falling out about the prices with managers. They'd come out and say "right, down tools, that's it, everybody in canteen", and we'd just stop production for a few hours while it got sorted out. They'd usually come back with a couple of pence more a dozen and that would satisfy everybody. [...] Later on as it started to decline, they couldn't do that. The unions lost the power. [...] A lot of the factories had shut or got smaller so there weren't so many union reps, people wouldn't just drop tools and go on strike because they were frightened of losing their job.*

Their labour power declined because companies could wield the threat of offshoring production. In Mansfield, the knitwear factories produced almost exclusively for Marks and Spencer. In the late 1900s and early 2000s, Marks and Spencer ended those contracts in favour of production in cheaper locales, effectively sealing the fate of the Nottinghamshire textile industry.[25]

Ahead of closures or redundancies, the factories would ring the benefits office to give them a heads up. One interviewee, Marsha, worked in a Mansfield benefits office from the early 80s through to the early years of the new millennium, as the area was rapidly deindustrialising. "We used to be able to tell because we'd be warned. So, if it was a factory was closing, the factory would ring the benefit office and say,

‘We’re laying whatever, 100 off.’ Because then we knew that around that time, that we were going to be really, really busy.” Over time, she could chart the economic transformation of the town through the phone calls she received at the benefits office. “We used to think it’s like, you know, when does this all end? Because you think there won’t be anything left in Mansfield at this rate.”

Table: Pits And Factories around Mansfield and Their Closure Dates

Colliery	Closure
Kirkby	1968
Langwith	1978
Teversal	1980
New Hucknall	1982
Pleasley	1983
Newstead	1987
Mansfield (Crown Farm)	1988
Blidworth	1989
Sutton	1989
Warsop Main	1989
Creswell	1991
Sherwood	1992
Silverhill	1992
Rufford	1993
Shirebrook	1993
Ollerton	1994
Bilsthorpe	1997
Annesley-Bentinck	2000
Clipstone	2003
Welbeck	2010
Thoresby	2015

Factory	Location	Closure
Meridian (later Courtaulds)	Newgate lane, Mansfield	1986
William Hollins (later Coats Viyella)	Pleasley Mills	1987
Mansfield Hosiery Mills (later Coats Viyella)	Botany Ave, Mansfield	1989
Meritina (later Coats Viyella)	North Road, Huthwaite	1998
Meritina (later Coats Viyella)	Common Road, Huthwaite	1998
Meridian (later Courtaulds)	Belvedere St & Quaker Way, Mansfield	2000
Bairnswear (later Courtaulds)	Raymoth Lane, Worksop	2000
Mansfield Knitwear (later Coats Viyella)	Newark Road, New Ollerton	2000
Simpson, Wright & Lowe (later Coats Viyella)	Huthwaite Road, Sutton-in-Ashfield	2000
Wrightwear Fabrics (later Coats Viyella, Welbeck)	Reed Mill, Sheepsbridge Lane, Mansfield	2001
Mansfield Brewery	Great Central Road, Mansfield	2002
Richard Roberts	Urban Road, Kirkby-in-Ashfield	2003
Martin Emprex	Lucknow Drive, Sutton-in-Ashfield	2003
Shoe Co	Dallas St, Mansfield	2004
Sherwood Iron Foundry (James Maude)	Forest Road, Mansfield	2004
Pretty Polly	Kirkby Folly Road	2004
Pretty Polly	Unwin Road, Sutton-in-Ashfield	2005
Etam	Sutton Rd & Skegby lane	2005
Martin Emprex	Kirkby Road	2005
Remploy	Botany Ave, Mansfield	2007
Whiteley Electronics	Victoria Street, Mansfield	2009
Metal Box	Oddicroft Lane, Sutton-in-Ashfield	2010
Metal Box	Rock Valley, Mansfield	2010

What Came Next

What happened after the closure of the pits, steelworks and factories? Although ex-industrial towns in the Midlands and North of England are often described as having been forgotten by Westminster, many of these were in fact *remade* along neoliberal lines. Successive governments unleashed experimental policies on post-industrial towns, which served as laboratories for novel forms of deregulation, subjectivation and corporate welfare. These policies came with big promises about good jobs, regenerated spaces and bright futures. But this future did not materialise. Many ex-miners and ex-steelworkers became economically inactive, while the present-day demand for labour in ex-industrial towns is largely for low-paid work in supermarkets, care homes and distribution centres.

Initially, Margaret Thatcher and her ministers promised that the shutdown and sell-off of state-owned industries would spark a bonanza of new entrepreneurial activity. Commenting in 1980 on the imminent closure of the Corby steelworks, then-Chancellor Keith Joseph prophesied that the town would have “a healthier economy and a stronger industrial base in a few years’ time [...] We have been overspending, successive governments [have been] over-taxing, over-borrowing, over-regulating, and we have obstructed the natural processes of job-creation that flow from serving the customer.” Instead of being dependent on one large, state-owned employer, Corby would now depend on many different private sector businesses, which, Joseph promised, would see the town thrive anew.

This was not the only time politicians came with big promises. We can trace at least two big waves of policy activity prior to the present-day levelling up agenda: the “entrepreneurship” agenda under Thatcher, focused on corporate welfare and incentives for individual would-be entrepreneurs, and the job creation agenda under New Labour, administered by councils and QUANGOs. Each has failed on its own terms. Both the Thatcher and New Labour projects did, however, transform the towns, heralding the arrival of low-paid distribution centre work in some locales and high-powered finance in others. In this sense, the emerging economies of ex-industrial areas were not holdovers from a past mode of production, but a sign of things to come.

Entrepreneurship

When the Corby steel works shut in 1980, according to the local council, "ghost town, bankruptcy and extinction were possible".[26] Searching for a way out of its predicament, Corby applied to become one of Britain's first "enterprise zones" — a delimited space where corporation taxes are lowered, regulations waived and incentives offered to attract new businesses. Thatcher herself appears to have considered the enterprise zones a test case for her style of conservatism in practice.[27] Scholars describe the enterprise zone project as "the neoliberal city's purest policy expression."[28] To right-wing thinkers, enterprise zones were intended to be openings in the structure of the nation-state, which might offer a glimpse of a future neoliberal utopia.[29] As such, enterprise zones were "perfectly [suited for] a new global geography of capitalism."[30]

In 1980, Corby was among the first tranche of enterprise zones, alongside other ex-industrial areas such as Canary Wharf, which would be entirely transformed by the same scheme. If this business-friendly remaking required short-circuiting democratic demands, then so be it. "Can the political decision-making process in the accepted, democratic sense in local government, cope with the need for fundamental economic initiatives?", asked the town's newly-appointed chief executive. "I do not believe that it can."[31] Corby council widely publicised its decision to cut 25 per cent of its staff in a commitment to slash bureaucracy, because "to attract business you have to be a business" .[32] The enterprise zone was inaugurated by Michael Heseltine, who visited Corby for a ribbon-cutting ceremony. The ribbon read "last piece of red tape in Corby."

Policy initiatives such as the enterprise zone facilitated the arrival of the logistics industry in town: one new warehouse, belonging to an electronics company, received at least £4.25 million pounds in subsidies.[33] The emphasis on private sector job creation and the deliberately subservient role of the state sets this policy programme apart from earlier policy interventions in areas which were losing their industry. As the historian Ewan Gibbs has argued in the case of the coal industry, earlier closures were governed by a "moral economy", in which the state wielded its planning and investment powers to guarantee

work. It was centred, Gibbs writes, "on an interpretation of the social responsibilities of elites, NCB officials and government policymakers, to provide security against economic instability."[34] These moral economy obligations were abandoned in the 1980s and the creators of the enterprise zones envisioned a rather different set of relations between the state, the private sector and the individual. Corby, as one of the first enterprise zones, illustrates this insight. So strong was the need to be "open for business", that even when the council found that a new business had made fraudulent claims or misused the subsidies, it could not act, for fear of not appearing "business-friendly", confessed a regeneration agency official in an interview for this project.

The footloose capital attracted by the enterprise zone resulted in jobs which often disappeared as rapidly as they had appeared. One example recounted by several interviewees in Corby was Commodore

Computers, one of the companies that had been attracted by the perks of the enterprise zone. But before long, the company shut down its operations. Two weeks before Christmas, the workers were laid off. One interviewee recalls:

> *That was horrific. You thought they would go work in the [factory], "come work at Commodore!", and then suddenly the jobs were all gone. And then there were people that I knew, a friend of mine stood up and said [to the management], "Oh, we'd like to thank you very much. The opportunity you've given us all here. [pause] But we can't, because you've shafted us!"*

The Thatcher government had argued that closing the steel works at Corby would be a source of strength and independence, as the town would no longer be dependent on a single industry in the way it had been dependent on steel. In practice, however, closure meant the reverse, as towns became increasingly dependent on outside capital.

By the time the area around Mansfield hit acute economic difficulty, when the pit closure programme accelerated in the second half of the 1980s, the twin initiatives of enterprise zones and development corporations which had been trialled in Corby had become the standard policy response to deindustrialisation. One Mansfield councillor who was involved at the time looks back at the enterprise zones with regret:

> *We sat down with the officers and said you come up with a programme to try and create 4000, 4000 jobs in five years. And then that's when we got allocated enterprise zones. You had a couple in Mansfield. And that — this is, this is my looking back — this is our big, this is our biggest, biggest mistake in Mansfield. And I was part of that mistake at that time. [...] [W]e basically went out and seduced companies, like American companies, to come in manufacturing car seats, etc. So they could have 10 years' business [rates], free rates, etc, come in, on a, on a basis that after they would have had all the benefits, they didn't [just leave]... [But] they just basically moved off and went. [...] [Y]ou know, all the American firms have come and went, once the grant's finished.*

The later enterprise zone in Mansfield resulted in the same dynamic as in Corby, whereby savvy companies arrived in town to take advantage of enterprise zone perks, only to leave within years or even months. Those that did remain would shed much of their workforce, as manufacturing became more automated. A company like Toray Textiles, a manufacturer of textiles for cars, may still be located in the business park on the old Crown Farm colliery site, but it only employs a fraction of its former workforce.

Certainly, local leaders in Corby and Mansfield had hoped to attract more permanent manufacturing businesses, but this proved difficult. Both areas would unsuccessfully explore the possibility of becoming the site for new theme parks and both explored the option of creating a local university, all to put themselves "on the map." In the end, however, both towns ended up with a similar employment mix, with on the one hand jobs in everyday social reproduction, such as local maintenance work for the council or care work, and on the other work in sales and logistics in the large supermarkets and distribution centres. Although neither Corby nor Mansfield is near enough major motorways to be of immediate interest to the logistics sector, financial incentives, lower land values and sheer lack of alternatives ensured that these would become major employers regardless.

The radical hopes of the right-wing advocates of enterprise zones were never realised in Britain, as the libertarians themselves lamented only shortly after the zones were put in place.[35] The watered-down zones, however, would form the basis of what was to come, having provided public money to attract footloose and sometimes exploitative companies to deindustrialising areas. Tracing the policy response to deindustrialisation reveals that efforts were made to remake both towns, which have served to re-embed them in capitalist geographies, albeit in a more peripheral, subservient role. When commentators and policymakers suggest that ex-industrial towns have been "left out" or excluded, this obscures the way both towns have been *included* on an adverse footing.

Nor is this predatory inclusion "natural" or accidental. Active policy interventions and state-subsidised corporate welfare have been crucial in shaping the new economy of both towns. The enterprise zone policies

were not successful on their own terms, but their failures should not be misread as their irrelevance. Although the scale of government investment in retraining local people and rebuilding local economies was far too small to fulfil the lofty promises that had been made, Thatcher's enterprise agenda would help ensure that ex-industrial areas would slot into the new economy, either as centres of high finance, as was the case with the former docks at Canary Wharf, or as providers of cheap labour, subjected to novel experiments in exploitation and financialisation at the hands of the newly-attracted businesses.

Job Creation

If the large employers of the industrial era had offered their employees not just an income but also a sense of solidarity, a social life and the promise of a job for life, the new era required, it was thought, that they learn to be flexible, responsible and self-actualising individuals. Enterprise Zone initiatives involved lofty rhetoric about entrepreneurship, accompanied by small-scale funding for business start-ups and entrepreneurs' hubs.[36] In practice, the support for new entrepreneurs was rarely taken up by former industrial workers. In South Wales, Ray Hudson and Huw Beynon note, a study found that not a single person in receipt of business start-up support was an ex-coalminer. Regeneration officers found that it was easier to help people who had run a business before and who had some capital behind them — people who had "the spark."[37] In Corby, the lack of take-up among ex-steelworkers was blamed on their psychology: they were "employees not employers."[38]

Disappointed with the lack of entrepreneurial spirit among their existing residents, some civil servants and local politicians sought to engineer the local population by attracting new people. Although controversial, some of Corby's leading civil servants saw this as an opportunity to change the socio-economic profile of the town by bringing in more wealthy and credentialed people. "So you don't build more affordable accommodation", said one former civil servant, but instead you build tens of thousands of up-market homes for the sake of "balancing the housing market." This was an explicit project of shaping workers' subjectivity. She argued that this would help the town because

> *...the concentration of deprivation in Corby was leading to a lack of aspiration in the community, a lack of social and economic success in terms of the community. The type of jobs that were available at the level of income that were possible, were [at] the lower end of the socioeconomic table. [...] So the, the esteem of chunks of the community could be raised to be* far more ambitious *about their* own futures.
>
> — Civil servant, Corby, emphasis added

Here we see the outlines of a town which is being remade. In some parts of the local leadership, the emphasis on providing for citizens makes way for an emphasis on aspiration, while the population is balanced away from former steelworker families and toward London commuters.

Many former industrial sites were redeveloped into up-market housing. Even for those local leaders who did not share in the ambition to "rebalance" the local population, the housing developments solved several issues at once, resulting in a profitable reuse of space, a helpful source of income for councils and an overall gloss of progress and development. In Corby especially, the rapid buildout and the influx of a new population of higher-earning commuters also yielded a statistical mirage which suggested the town was getting steadily richer, earning the town favourable write-ups.[39] For many long-standing residents of both towns, however, the replacement of beloved workplaces and semi-wild spaces with unaffordable homes fed a sense of decline. On a quiet night at the pub in Mansfield, a group of ex-miners discussed the fate of the various pits they had worked at. One of the men chipped in to say he had started at Sherwood, which had been turned into houses now. Creswell, too, someone else said. They talked about a few other pits. "Why ain't that full of houses and sold off?" "Everything disappeared", said the first man. "After a while it did," said someone else. "And suddenly 90 per cent of the town is on minimum wage, just like that."

Under New Labour, it became common to refer to post-industrial areas as having been "left behind"[40] — the phrasing that would be used once again in the aftermath of the Brexit vote. Although the New Labour government put significant money into post-industrial areas, its focus on

"delivery, delivery, delivery"[41] also built in a pragmatism. Having both hosted enterprise zones in the Thatcher years, the Mansfield and Corby areas would seek out large grants from Westminster and Brussels in the Blair years. In Mansfield, the major source of Blair-era government funding came via the Coalfields Regeneration Trust, which also helped to make woodlands out of abandoned slag heaps and to remediate ex-industrial sites. In Corby, the major source of funding came some years later, under the New Deal for Communities programme.

Funding from the Treasury, however, came with rules and caveats around pounds spent per job created, typical of the target-setting policy approach of the Blair years.[42] These targets, as it turned out, were most easily achieved by facilitating the construction of large warehouses with high numbers of low-paid jobs. One person who was involved with the Regional Development Agency which covered both Mansfield and Corby recalled:

> *Now, of course, if you want an innovative business, yeah, it might actually not create many jobs. But actually, it's far more important to have that innovative business because it's someone that's adding value to your local economy. And it's employing people with higher skills. So again, creating opportunities for local people to have higher skilled jobs. So that was one of the other kind of contradictions. [...] If you were going to go for purely, you know, number of jobs per pound spent, then you'd have a big warehouse, packing stuff, like Sports Direct. There are a lot of people in there. Very low skilled, very low wages. But that wasn't... Those were the measures that we were judged on by Treasury. It was purely on the number of jobs, investment.*

While it was possible to make the case to the Treasury for support for higher-quality jobs, in practice the path of least resistance ran through more insecure jobs, the "creation" or "saving" of which was constantly tallied.

The easiest way to meet Treasury targets was by attracting large distribution centres, a development which some councils had initially resisted. Because of their planning powers, and because warehouse developments fall under a specific use class, councils were able to withhold permission for the construction of new "big shed" distribution centres. More specifically, they would look for use class B1 or B2 developments, which indicated general industrial use and manufacturing, over B8 developments — storing and warehousing. One regional regeneration officer recalled:

> *[Some councils said], "well, we don't want warehouses because that doesn't employ anybody." And it, and it's not skilled. [So it was] actually quite difficult for companies to get a B8. The other thing for developing, development companies was that they knew that the demand for B2 was declining. It also meant smaller, selling smaller and selling lots, you know, because it's smaller, whereas with a B8 designation, you can sell [with emphasis] acres [laughs] and be really profitable.*

In other words, whether or not areas like Northamptonshire and Nottinghamshire would become dominated by industries such as logistics was dependent on support from councils. Regeneration funds, which were made contingent on job creation, helped to ensure that councils threw their support behind large distribution centres.

"It was all about numbers", said another person involved at the time. "I think it's quite extreme in those days because that was at that height of the unemployment. So I think it was probably appropriate at that stage to get jobs, numbers. But it never changed." Another person involved with compiling the statistics at the time was more cynical still:

> *It was all bodged. It was all bodged. The figures were all bodged just to tick a box from central government that they'd achieved [guiding] so many people [into work]. You know, created jobs. Yeah, but they might be on two hours a day. It's a job, so people said, we'd created four jobs and didn't say that in FTE it was not even one. They manipulated the figures. And every council did, to warrant the funding. [They showed increases in employment] and it was not the case.*

The figures compiled by places like Mansfield formed the basis for deputy Prime Minister John Prescott to say, in his 2000 Labour conference speech, that "The new Regional Development Agencies have already saved 35,000 jobs."[43]

Several thousands of the jobs the development agencies would eventually create or claim to have created were the result of the redevelopment of Shirebrook colliery, just north of Mansfield. After almost a hundred years of coalmining, the pit closed in the mid-90s. One interviewee recalls gathering with her classmates in the science tower of her school to watch as the imposing structure of the pit was detonated. Thereafter, the East Midlands Development Agency invested £38 million in public money to ready the site for new uses. When Sports Direct took on part of the redeveloped site for an undisclosed sum, an EMDA press release declared that the project was "expected to create up to 2,500 jobs — more than existed at the time when Shirebrook Colliery was operating at full capacity."[44] The redevelopment was written up as a success story. "The underlying ethos behind the development has been

to ensure that the employment opportunities it generates directly benefit the local workforce and new residents to the town. This in turn will increase the economic viability of the town and attract new investment leading to improvements in the town centre, services and the general environment."[45]

A decade on, however, it had become clear that the jobs at Sports Direct were hard, insecure and poorly paid. Despite the promise that the new warehouse would "directly benefit the local workforce", few ex-miners were willing or able to work under conditions which were likened to a "gulag" or a "workhouse".[46] The warehouse was often a topic of local conversation, with some residents bringing up the financial support received by the business as an example of government corruption. "He got help and grants to build that building", one ex-miner said. He relayed all the perks which the government had offered Sports Direct boss Mike Ashley, on the understanding that the new development would provide jobs for the now-redundant Shirebrook miners. "Not a single one got a job to my knowledge. Got away with murder, he did."

A House of Lords inquiry into the working practices at the warehouse heard the testimony of a worker who was fired for being ill, another who had been promised a permanent contract if she performed a sex act and many who had been strip searched at the end of the working day. Although Sports Direct generally offered no employment security, its agency workers were expected to be available to accept work at all times or potentially face dismissal for gross misconduct. Order picks were timed to the second and those who did not meet the targets were publicly singled out. Those who failed to meet targets, spoke to a colleague or returned too slowly from a break would receive a "strike", which could not be appealed, and after six strikes workers were dismissed.[47] The workers subjected to this gruelling regime were predominantly Eastern European migrants, recruited by the two employment agencies which staffed the warehouse.

Another case which was promoted as a success story by the regional development agency is the Mansfield-Ashfield regeneration route just south of the town. This £30 million construction project was intended to improve access to former pit villages and open up new sites for development.[48] In 2020, Amazon took advantage of the opportunity to build a large distribution centre along the regeneration route, as part of the company's 2.5 million square foot presence in the East Midlands.[49] In effect, in both Mansfield and Corby the result of the multi-million pound investments in "'job creation" was to make the area attractive to further low-paying logistics work. Lofty promises of regeneration resulted instead in exploitative jobs, fractious communities and run-down public spaces. "As the twenty-first century progressed", write Hudson and Beynon, "it became increasingly clear that strategy documents promising the creation of successful, advanced industrial regions were not worth the paper they were printed on."[50]

Beyond “Left Behind”

England’s older industrial towns continue to be marked by poor job prospects, low social mobility and high rates of incapacity benefits.[51] Current policy orthodoxy suggests that statistics such as these be read as a sign that some places are lagging behind, perhaps due to political neglect. For example, the Levelling Up White Paper drew a distinction between places “steaming ahead” and “left behind”, referring to “left behind” places a dozen times.[52] An amnesia about past policy interventions and their limitations has allowed politicians to once again position inward investment as the solution to the problems facing ex-industrial areas, unaware or unwilling to admit that such interventions have been tried before with little success.

Locals, however, remember many of these broken promises. In pubs, clubs and community venues, the residents interviewed for this project were often cynical about politics, referring to politicians as fundamentally corrupt. As many as one in three residents interviewed for this project understood politics predominantly through the frame of corruption.[53] “They can’t even lie straight in their bed at night”, several joked. The loss of well-paying industrial jobs has affected not just incomes but also the social and political life of both towns. Unions have all but disappeared from local workplaces and many of the public facilities won by workers, such as socials, welfares and sports pitches, have since shut, been sold off or fallen into disrepair. It is easy to feel, as many local people do, that the powers that be do not care. This dynamic is more pronounced in Mansfield than in Corby, with the latter benefiting from proximity to London, while the steady sell-off of publicly-owned land has allowed the council to ward off the most visible signs of deprivation and austerity. While some Corby residents are proud of the regeneration and the resilience of the town, interviews generally highlighted the same themes of loss, decline and corruption.

The political discontent of citizens in towns like these has often been explained as the revolt of people in left behind places. The discontent is real, but the framing of ex-industrial towns as “left behind” is misleading. Towns like Mansfield and Corby have been subjected to frantic policy intervention over time, remaking them to be more hospitable to capital. Having been remade through enterprise zones, regeneration projects and Treasury-imposed job creation programmes, they now harbour

some of the most footloose and financialised employers in the country, as the result of active policy interventions.

Present-day employers in both towns have been quick to embrace new economic practices, which have often served to deepen the exploitation of workers. For example, social care providers, which are important employers in both towns, were early adopters of zero hours contracts.[54] Some have also pioneered forms of tax avoidance. The care provider Barchester, which runs a care home in Mansfield and another near Corby, has been linked to tax havens.[55] In recent years, the company has received criticism because its CEO received pay 120 times that of the lowest-paid employees.[56] Forthcoming Common Wealth research has found that the company operates complex webs of rent and lease payments involving its own subsidiaries. Significant proportions of the money the company receives in fees and government support are put not towards staff salaries or quality of provision, but instead leak out into offshore tax havens and into the hands of institutional investors through complex feats of financial engineering.

Complex financial constructions and far-flung ties are rife among major employers in both towns. Another example is the Center Parcs just northeast of Mansfield, a major local employer, which is now owned by a private equity firm. Its owner, Brookfield, has loaded it with billions of pounds in debt,[57] a practice which can threaten the stability of the business, putting jobs at risk.[58] Meanwhile, the "big shed" distribution centres dotted around Corby play an important role in the portfolios of major property developers, even as workers are stuck with insecure contracts and poor working conditions. Despite the reputation of ex-industrial towns as insular and inward-looking, these financial ties connect them to financial actors across the globe. The infamous Shirebrook Sports Direct warehouse is an evocative example: the physical structure itself is now owned by a Malaysian pension fund under a leaseback construction, with Sports Direct revenues flowing towards increased rent payments rather than worker pay.

Similar stories play out across ex-industrial areas, even if social and geographical factors have resulted in a somewhat different employment mix in different areas. Where distribution centres have dominated the Midlands, former industrial areas in Wales have received more call centres and abattoirs. Yet the resemblances outweigh the differences. Like in Mansfield and Corby, exploitative businesses were attracted with public money, providing little stability and few good jobs.[59] Again, these former industrial areas have been not stuck in the past but at the forefront of new developments in financialisation and exploitation. The call centres might not usually be thought of as "innovative" businesses but they are at the forefront of developments in workplace surveillance and the AI-based monitoring of remote workers.[60]

Recommendations

Old industrial towns are important sites for contemporary capitalism, but they have been included in the new economy on an adverse footing. Local working-class employment is devalued, and civil servants and local leaders are structurally incentivised to attract and cater to credentialed young professionals if they want their towns to be “competitive”, while successive waves of neoliberal policymaking have yielded poorly-paid jobs under poor conditions. A progressive policy platform and political programme for ex-industrial areas must learn from the mistakes of the past and respond directly to the present-day grievances of locals. Rather than chase inward investment and provide perks to multinationals, it should emphasise political reform, good jobs and thriving commons.

1 Political reform

The economic restructuring of ex-industrial areas and the broken promises of renewal have combined with other, structural factors to erode trust in politics. When politicians make pledges or take a moral stance, these ring hollow for the many voters who believe there is a political class which only seeks to benefit its own. Progressive proposals will be met with cynicism unless low trust in politics is addressed head-on. A firm agenda for political renewal could signal a fresh start. Progressives should propose tough measures against second jobs for politicians, against politicians employing family members and against lobbying, including a five-year lobbying ban for former members of cabinet. Progressives should also back symbolic measures to limit perks for politicians, such as the subsidy on food and drink on the parliamentary estate. Ending visible and highly publicised examples of political corruption or the semblance thereof can help rebuild trust in politics as a collective practice for building a better world.

2 Good jobs

The New Labour-era approach of tallying “jobs created” has resulted in unstable jobs and poor employment practices. A progressive agenda should prioritise the quality of employment and enable workers to claim

a degree of autonomy over their workspaces, like miners and textile workers used to have. This good jobs agenda should include fair pay agreements in the social care and warehouse sectors and legal curbs on work sanctions, ensuring that workers cannot be penalised for going to the bathroom or speaking to a colleague. It should also place limits on the use of complex financial structures in businesses which provide essential services, such as care providers. Repealing anti-trade union laws and rebuilding institutions of workplace solidarity through a maximal vision for the New Deal for Working People is vitally important not only because it will help workers claim the fruits of their labour, but also to foster political subjectivities and a sense of collective self-determination.

3 Thriving commons

The loss of markets, sports pitches and common spaces serves for many as a visible reminder of decline. Many of the shared amenities which were won by the labour movement at its zenith have now been closed, sold off, or fallen into disrepair. A lack of free or cheap facilities for children affects the quality of life of parents and children alike. An ambitious progressive agenda should seize this opportunity to make a palpable and highly visible difference to people's lives. Underused high streets and struggling town centres offer an opportunity to reimagine what thriving common spaces might look like. Progressives should couple investment in childcare, public transport and further and technical education with funds to retrofit town centre locations, making caring and learning into the anchor institutions of flourishing local areas. It should strengthen compulsory purchase powers; further strengthen the right of community groups to take buildings into community ownership; and invest in civic infrastructures such as local markets, libraries and community hubs.

Methodological Note

This report is based on ethnographic work undertaken in and around the towns of Mansfield and Corby as part of a doctoral research project. After review and approval by the ethics committee of the London School of Economics and Political Science, interviews started in mid-2019 and continued until early 2022, with the bulk conducted in the second half of 2021, after a break during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic. The research involved four months in each field site plus periodic revisits. Data collected include transcripts for formal, recorded interviews with 96 interviewees and field notes for informal group discussions with a further 25 interviewees. The resulting data were analysed using an abductive analytical strategy, going back and forth between the literature and the data.[61] The thematic analysis identified basic themes, organising themes and a global theme, following the thematic network approach set out by Attride-Stirling.[62] In addition, the research involved several months of archival research, reviewing regeneration documents deposited in the British Library, Corby Library and other archives, especially the repository of EMDA documents, hosted online by Nottingham Trent University. Locations and closure dates of local factories were obtained through conversations with locals, in person and in local Facebook groups, and subsequently cross-referenced with newspaper archives through Nexis UK.

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Endnotes

[1] The term “ex-industrial” is used interchangeably with “post-industrial”. When referring to ex-industrial towns more generally, I adopt the categorisation by Christina Beatty and Stephen Fothergill in “The contemporary labour market in Britain’s Older Industrial Towns” (2018), table 1, which lists the districts and unitary authorities covering Britain’s ex-industrial towns.

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COMMON WEALTH

A Tale of Two Towns: Economic Disadvantage and Political Disempowerment in Ex-Industrial England

Sacha Hilhorst

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