

## Essential experience

As a student at York University it worries me to read that experts now consider the government to be wasting resources by encouraging a university education.

But it is true. Many graduates are virtually unemployable with few or no marketable skills and little experience of the 'real' world. Thirty per cent of school leavers now go on to higher education precisely because there are no jobs and it delays having to find a career for at least another three years.

Degrees are becoming commonplace in the workforce. I recently went for a job interview and was told that everyone in publishing had a degree and it was nothing special. They were looking for relevant work experience and proof of a genuine interest in the company. These days qualifications on paper are becoming worthless and employers are looking towards skills to choose the right person for the job. They don't want some disillusioned graduate who has no concept of time management or the enthusiasm to pick up new skills, even if they have got a First in Physics. Employers would much rather choose a cheerful, punctual, adaptable 16-year-old with one GCSE in Travel and Tourism.

A degree no longer means you will walk straight into a job. According to a recent article in *The Mail on Sunday*, ten per cent of London's homeless people have degrees. The old adage that a degree shows you are capable of applying yourself is now meaningless. Few graduates will ever need to apply the fundamentals of quantum mechanics or debate the authenticity of Shakespeare's plays in their final career. Practical skills are much more employable; experience in the field is a definite advantage. Graduates are mostly qualified to do nothing and will join the dole queue.

It's a sad fact but it is the truth. The economy needs to be turned around before things get any better for graduates. In the meantime I'll be filling my summer holidays doing 'useful' things and waiting for the government to do its job. Perhaps we ought to wonder how many ministers have degrees and remember what life was like as a student...

Elizabeth Harrin

## the **subtext** postbag

... is waiting for your letters. Write to: the editors, subtext, c/o the fishergate centre, 4 Fishergate, York, YO1 4AB, and mark clearly 'letter for publication'.

*York – grand old city, or small dull town? A lively, culture-filled environment, or a place where nothing much happens? A mere tourist attraction, or a place catering equally well for its residents? Old Yorkie offers a few thoughts, and Jess Fowler looks at the problems faced by small businesses in York.*

## Smile: you're on camcorder

**I used to be tolerant of tourists. This summer I found myself turning into the unsociable and grumpy semi-maniac I knew I was destined to be.**

Now you step out of the way of the camera and straight into someone's amateur video

**L**ike many other locals, I will appear on countless home videos, dashing about and swearing in the back-ground somewhere as I try to negotiate my way around all the cameras and camcorders. Not long ago, it was a case of trying to avoid getting in the way of someone's photograph. Now you step out of the way of the camera and straight into someone's amateur video. Much technology enhances our lives. Some of it gets in the way. There seems little point in filming something that doesn't move, like York Minster, when a photograph would be sufficient, or, even better, a postcard, with a photo by a professional who can fit the whole thing in the picture.

If you're trying to get somewhere in a hurry – to Barnetts to get your DIY products, to one of the few remaining food shops, to the station to get a train to Leeds in order to do your shopping in a town not brimming with tourists – it's impossible to travel at any kind of speed. The cameras and camcorders are everywhere, and the people wielding them usually right in the middle of the pavement.

In fact, this has become so irritating that residents can be seen often deliberately walking right in front of someone's camera or camcorder in a firm and assertive manner.

**O**bviously there's the tendency, when on holiday, to be more relaxed and to wander about in a confused and directionless way, while reading maps and being overcome with sudden enthusiasms to 'go that way!' We Yorkies understand this and try to smile. Yet York has become so successfully tourist orientated that tourists seem to think they're in a specially created Disney-like set, where real people with real lives don't exist, and it doesn't occur to

them that anyone might be in a hurry to get somewhere for something important and essential to life, like a cheese and onion pasty. As we struggle along with heavy bags of fruit and veg, not only are we half-choked by the traffic smog but often pushed off the pavements.

Granted, it's difficult, on a street like Gillygate, for more than one person to fit on any stretch of pavement at one time, but many tourist groups manage to fill any pavement, however roomy, and elbow locals into the road. I used to step aside, voluntarily throwing myself in front of oncoming traffic, until I realised that it was foolish to risk one's life for visitors to whom one has no lasting significance or interest – unless one happens to be dressed as a Viking. Now there's an idea.

**I**f you live in this city for long enough you get to know where to go to avoid tourists – I'm not going to mention my favourite haunts because then everyone reading this might go to them and spoil it for me.

That's the trouble with tourism of course. We need only think of the holiday programmes on TV, where those orangey presenters stand on a beach of white sand with no one else around and tell us 'This is a beautiful unspoilt place'. You can almost hear the Landrover Discoverys revving up. And suddenly paradise is full of noise and litter, and everyone decides it's too crowded and goes off to find somewhere else to spoil.

According to those in the know we have to constantly strive to attract tourists. It wouldn't seem that way to the average resident as he or she struggles through the crowds to get to an urgent appointment.

The tourism-oriented businesses often display hysteria in the face of falling tourist figures, and sound as if they might do virtually anything to attract the tourist. The most alarming demonstration of this is in the recurring moan about the homeless on York streets. This, it is suggested, ruins the tourist experience.

Do we really think people might be put off coming to York because they see homeless people living on its streets? Poor them. How terrible that they should come to a historic city and find real life, in real Tory Britain. We should be ashamed that we can't house and care for all our citizens, but we should be ashamed only because that's a terrible indication of the state we're in, not because it might upset a few passing visitors.

It is difficult enough to walk along pavements filled with tourists when you're in a hurry to get somewhere. It must be worse to be sitting on those pavements filled with tourists as they walk past ignoring you in the dash to buy souvenir mugs and teatowels.

**We should be ashamed that we can't house and care for all our citizens because that's a terrible indication of the state we're in, not because it might upset a few passing visitors**

**M**ost visitors to this city are of course undeserving of my moaning and griping. Some of them even walk on the outside edge of the bar walls if you encounter them in a section with no railing. Many of them enthuse over the city and its history and beauty and its buskers, and say 'You're so lucky to live here.' You might want to say in reply, 'It's nice in Autumn when the tourists have gone' or 'It was better before loads of locals were made redundant and before it turned into Toytown', but it might be best just to smile. It's not their fault that York sells itself so much as a tourist town.

**A** man cycling down Petergate in the evening recently, swerved around the wandering visitors ringing his bell frantically as if he was one of the emergency services. When one of the wandering bodies collided with his bike he started yelling 'I live here! I live here!' as the tourist started up an accompanying chorus of 'How rude! How rude!'

We Yorkies have probably all felt like the man on the bike at times, but deep breathing is probably a preferable tactic. Being rude and aggressive never solved anything. It's best not to lose your temper, as on any historic street in York the chances are you'll be captured on film fifteen times over.

## Village people

**Y**ork is, as many people who have lived here for years comment, 'like a village'. You can meet someone new, and then find they're the brother-in-law of your ex, or that they played in a band in the 80s that you used to watch at the INL. Sometimes this can be alarming, as you realise the new friend could go back to the suddenly discovered mutual friend and find out all kinds of embarrassing long-buried things, like that you used to wear an afghan coat with a dove of peace embroidered on the back (oh yes I did).

Feeling like everyone you meet knows everyone else you already know can result in a sense of claustrophobia, and it gets worse the longer you live here, and the more you go out and about and meet people. The idea of drifting about anonymously in a large sprawling metropolis does have a certain appeal.

Yet it's easier to achieve some level of fame and notoriety in a small city. If the idea of fame appeals you might find it best to stick around

**you realise the new friend could go back to the suddenly discovered mutual friend and find out all kinds of embarrassing long-buried things**

and become locally famous – stars are after all very common in London. Perhaps this is one of the reasons why Shed Seven still drink in the Cross Keys – local lads (or lasses) who have made good are generally most appreciated in the place from which they came.

York may be small, but we're moving now towards an appreciation of the value of smaller communities, and no doubt places like York will soon become incredibly trendy. The small community is still within our control, we can still affect what goes on. A sense of anonymity and urban angst might help a few of us write great novels and songs, or paint impressive canvases, but the large city also means lots of long boring tube or bus journeys to see friends or go for a night out. Yorkies can get into town easily and quickly in the evening and find enough pubs and wine bars, at least, to keep anyone happy, with many of the pubs virtually next door to each other.

**W**e could, of course, do with more industry, more real jobs. Many people have left York not whooping and cheering but reluctantly, in order to find work they couldn't find locally. Engineering jobs are hard to come by, more so since the closure of ABB. The redevelopment of the site may bring more opportunities. It might also bring new people to York, so we'll all have the chance of that rare phenomenon of meeting someone completely new who has absolutely no connection to anyone we know already.

## Making it happen

**The feeling that there is nothing new happening here is understandable. I often want to run off elsewhere too, somewhere where there's a bit of radical culture and maybe the odd anti-government riot.**

**Y**ounger Yorkies have a tradition of bemoaning the lack of things happening in York. There are those who leave because they have to, to find work. Then there are those who leave because it's 'boring', and every now and then they come back to tell us just how boring it is, the implication being that we're boring as well for staying here. It's as a result of listening to this criticism so often that I've felt the need to spring to this city's defence.

Many people go off to a place where it's already 'happening'; this could be described as quite boring too, as it's often more of a challenge to stay put and make something 'happen' on your own doorstep.

at the Unity 96 festival about ten people saw Credit to the Nation do a brilliant job of creating an atmosphere at the end of an embarrassingly under-attended day

Friends of subtext have more right to moan than most, as York in its general conservatism offers little support many ventures that are not immediately accessible, and as a result this magazine has trouble finding enough support from local business. The lack of suitable advertisers and stockists will probably result in the death of another local venture. Despite this, bearing in mind that another town might offer more, subtext will hang around in York for as long as possible, because York needs it more than, say, Leeds does.

Others have tried to make York a happening place, and continue to do so. Mike Bennett's Comedy Shack, once a regular feature at the Bonding Warehouse, offered us the chance to see Mark Thomas, Jeremy Hardy, Jo Brand, Lee Evans and other folks who have since achieved TV stardom. Those evenings were intimate occasions with a great atmosphere, the door charge was fair and reasonable – cheap even. There were even candles on the tables, for God's sake.

Then there was the Unity 96 festival in Rowntree's Park in May of this year, where about 20 people saw Credit to the Nation do a brilliant job of creating an atmosphere at the end of an embarrassingly under-attended day.

**M**aybe it's a direct result of the common view that York is boring that so many events are under-attended. Maybe other locals have, like me, heard so many people talking about York as a cultural desert for so many years that they've been lulled into a feeling of complete apathy. I'm aware that I'm guilty of not supporting as many local events and ventures as I should. We're all lazy sometimes, busy sometimes. Those on a limited income cannot attend every event they might like to.

Yet there are success stories in York, proving that the 'cultural desert' label doesn't really apply. There are facilities and events in York catering for most tastes. We've got galleries, small and large, an independent cinema, theatres, cool cafes, poetry reading events, clubs, buskers, great music venues, occasional live comedy, summer events in the park areas, festivals . . . and no doubt many other things I've not heard about yet.

If York doesn't offer enough all this can be changed by effort on the part of residents. If the thing you want doesn't exist you can always try to create it. When subtext fails through lack of interest there'll be at least one major gap in the market. (Anyone fancy opening a radical bookshop?) And if you can't be bothered to create it, move somewhere else. But don't come back here and moan about it – at least not to me.



# and the rest is history?

I'm just a sentimental idiot when it comes to a bit of glowing limestone, but I can't be the only one who goes all poetic at the sight of York in the evening sun.

**M**any find York's prettiness rather cloying, or at best irrelevant, and it seems they would prefer the whole of York to look like the Stonebow. Urban ugliness is fashionable, probably as a result of pop videos.

Many young guys in bands would no doubt prefer to be wandering about in a landscape full of gasometers, abandoned factories, derelict buildings and graffiti covered concrete. (There's always Foss Islands Road, folks, and all that old abandoned railway land.) In the past people created beautiful things to reflect our higher nature. Now it seems we'd rather see art created from the contents of an old vacuum cleaner bag.

The beauty may seem empty, all for the sake of tourists. Look closer and feel lucky. Catch parts of York at a quiet time in the evening or early morning and see some fine products of human endeavour. Call in the Minster in the late afternoon and stand in the sunlight that streams through the west facing windows and even if you're an agnostic, like this writer, you might just feel just a bit moved.

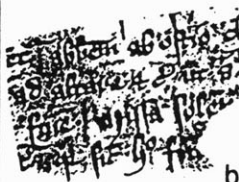
Yorkies tend not to bother with the tourist attractions, which is odd, as many of them are worth visiting if only so you can walk about being pompous about your local knowledge. There are some fine museums in York that many locals never visit. Many have changing exhibitions, and provide a fine opportunity for entertainment on rainy afternoons.

**G**rand monuments are one thing, and in York they're carefully signposted, and packed with visitors in summer. Yet there are details of history all around us, and unexpected views that only the resident appreciates, because you need to live here for a while before you get to see everything.

I was never that interested in history – it all seemed a bit distant and irrelevant. Now, walking down streets like Trinity Lane, passing through Bishophill on a sunny summer evening, makes me realise what a town or city really is, how so many lives pass leaving their own small mark. History isn't all about kings and queens and dates, it's about what ordinary people build and rebuild and change.

Many young guys in bands would no doubt prefer to be wandering about in a landscape full of gasometers, abandoned factories, derelict buildings and graffiti covered concrete

## YORKSHIRE MUSEUM



The award-winning Yorkshire Museum set in 10 acres of botanical gardens in the historic centre of York, displays some of the finest Roman, Anglo-Saxon, Viking and Medieval treasures ever discovered in Britain.

Admission includes entrance to all blockbuster exhibitions and the new geology gallery 'Time Climb'.

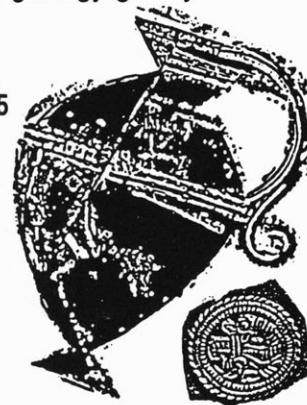
Telephone 01904 629745

Fax 01904 651221

**YORKSHIRE MUSEUM**

Museum Gardens

York YO1 2DR



You might not think this relevant now, but one day in your old age, if you're creeping towards thirty (as I am) or just reached it (Hi Kenny) or even a bit older than that, you might find yourself telling people 'Would you believe there used to be a nightclub on Bootham above the supermarket, where those nice bright offices are now? And it was all dark and dingy and we used to dance to the Sisters of Mercy.' And the younger folks will ask 'Who were the Sisters of Mercy?' In fact, they probably do now, which proves my point. History is everywhere, often among the ordinary, and is always being added to, sooner than you think.

Old Yorkie Lisa

*'The native inhabitants of York are a civil sort of people; courteous enough to strangers . . . The common people are very well made and proportioned; crookedness, either in men or women, is a rarity amongst them. The women are remarkably handsome; it being taken notice of by strangers that they observe more pretty faces in York than in any other place.'*

Francis Drake, Eboracum (1736)