

Capital City Of Britain's Workless

The north-east is being hailed as an example of urban renewal. But, **John Mapplebeck** argues, the reality is quite different. And **Simon Beck** suggests a weekend break

'Divvent drive me bonny dreams away', goes a line from 'Keep Your Feet Still Geordie Hinny'. Its author Joe Wilson was the most original talent turned up by the Victorian music hall on Tyneside. Wilson lived through some of the troughs of what passed for Newcastle's 19th century economic miracle and knew, therefore, how important dreams were to the north-east working class. Now with Newcastle once more the capital city of England's workless those dreams remain as potent as ever.

How else to explain the swirling mass of young drinkers, most of them out of work, who clog the Bigg Market every Friday and Saturday night? Young people who think nothing of paying £1.30 a time for a can of Red Stripe but look askance at a glass to drink it from, in case it should be mistaken for a half of weak Scotch beer, or still worse a bottle of Amber. Does the power of plastic spending on its own explain the scene on Northumberland Street, or up the Tyne at the Metro Centre, where another generation of Geordies practise the art of conspicuous consumption.

It is, as Joe Wilson would be the first to recognise, a fantasy of the purse-proud. Those who, whatever their employment prospects, lack the shackles of mortgage or life insurance. For the young it is the freedom which comes from the indulgent shelter of a family tradition which always insists on putting the 'bairns' first, even if they are by now in their 20s. It leaves them free to spend their dole money on themselves. For young and old on Tyneside what matters is that you should always be able to 'stand your round'.

They are fantasies played out only where there is an

audience. There is no audience on Newcastle's Westgate Road, unless of course you count the eager *Pravda* correspondent, to witness queues for yesterday's bread as long as any at a Marks and Spencer cash out. *Pravda* set it down in what has become in the north-east a now notorious despatch. Cold comfort for Moscow's own consumer queues, but stubborn evidence nevertheless of a pervasive poverty, albeit one discreet enough to remain on the fringes of the city centre and not embarrass either the retailers or the consumers of Eldon Square and the Metro Centre.

The only audience at Penshaw Monument to witness the bald despair of the skin-headed glue sniffers is the lens of Chris Killip's camera, peering between the graffiti-stained columns of that temple to what was once the region's industrial might. Dedicated by the grateful liberal pitmen of Penshaw Hill to the first Earl of Durham, it serves today only as a shelter for the sad young derelicts who have lost for ever those cultural strengths which enabled their forefathers to withstand all those other workless winters.

These Killip images, together with those from the Westgate Road, are more potent than the gloss of the region's public relations industry. They are also truer to the economic reality. Nissan's success at Washington, like the Metro Centre at Gateshead, has been seized on by all those anxious to talk-up the north-east's prospects. But as one Durham academic reminded us recently, you would need a new Nissan plant every week to make any real reduction in that awesome north-eastern record of the highest unemployment rate in mainland Britain.



The Metro Centre, Gateshead: Escalating consumerism

A Weekend Break

Assuming the north-south divide does exist, a weekend in Newcastle may instil a little doubt as to which side of the equation actually has the better deal.

The city is moulded in Georgian, Victorian and T Dan Smithian splendour, focusses on the darkly romantic Tyne, houses fabulous people and boasts enough nightlife and culture to remove the stuffing from smug Londoners. And most importantly, Newcastle is the home of *Viz* magazine. The smutty rag may now be famous all over the land, but a thorough read of its grim humour is a must before heading Tynesidwards.

A daytime walk should take in the river before anything else. Down the fiercely sloping Dean Street, past the ghostly Victorian warehouses to the Tyne Bridge, regal centre of seven impressive bridges linking the city to its ugly brother, Gateshead. Absorb the breath-taking quayside dereliction (especially the old flour factory), soon to be yuppied up by developers.

There are some great shops for everything from clothes to antiques, mostly in the old Bigg Market zone. Much political capital is made of the liberal spending habits of hard-up northerners, and credit-boom Britain is encapsulated in a walk (or a push) along bustling Northumberland Street.

Newcastle nightlife is a living cliché, from the winding pub queues to the mini-and-stiletto starlets. It's a truism, as the

plague of fun pubs (fun?) bear witness.

The most authentic, atmospheric bars are found nearer the river - try the Crown Posada, the Bridge, or the Free Trade along towards Byker.

Clubs? Julie's is Shazza 'n' Gazza with class, Rockshott's is cruising gay (mixed and hip some nights), and the infamous floating nightclub Tuxedo Princess, well, floats. The Riverside co-op offers good gigs cheaply and sparsely.

Theatre buffs will be well pleased with the Playhouse, the beautiful New Tune Theatre and the newly renovated Theatre Royal. The Tyneside Cinema is, quite simply, the best provincial arthouse film parlour in the country. For art, the traditional Laing Gallery suffices, the Side has right-on photographic shows, and Newcastle's pride in good art-and-design students is evident in the poly gallery.

The north-east boasts some spellbinding landscapes. Newcastle is well-placed for Hadrian's wall and starkly beautiful Northumberland, or for Holy Island and the rest of the castle-dotted coastline. A spare couple of hours would be well spent in Durham or the genteel coastal town of Tynemouth.

Finally, soccer fans cannot afford to bypass Newcastle United and St James Park - for the stoically witty, long-suffering crowd rather than the 11 villains on the pitch! Here truly lies the cold, grey north.