

ALCR/33

"ALL CHANGE" NEWSLETTER - November 1976

Since the summer, we have been visited by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seegar for a weekend workshop in song writing, and also by Peter Cheeseman who came to discuss our research materials prior to dramatisation. A major part of our time has been spent in preparing the first working draft of our play and we are now at the stage where we are gathering together a production team.

RESEARCH

The aim in researching Wolverton's history was to provide an overall picture from which we could choose the content of our story and to gather sufficient primary source materials so that every scene and song would have this foundation. At present we are at the stage where we have fulfilled the first objective and in Peter Cheeseman's view are 80 to 90% towards fulfilling the second. On his first visit, Peter made it very clear to us that the success of his documentary plays, produced in the Victoria Theatre, Stoke-on-Trent, where he is director, depended on the discipline of only dramatising events for which he had primary source research materials and always allowing these materials to suggest and define the form of the drama. We accepted Peter's recommendation and this is the reason why much of our work so far has involved gathering and studying primary source materials.

MUSIC

Visit by Ewan MacColl and Peggy Seegar - 10, 11 & 12 September.

Ewan and Peggy gave a very carefully prepared seminar on Friday night and Saturday morning, describing the structure of different types of songs and their usefulness in documentary drama using extensive examples from their own work. The group was then asked to work on their own songs which were presented for criticism on the Sunday morning. These songs were based on three sets of documents concerning events in Wolverton's history. The quality of music and song composed was encouraging. Peggy taped the seminars and we have our own copies. We now have a group of musicians eager to continue work on the project. There were 8 songs produced that weekend.

THE STORY

After Ewan and Peggy's visit, the group began looking at the content of the research and discussing the story. We decided against trying to make explicit comparisons between 19th century Wolverton and the New City of Milton Keynes. We felt sure the impact of the historical material would be such as to provoke the audiences own reactions.

There were dramatic changes in both the 19th and 20th centuries to which the title "All Change" is equally applicable. After a great deal of discussion a consensus was reached that we should concentrate on the middle years of the 19th century. In 1830, there was a great deal of agricultural unrest in Buckinghamshire. Farm works could hardly be distinguished from paupers. Their wages were very low, often supplemented by poor relief and there was inadequate work on farms, especially in the winter. So we start our story right in this area with the Captain Swing uprisings: wage riots in Stony Stratford, rick burnings and threshing machines destroyed in local villages. By 1834, outdoor relief for the poor was discontinued and the unemployed were faced with even harder times. Now the only alternative to starvation was to enter the workhouse.

There is another conflict raging in London, however, which will bring a much more startling change to the local agricultural scene. Robert Stephenson has completed his plans for the London and Birmingham Railway and with representatives of the farming, military and industrial concerns of the country; he is giving evidence to parliament for a Bill to build the railway. The landowners are fiercely opposed to the railway and use their power in the House of Lords to defeat the Bill. The eventual success of the Bill carries our story back to the land, where navvying has opened up the prospects of employment for thousands of local men.

With picks and shovels, the railway is built. The vagaries of the soil set back the work at Wolverton many times, and the canal boatmen frustrate the works by sabotage. Contractors go broke.

In 1838, however, 5 years after the Bill was passed, we open on scenes of the trains running. Many passengers cannot get used to the 'railway servants' who live by the rule book and not by servility to secure a gratuity. Many local men have stayed on to work in the works, and are joined by skilled men from industrial

centres. It's a man's town. Families are left behind, perhaps to be visited on special railway passes at weekends.

The 'station men' are not welcome in the local area. Some are tried by the vicar who sits on the Magistrates bench when local incidents of poaching are heard. The only public building is the pub called 'Hell's Kitchen'. A prize fight held locally and bringing hundreds of cudgel-bearing supporters into Wolverton, convinces us this is a Frontier Town, and not the idyllic works settlement described in the travelogues of the day.

During this time, railways are expanding across the country and the London and Birmingham Railway joins with other companies to form the London and North Western Railway. A new superintendent called McConnell is appointed at Wolverton. He has his own ideas about engine design and Wolverton depot ceases to undertake repair work only, and takes on the responsibility for producing all locomotive engines for the Southern Division. The works is expanded, housing extended. A Church is built and a new Science and Arts Institute planned. Wolverton begins to grow into a town as this prosperity and purpose works through the community. Wolverton, now rivals the locomotive engine works of the Northern division at Crewe. Its engines are superior and its productive capacity greater.

However, not everyone within the LNWR management looks favourably on these developments and we turn our attention to Richard Moon who is determined to see changes in the organisation of the company. For a long time he has favoured the development of Crewe and the closure of Wolverton works as a locomotive engine depot. Suddenly Lord Chandos resigns as the company's chairman and Richard Moon takes his place.

McConnell knows his days are now numbered. The LNWR is swayed to approve allegations made against McConnell and by this means to force his resignation. Wolverton works is to be run down as an engine depot and the carriage works is to be moved from Saltley in Birmingham to replace it.

The superiority of Wolverton's engines is to be proved, however, once and for all in an historic run from Holyhead to London. The company has promised to deliver despatches from Holyhead to the Queen in London in 5 hours. The journey pushed the engines of both the Southern and Northern divisions to the limit of their capacity. Wolverton men watch this display of their engines' superiority and wait to hear what their future holds.

On his second visit in October, Peter Cheeseman supported us in our decision to concentrate the story on these early years. He suggested for the next stage we prepare a running order of scenes and songs, each of which was defined by the job it did in carrying forward the narrative. Each scene or song is at this stage represented by a bundle of documents, and is referred to as a unit. The advantage of this system is that each unit can be worked on in drama workshops independently of all others. For example, musicians can start working on units to be presented as songs. Those units requiring further research can be worked on without holding up others.

At a meeting on November 17, we outlined the story and invited key people to take on leadership of groups in the production team. These groups included actors, stage managers, musicians, designers (set and costume), stage props, sound crew, lighting crew, exhibition, publicity and box-office, the programme and photographs.

If you would be interested in joining any of these groups, we would like you to come to the meeting being held on 24 NOVEMBER at 8.00 p.m. in Stantonbury Theatre. A full outline of the production schedule and times for 'auditions' for actors will be presented. If you can't make this meeting and would like to join the team, please telephone Roy Nevitt or Margaret Broadhurst.