Punk in the East

Punk in the East is a history project with a difference. Not only does it document the history of punk in Norwich from 1976 to 1984, it does so ‘from below’ – by enabling punks from Norwich to collate, archive and produce their own social and cultural history. The project has been so successful that not only has it made a tangible difference to the people of Norwich by creating a collective history, shared by punks and the people who lived with and around them, it has also inspired a similar initiative in Sunderland.

The brainchild of Matthew Worley, Professor of Modern History, Punk in the East entailed gathering material – from ephemera, fanzines, photos and posters to memories, records, tickets and people – from the heyday of British punk to forge a history that would coincide with the 40th anniversary of British punk’s emergence. Norwich was taken as a case-study, with a radical objective: to work with local archivists and cultural practitioners towards producing a collective, shared history rather than one that could be described as ‘mine’, ‘yours’ or ‘theirs’.

Worley developed a strong social media presence and published a sell-out fanzine, Young Offenders: Punk in Norwich, 1976-84, featuring contributions from Norwich punks. Punk in the East’s main event was a series of events in the Norwich Lanes area between October and December 2016, with influential
punk bands such as The Ruts, The Buzzcocks and The Undertones making appearances. Anarcho-punk trailblazer Steve Ignorant, former lead singer with Crass and Norfolk resident, performed with his band Slice of Life; events and gigs were also documented on film and via social media channels.

Norwich Lanes hosted a punk trail of 15 historic venues, with clothes shops housing Vivienne Westwood’s Seditionaries collection, and the windows and walls of shops, cafes and pubs providing display space for punk ephemera. The Punk in the East exhibition at the Museum of Norwich proved so popular that the museum, using scans of all the items shown, is creating a permanent digital archive.

Stephen Hansell, singer in The Disrupters, spoke for the punk community when he said the project had made him thoughtful about his place in social history: “Back then I never thought for one minute that what we were doing would one day be regarded as social history. Funny old world.”

The key beneficiaries of the project are the new and old punks of Norwich, who have been involved from the ground up in creating and presenting their history in their own way; the Museum of Norwich, which has forged links with a marginal group in the community and used this learning to undertake changes at an institutional level; and the Norwich community, which has benefitted from increased visitors and a better understanding of this period in the recent past.

And just as punk grew exponentially, taking root up and down the country, Punk in the East has spawned a kindred project in Sunderland. Worley, whose book Anarchy in the UK: Punk, Politics and British Youth Culture, 1976–84, was published in autumn 2017, says the premise can be expanded yet further: “There is no reason why collaborating with cultural practitioners to cultivate grass-root histories of youth cultural agency can’t be done elsewhere in Britain and, indeed, across Europe.”

Acknowledgements and further information

Punk in the East is a digital collection of original photographs, gig tickets, posters, clothing and ephemera from Norwich and across East Anglia. As content continues to come in, it is fast becoming the largest digital UK punk archive to be found anywhere on the internet.

www.punkintheeast.co.uk,


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