

Billy's notes on the Songs

The following notes refer to the ideas and inspiration for songs written by Billy Stewart during his research for his ***Steel Away*** album.

The Colville's Company

When conversation comes around to the steel industry we always talk about the “steelmen” never any mention of the “steelwomen”, the wives who had the job to make sure their men had clean working clothes each day, had their piece-boxes ready and had peace and quiet to sleep when they were on night shift. Hopefully this song goes some way towards redressing the imbalance by highlighting the important part wives played in the steelmaking process.

Tearing Our Industry Down

Motherwell and surrounding areas were the heart of Scottish steelmaking. Slowly, however, the Scottish steelworks were closed one by one until one day in 1992 it culminated with the announcement that Ravenscraig the biggest of all was to close. This was a terrible blow to the communities of Motherwell and Wishaw and to many of the businesses reliant on the Steel Industry. It did in fact “tear the heart from the people”.

The Apprentice Engineer

My father, John Stewart, completed his schooling at Wishaw High School in 1938. Aged 18 he took up an apprenticeship at Dalzell Steelworks. He wanted to be an engineer. His apprenticeship would last five years and entailed a learning journey through the engineering workshops as well as three nights a week night school. Three years into his apprenticeship he was called up to the Royal Engineers – one of only a handful of people called up from the steelworks. He stayed with them until the end of World War II and returned home an engineer. This is my dad's song.

The Steelworks

The Steelworks was not just a place of employment it was also the biggest department store you could ever hope to find. It did not matter what you were looking for there was always someone in the works who could supply it. If you needed a part for your car someone could make it. Cigarettes? Somebody sold them. You could even find someone to cut your hair, but that's another story. In fact you could get anything from a television to “something for the weekend”.

Clyde Alloy

The sales department of the Clyde Alloy or BSC Craigneuk Works as it became was my first place of employment after leaving school and so has a special place in my memories. It was also the place where my father-in-law

Jimmy Burnside worked all his life as a Billet tractor driver. He is pictured on the front cover – “Wee Burnie”. The song is merely a happy recollection.

An Unemployed Joiner

This song was inspired by George Dick. George had been employed at the Clydesdale Works since leaving school and like many others was made redundant when it closed. At that time the Government policy was give the workers the chance to retrain either to another trade or go back to college for a year to gain further qualifications. The Government paid your salary for 52 weeks. This meant that after a year you had been re-trained in work other than steel. Unfortunately unemployment was so severe that there were no jobs for your new trade either. According to Government statistics however you were no longer an unemployed steelworker but an unemployed joiner or brickie or brain-surgeon, etc.

The Works Cat

One thing that every steelworks had was cats. There were cats everywhere you went. They were gladly accepted and looked after as they kept vermin down. The cats however were generally not pets and were very aggressive if approached. Of course every work has its “works cat”. The guy who works all the hours available “he does more hours than the works cat”. Is that what the song’s about?

A Steelman’s Memories

This song could have been written about any number of steelworkers. Men who had expected to see out their working lives in the steel industry only to be told that they were being made redundant and the plant was closing. The song is about one such man recalling the heady days of the steel industry as he takes a walk to view the sites where the works once stood.

The Ravenscraig Rabbit

Gavin Stevenson wrote the words of this song. Gavin was a joiner with Northwest Holst working in Ravenscraig at the time. He and one of his workmates spotted a rabbit one day and decided to lay a snare. Unfortunately Gavin was a bit late for work the next morning. The bothy was in darkness when he arrived and as he felt around for his tool belt in the dark his hand suddenly came upon something furry and cold. Frank had come in early and found the rabbit in the snare and brought it into the bothy. In Gavin’s own words when he felt the rabbit “my wife nearly had an awfy washin”

A knock at the Door

Fatalities in the steel industry are a fact. As a songwriter it was a subject which I had to deal with but found great difficulty with. Some of the stories I

was told were quite horrific and in many cases totally unbelievable. I have to thank a fellow songwriter for pointing me in the right direction to a song that I hope deals with the subject. "Jim" referred to in the song was someone I know who was unfortunately killed in a steel works accident.

Shunters

A simple wee song sung about the men who drove the steam pumps around the works taking various loads throughout the plant. How would a steelworks survive without them?

The White Collared Worker

There was always banter between the men in the works and the men in the offices – the white collared workers – who came to work in suits and ties instead of hard hats and overalls. This song is about a white collared workers "busy" day.

Starved to Death

George Dick wrote the words of this song as a poem while working in the Clydesdale works at Bellshill. It is a self explanatory song about what will happen if investment is not made to keep a plant up-to-date and modern.

Back o' the Clyde

Motherwell steel was much in demand by the shipbuilders of the Clyde. The shipbuilders were in fact the main reason for the steel industry initially and at one time the major shipyards owned the steelworks. Motherwell steel was used in all the Clydeside yards and in Belfast yards. The two World Wars were exceptional times for both industries with steelmakers like Colvilles being pressed to produce more and more steel. Apart from the warships the great ocean liners were also being built on the Clyde. The shipbuilders referred to the steel as coming from "the back o' the Clyde" hence the title of the song.

Stranger in Paradise

The writer of this song is anonymous like many writers of good songs. Using the tune to the Mountains of Mourne it tells the story of what many saw the Ravenscraig to be. Somewhere men were paid good wages for no work. Where you could sleep on the night shift without being disturbed and where your family could be sure to get a job – a popular conception but completely untrue – well maybe not completely.

Red Dust

Many people get misty eyed when they talk about Ravenscraig. Like most memories you only remember the good times. The people of Craigneuk and surrounding areas have another memory of the Craig. That memory is the

Red Oxide Dust that poured from the chimneys and coated everything round about. Cars changed colour, window sills lay thick with dust and washing days were a nightmare. What the possible health hazards were did anyone ever know? Happy memories!

Ravenscraig Towers

On Sunday 28th July 1996 the cooling towers and gas towers of the Ravenscraig were blown up. Those had been major landmarks of the Motherwell area since the works had been built in the fifties. Built from concrete and steel, it had taken many men a long time to erect these towers and a number of those were lost during the construction. It took a mere six seconds to remove them from our landscape for ever.

Changes

From the very beginning of steelmaking in the 1800s the process has been subject to change. Regrettably where changes cost money they were not always forthcoming and the least amount of capital was invested to keep a plant open and making money until the inevitable happened. Lack of proper investment meant closure. Experienced workers were paid off losing valuable skills. Computerised machines replaced others until a time came when even the computers were deemed obsolete and the plants were closed due to lack of investment. This song charts the progress of these generations through this time.

Regeneration

The Ravenscraig Steelworks was built on a 1000 acre green field site and was commissioned in 1956. The works were closed in 1992 with not only the steel jobs being lost but many of the sub contractors who first appeared at the birth of the Craig losing jobs as well as total loss of business. Firms lived and died in the massive complex. By the year 2000 all that remains of Ravenscraig is a flat barren site. Plans are however underway to regenerate the site. Plans have been lodged with North Lanarkshire Council for what amounts to a new town providing housing, leisure and play facilities but more importantly providing new jobs in a hard hit area. What will the name of this town be – Ravenscraig?