

Britain since 1930: Jarrow Crusade – Resources A

Jarrow: extract from English Journey by JB Priestley, 1934

The most remarkable giant liner in the world is probably the *Mauretania*, for she is nearly thirty years old and is still one of the fastest vessels afloat. Her record, both for speed and safety, is superb. We are proud of her. Now the *Mauretania* was launched at Wallsend, just across the river from Jarrow; and she has lasted longer than Jarrow. She is still alive and throbbing, but Jarrow is dead.

As a real town, a piece of urban civilisation, Jarrow can never have been alive. There is easily more comfort and luxury on one deck of the *Mauretania* than there can ever have been at any time in Jarrow, which even at its best, when everybody was working in it, must obviously have been a mean little conglomeration of narrow monotonous streets of stunted and ugly houses, a barracks cynically put together so that shipbuilding workers could get some food and sleep between shifts. Anything – strange as it may seem – appears to have been good enough for the men who could build ships like the *Mauretania*. But in those days, at least they were working.

Now Jarrow is a derelict town. I had seen nothing like it since the war. I put a derelict shipbuilding town into *Wonder Hero* and called it Slakeby. Some people thought I overdid it a little in my Slakeby chapter. I assure those people that the reality of Jarrow is far worse than anything I imagined for Slakeby. It far outran any grim expectations of mine. My guide-book devotes one short sentence to Jarrow: "A busy town (35,590 inhabitants), has large ironworks and shipbuilding yards." It is time this was amended into "an idle and ruined town (35,590 inhabitants, wondering what is to become of them), had large ironworks and can still show what is left of shipbuilding yards.'

The Venerable Bede spent part of his life in this neighbourhood. He would be astonished at the progress it has made since his

time, when the river ran, a clear stream, through a green valley. There is no escape anywhere in Jarrow from its prevailing misery, for it is entirely a working-class town. One little street may be rather more wretched than another, but to the outsider they all look alike. One out of every two shops appeared to be permanently closed. Wherever we went there were men hanging about, not scores of them but hundreds and thousands of them. The whole town looked as if it had entered a perpetual penniless bleak Sabbath. The men wore the drawn masks of prisoners of war. A stranger from a distant civilisation, observing the condition of the place and its people, would have arrived at once at the conclusion that Jarrow had deeply offended some celestial emperor of the island and was now being punished. He would never believe us if we told him that in theory this town was as good as any other, and that its inhabitants were not criminals but citizens with votes. The only cheerful sight I saw there was a game of Follow-my-leader that was being played by seven small children. But what leader can the rest of them follow?

After a glimpse of the river-front, that is, of tumble-down sheds, rotting piles, coal dust and mud, we landed in Hebburn, where we pursued, in vain, another man we wanted. Hebburn is another completely working-class town. It is built on the same mean proletarian scale as Jarrow. It appeared to be even poorer than its neighbour. You felt that there was nothing in the whole place worth a five-pound note. It looked as much like an ordinary town of that size as a dust-bin looks like a drawing-room. Here again, idle men – and not unemployable casual labourers but skilled men – hung about the streets, waiting for Doomsday.

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Britain since 1930: Jarrow Crusade – Resources B

Character cards for Jarrow families (one card per pair of children)

1 The Mayor

The Mayor is the trade union leader.

The workers in the shipyard voted him into office.

His council are all Labour Party members.

2 The MP, Ellen Wilkinson

Ellen Wilkinson is the Labour MP.

She is working hard to keep the shipyard open.

3 Boy Scout leader

The Boy Scout leader works for the local council.

His wife's brother is a shipyard worker.

4 Publican

The Publican owns the pub where the workers often meet after work.

The pub has a darts team and a football team.

5 Manager of Palmer's shipyard

The manager is in charge of the building of ships.

6 Ship painter

The ship painter belongs to a trade union.

A trade union is body that tries to get the workers good wages and conditions of work.

7 Draughtsman in the shipyard office

The draughtsman draws the plans for the ships.

8 Doctor

The doctor looks after many of the shipyard families.

9 School teacher

The school teacher works in the school to which the children of the shipyard workers go.

She lives with her widowed mother.

10 Riveter

The riveter works in the main shipyard in the town – Palmer's shipyard.

He rivets the metal ship parts together.

11 Labourer

The labourer works at the docks, in Palmer's shipyard.

12 Miner

The miner works in a coal mine that provides coal for the shipyard.

13 Grocer

The grocer sells fruit and vegetables to the local workers in the shipyard.

His shop is in the middle of the dock workers' houses.

14 Post office keeper

The post office is in the area where the shipyard workers live.

15 Policeman

He is the policeman on the gate of the shipyard.

Britain since 1930: Jarrow Crusade – Resources C Role play sheet

My character _____



Me with my family



Me at work