

## Darlo still matters and walls can always change colour

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CULTURE

COMMUNITY



St. John's Church as seen from Darlington Station

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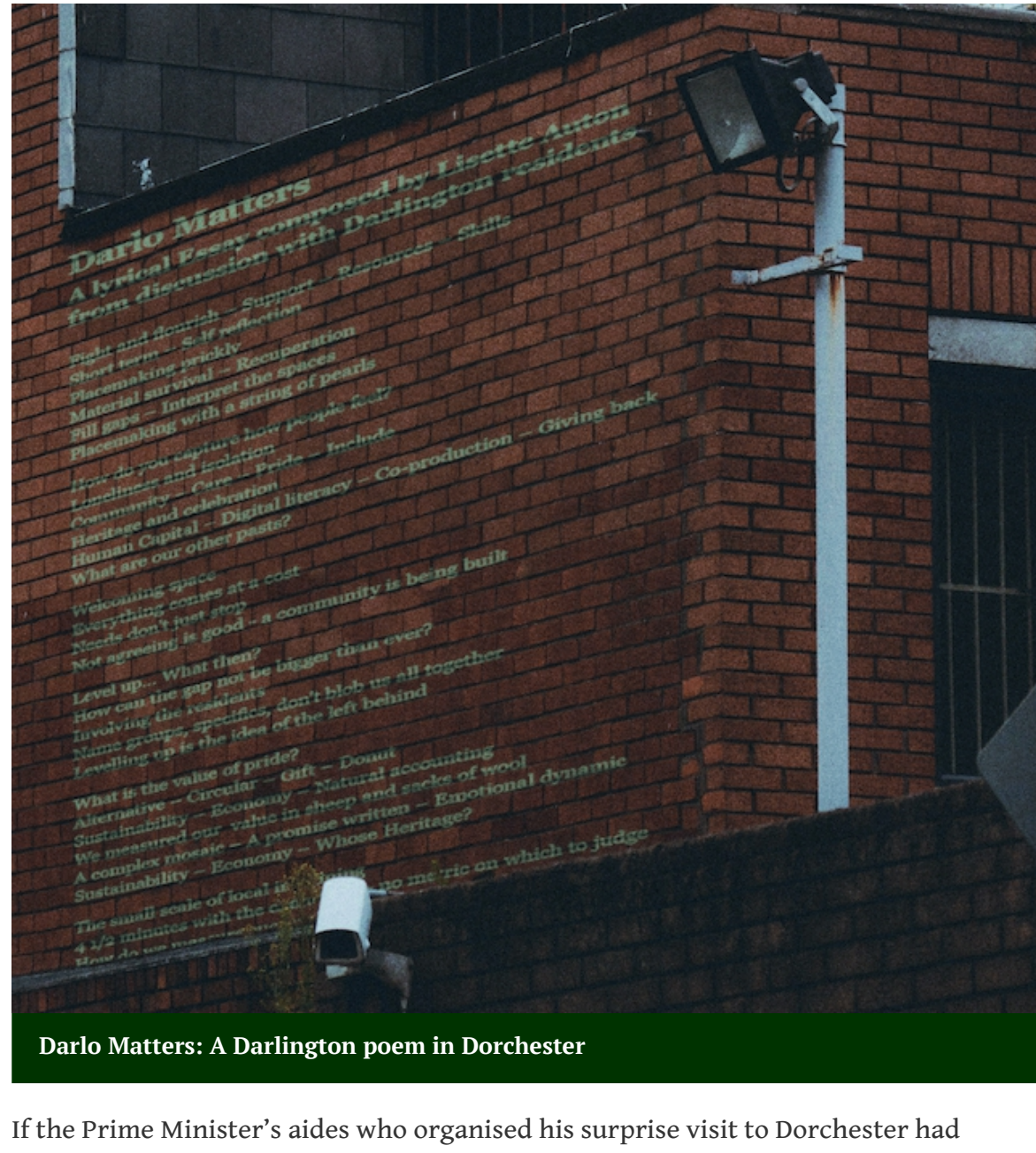
**A year ago today our editor asked me to head to Dorchester, a town I had only visited once before, when I was much younger, so that I could cover the Dorchester-to-Darlington Festival of Exchange.**

When he asked me to report on a series of cultural events aimed at pairing our two towns he probably hadn't expected that a now infamous faux pas in the Commons and much tense debate about the ideology underpinning the scheme meant that I was not to be the only reporter from outside Dorchester heading down to cover this new government initiative.

He thought, understandably, that I might speak with some local residents, arts practitioners, and hopefully the town Mayor, to get some feedback on some of the projects taking place that had been designed to kick-start the new twin relationship. It was meant to be a straightforward story that would introduce the festival to our readers back home, and I thought I'd probably spend the afternoon talking to local schoolchildren about their projects on the Romans.

Instead, I found myself part of an impromptu press corps, gathered around Boris Johnson as he stood in front of a large brick wall displaying a poem he had, by his own bumbling admission, never read.

The poem was titled 'Darlo Matters' written by Darlington spoken word artist and activist Lisette Auton, and it had been recently painted as a text mural on a wall near the centre of Dorchester, in the hope that local residents could read it and see shared values between the two towns.



Darlo Matters: A Darlington poem in Dorchester

If the Prime Minister's aides who organised his surprise visit to Dorchester had taken the time to research the project behind the poem, they might have realised sooner that him talking up the merits of his latest Levelling Up scheme in front of a work that took specific aim the evident flaws in his regeneration drive, did not, in fact, make for a great photo opportunity.

As the crowd swelled and he began to take questions, there was a moment where some local residents actually began heckling him with lines from the poem behind him. 'Let down by those in power!' came the call, followed by the less verbatim, but tonally relevant, 'Do we matter to you?'

Such was the pantomime nature of his appearance that when he started to rattle on about wanting to find and raise civic pride in Britain I almost expected someone to call out 'It's behind you!'

I ended up having to write two articles for the inaugural Festival of Exchange, one about Johnson's visit, and one covering the range of events put on by our Dorset hosts, which included a fun tour of the town where we encountered young people dressed as emoji faces who would then answer our questions about the personal or folk history of whichever spot they were standing at.



Local tour guides with a tale to tell

As I return this year for the second festival, there is decidedly less fanfare. I didn't meet the Mayor, nor any emoji-clad teenagers on the High Street. There is also no pantomime villain, though it was announced this week that Rishi Sunak will soon be heading to Darlington.

This is much less of a surprise than his predecessor's trip to Dorset, given that election season is approaching and we represent a much less safe seat for the Conservatives than our southern twin. Evidently, the scheme was not just about painting walls with community poetry. The government's main concern is with a much bigger wall in the North, covered in a single coat of blue paint that they fear might soon be scrubbed off to reveal the much older red beneath.

Other articles will report on Sunak's visit and the Darlington-hosted events for this year's festival. Wanting to follow up down here, I came back to Dorchester hoping to find out how local people now felt about the Tale of Two Towns initiative that was once touted, and even lauded, as the scheme that would energise local pride and national connectivity.

A year ago, I asked people what they thought about my hometown, and whether Darlo had come to matter to them at all.

The responses were varied. Many admitted to never having really understood why a poem about a northern town they'd never visited had been painted so prominently on a wall of their town centre. Some of the younger people spoke positively about their experiences with the scheme, having taken part in a school exchange trip to Darlington last summer. They recalled the railway museum especially fondly.

One man wanted to explain to me how much it had cost to remove graffiti from the poem, though he wouldn't or couldn't say what the graffiti had been. I later discovered that someone had replaced the word 'Darlo' in the title with 'BLACK LIFE', which had caused a certain amount of debate among councillors about whether or how to restore the original wording.

Remembering my visit in 2022 I could hardly ignore the fact that fewer people, in Dorchester, Darlington and throughout the country, were talking with interest about the identical twinned towns scheme now. Maybe that is to be expected. Something is always going to make the headlines more at the start of its life, and its supporters may say that it's a sign of its success that we have naturalised what seemed, at first, to be a fairly controversial idea.

But I couldn't help wondering if it was now just another quickly forgotten relic of a government struggling to come up with proposals for dealing with some pretty significant civic problems. Other twinings have since been made, with other festivals of exchange inaugurated across the nation, and I am certain that many thought-provoking ideas have been generated by the fantastic work of community groups and dedicated individuals wherever this has happened.

Whether or not it has achieved any of the original goals of the initiative is a different matter. Have the projects generated 'growth, pride, and sustainability across our communities'? Perhaps not. It could be that the high point of inter-town solidarity and connection between Darlington and Dorchester came in that moment when someone heckled the former Prime Minister with lines from Lisette Auton's poem.

That said, I have now spent more time in Dorchester in the past thirteen months than I did in the forty preceding years. I've visited local shops, museums, galleries and gotten to speak to a wide range of people from the community, noticing, as I did, the values we clearly all share. I will also admit to feeling a distinct pride in my own community when I look up at that wall and see the work of a Darlo artist so far from home. I don't know how long it will stay there for, but that's the thing about heritage, it doesn't have to be permanent to leave a mark.

Unfortunately, the same is true of austerity.