

Now Thus – Now Thus
A semi-fictional tour through Alexander Park, St. Helens

Scene 1 – The Corridor:

I've worked here in one form or another for a long time. At the beginning I was on the factory floor, I cleaned and I packed. I did what I could. I did what I was **allowed** to do as a woman. In those days it was a family run business. You would often see his lordship weaving his way through the lines of workers, looking over your shoulder to see you were doing a good job. In 1773 the company symbol changed from one man working to a group of 8 (all men of course). They reminded us of what it meant to work together, to be a team. How we were all in it together. Of course we didn't always do things as a team. In olden days the craftsman was the one to make. He knew how to do a job from start to finish.

But in the 1800s they started to bring in the big machines – machines that could do all sorts of things. It was incredible. It seemed as if they had a mind of their own. And of course, if the machine was doing lots of the work then almost anyone could do the job with a little training. And there was a great ruckus over that - People rioting, angry that their jobs were going and their skills being made redundant. Redundant was to become a word all too common in our minds over the years.

But we went on working as we could and the family looked after us. There were all sorts of things, picnics, and cricket, bowls the lot. They even put on Christmas pageants and had a lovely ladies competition. I never entered. I daren't try! Somehow you felt safe even if you **were** working very hard for it.

And then there was great upheaval during The Great War – the factory started to make munitions and we women were brought in on all sorts of jobs. In those days - with all the men gone to war we were put to work just like any man. It was a great time. We worked with 'courageous enterprise, strenuous endeavour and duty'¹.

I went on to administration after that. I remember the huge vaulted long room, with rows and rows of long benches where hundreds of us sat, dealing with orders, purchases, payment. It was a constant stream of papers passing through my hands. But it wasn't long before that all changed. I was trained in on a comptometer, which was a machine for doing calculations. Eventually that was automated too. The Comptometer became a redundant tool and I moved on again. I went to secretarial services. I even got sent on a training course. By then, there was a huge computer that did lots of work. We punched in numbers and it spat out reams and reams of invoices, pay slips, order forms. The water from the lake was used to keep the enormous machine cool.

But it wasn't just the machines that were changing – the company itself was changing too. You no longer saw his lordship or his son or his grandson anywhere near the workers. The place had gotten so big; there were managers upon managers, different people to report in to. They still had the parties and the pensions but it was different. You didn't feel like you were working for the family anymore. The workers were still family but the top was changing.

When things were tight for the company his lordship remained convinced that we could balance our books as he said, we need 'not merely to work harder and better to improve our general productivity but we shall also need to work more. Whether this be through longer hours and less idle time on the day or rather more Saturdays or rather fewer holidays in a year or even a later age of retirement and pension is a matter of opinion.'

But of course those of us doing the work had one opinion and those deciding the hours of work another. There was a distinction between our employer's time and our own time.² I think they started to think of us as units of manpower³, part of the machinery of the company, rather than people. In a way it isn't surprising that the strike happened.

But that was a glorious time. 'There was a feeling of elation the way some of the men were talking, it was as though they had done something big for the first time in their lives.'⁴ There was something about so many people taking the power into their own hands, fighting against those in authority.

It is even said that they showered the union bosses with paper airplanes in protest during the negotiations! But it wasn't long before they took back control. It went on for too long. Without official union support it was difficult. There was plenty of good will and money coming in from all around the country but after so many weeks it was hard to feel powerful when you could hardly put a dinner on the table. And there weren't many other employers. There was very little other work, so in a way they had the monopoly. They always had in this town.

Of course after the strike it all changed completely. The company went public and the management had to work to make it more competitive in the global Market. You couldn't do it as you always had they said. Costs had to be cut.

I use to be the secretary for one manager but it didn't take long for that to go up to four. There was a lot of uncertainty and people were being laid off all over the place. They were making the company more competitive; no one could be guaranteed a job for life any more. You had to be flexible. More and more of **my** time was taken up with collecting data on the employees. How productive were they? Was their role necessary? The administration of it all increased. Let me show you what it looked like?

Scene 2 – Speedy Hire:

So as I said the company was looking to make itself more efficient. There was a focus on what they called core competencies - or what they were best at and what was most important to the business. 'Naturally this led to an epidemic of outsourcing catering, cleaning, building maintenance and even mailroom services.' Anything that wasn't part of the main business was handed over to another company to provide at a lower cost. Three of the women in translation services were told in front of 300 people they were being outsourced. Some could move within the company so kept their benefits. Some were given the same job but with a new company. The pay was less but they got to keep their pensions and benefits – the holy grail because at least you only had to worry about the present and not the future too. Others weren't so lucky. Automation continued and even more people lost their jobs. More and more jobs could be done with less and less people.

And of course this was at the time when Maggie Thatcher was Prime Minister. Her and her lot changed a lot of things in those times. They made sure the unions lost the bit of power they had, they pulled apart welfare and privatised public services. Everything became a business even if it was a hospital or a school. She even said 'There is no such thing as society.' I didn't know what she meant at the time but I soon came to understand it when I saw my friends lose their jobs - with no one to fight for them and trying to get the dole. Many of them ended up being forced to take low paid jobs that could hardly keep a roof over their heads.

Then in the 1980s there was a hostile take over bid. I had never heard of such a thing but then it was happening to us. We all got behind it. We didn't want someone buying up our company and selling it off bit by bit. We fought to keep the company and to keep our jobs. We even went on a March up the town on a Saturday so everyone would know. 'When someone was attacking us, by god they knew about it.'⁵ Eventually the vultures stopped circling and the bid was defeated. There was a real sense of achievement, a sense togetherness, at that time. After that the rationalization and outsourcing continued in earnest.

So let's imagine the company were making paper airplanes – in the beginning you would have learned to make the plane from start to finish. You would know how to make each fold meticulously with care and skill. Later you would have learned how to work the machine that folded the paper; you might only have ever seen one step of the process – one of the folds along the way. Eventually you might have a machine that would do everything, no need to man the machine or fold anything, you didn't even get to throw the thing to see if it could fly! And now the person that was cleaning the scraps off the floor worked for a different company.

So many of the new people were now on temporary contracts, or reduced hours or what ever. It wasn't the same. Many thought it was great. They said they were free to choose when they worked and what they worked at. They were flexible. 'Equality and security seemed to be sacrificed to Freedom and Choice.'⁶ They were the new buzzwords. Besides people didn't seem to feel that you should go on welfare. There was a shame about it. Rather than feeling like it was a right, people thought you should be able to stand on your own two feet. If you weren't working you were a sponger and that was it.

In the 70s and 80s they started to hire graduates too. I left school very young; some didn't even go to school and came straight here. A long time ago they even had a school in the company for the children who worked here. It used to be you had to be related to someone to get a job but that was all changing. So the pressure was on a

bit. People were more educated and there was more competition. But they said 'you had to look after yourself, [be a go getter], and then **they** would look after you.'⁷

The company was looking for people to lay off in those days so they started to watch people - to see how many sick days you were taking - you often didn't know if someone was watching you. They would look to see how well you were working? Did you have a good work ethic? How was your attitude to the company?

They started to rationalize, and centralise operations. Everyone was encouraged to join in – to make the work as efficient as possible. They even tried to bring in the Japanese Kaizen – a system of continuous improvement of working practices and personal efficiency⁸. But that didn't really take hold. In Japan they are guaranteed a job for life but here that was long gone, no one wanted to improve things so much that they wanted to put themselves or someone else out of a job. But they wanted to involve us.⁹ **'We want to create one organisation with no 'them and us' attitude between departments, levels, functions, businesses and countries, we have to work together as a team,'** they declared.¹⁰

We were given freedom to become more autonomous – we could manage our own time – many of us, at that stage, were on flexi-time, which meant we could set our day to start earlier or later as we saw fit and sometimes even work from home. We were set targets and goals to achieve but were given relative freedom in how to achieve these.¹¹ They did monitor us though. There was surveillance of phones and email – the use of intranet meant they knew how long we were logged into the company system.

Sometimes it seemed like the targets were impossible to reach. They would set a target but there was no sense of how or why they came to that number. Once I asked my boss – How did you come to the number 8 as the target? His reply – because 8 is great!¹² It was frustrating. Sometimes I even made up accounts to make it seem like I was reaching the targets. I would open the account and then close it once they had checked the targets. There was constant re-organisations going on and you just had to keep up or you would very likely be the next one out.

When the company was finally bought they made lots of people redundant again – sometimes they hired people out on different contracts. People who were paid a wage were suddenly self-employed and hired as a subcontractor¹³ – it was a completely different relationship. The pension and benefits of the old days was gone. You were just happy to have a job. And now everyone one had a different contract – with such individual paths for promotion and salaries, it's hard to have a union to bargain for people collectively. It's every man for himself.¹⁴ You might have a contract that lays out what you are **supposed** to do but in the end you have to work hard, you have to go above and beyond, be available all the time, be adaptable and work well with the team.

Now we do performance reviews where what we do is monitored to see if we reach our targets and to set new ones. What we do and how we do it is documented. And now we do what's called a 360 feedback. The 360 gets feedback from the people you work with on your performance and how you work. Working in a team you need different skills to the old days, you have to be a good listener, you have to be able to co-operate, you have to be able to adapt to other people, you have to have empathy.

But it's a funny thing if you know your colleagues will at some point have to evaluation your performance – you pay attention to how you come across, sometimes the need to be agreeable and fit in changes your behaviour. You are

being watched but you are also watching – in your mind answering the potential questions - you wonder is this person **'on the lookout for ways to make things better'** does this person **work well with others**, is this person **self motivated**? When the responses are collated I deliver them to the management. I'll show you where.

Scene 3 – the Boardroom:

So often I bring the hard copy to this boardroom. The room is always warm, heavy with dry air. The carpet has a deep pile that creates resistance when you push the door in. The view is magnificent. Rarely can one see the town from this vantage. It looks beautiful, with the landscape stretching out beyond the houses. Usually the executives sit around the table. They wear shirts and ties, the heat of the room usually having plied the jackets from their shoulders earlier.

Wait for a few minutes outside can you Elsie? The head of HR, Peter Lane says to me.

I sit outside near the door. I'm curious to hear what they have to say. I know some the people being reviewed; I've even given feedback on one or two.

'What do we do with Anthony? One of the other managers asks.

'Well, John, we are looking to cut back. We are going to have to outsource the security. We should have done it years ago.' Peter answers. 'We need to make ourselves leaner. But should we try to keep him, give him another role – up skill him?'

'Well lets look at his performance over the last few years, John responds.

'He has had pretty consistently good reviews over the past few years. He is a good supervisor. He's generally liked, which is good and he seems to have integrity, which is also important. And people see him as Loyal.' He says in a satisfied tone.

'Yes but we all know that loyalty doesn't serve anyone anymore in an economy where 'business concepts ... and capital equipment have shorter credible life spans [than a job].¹⁵ There **is** no more long term. What I want to know is does he have drive? Can he make decisions quickly? Is he creative, **is he a disrupter** – does he imagine beyond the boundaries of what exists? Does he have the skills to do something else?' Peter answers with some urgency.

Well, he tests high for self-motivation but there seems to be some recent behaviour issues. His supervisor says that he's not complying with the new guiding behaviours. He doesn't use the language.'

'But we introduced the guiding behaviours [to] make it simpler to understand what is expected of us in the way we work. These compliment the mission statement and statements of strategy that have now been rolled out in all the business.'¹⁶ Another voice chimes in. It sounds like Kenneth, from development.

'Some dissent can be good in an employee, Peter replies with authority – it shows character, confidence – but if he isn't adaptable – if he isn't **change receptive**, then he won't be much good.

'Yes,' John responds. 'We need someone who is can handle change. As Machiavelli said 'There is nothing more difficult to carry out nor more doubtful of success, nor more dangerous to handle, than to initiate a new order of things' so we need people who can cope with it. We want people who can position themselves in a network of possibilities rather than paralyzing themselves in a particular job.'¹⁷

'But can Antony see possibility – can he take risks?' Kenneth responds.

'He has shown some self-motivation when it comes to the office. He adapted to the 5S system that the Japanese brought readily. But it doesn't really show the entrepreneurial spirit we are looking for in future employees. We need someone who has 'the confidence to dwell in disorder, someone who flourishes in the midst of dislocation. I'm not sure he has the kind of determination and independence to push through more and more re-organisations that will no doubt come down the tracks.'

John responds.

Ultimately gentlemen, his recent scores don't give us the picture of the kind future employees we are hoping for or imagine. We will just have to let him go.' Peter says firmly. 'We are all contingent workers in one form or another – we are all victims of time and place.'¹⁸ We need to trust in this process and respond to the results we get.

'Insert his name at the top of that letter dismissal and we can add it to the rest.'

'Elsie – can you come in please.'

I walk in and am handed a stack of envelopes.

'Can you take these to the post room on your way down please, Elsie' Peter asks politely.

I take the stack reluctantly, looking searchingly to see a reaction in their faces but they have already moved on to the next task at hand.

I leave and take the elevator down to distribute the fateful letters.

Scene 4: The Post room:

Antony is my brother. We've both worked here for centuries. He's a good man, a hard worker, but he doesn't like to be told how to be or what to say. He doesn't want to use the language of the company to talk to people or his colleagues. He wants to be himself and treat people as people not consumers. He was never going to use the guideline behaviour.

As I begin to slot the letters in the relevant pigeonholes I get to wondering. What is the effect of this new need for flexibility and adaptability?

I used to think that 'if you worked hard enough, show enough dedication, commitment and desire, that you can achieve great things.'¹⁹

Maggie Thatcher had us all believe that we were all upwardly mobile and could self assign our class. But I'm not so sure now. You can't say no as easily anymore.²⁰ They want everyone to be entrepreneurial, creative, a risk taker. We should all be like artists - unattached and adaptable to circumstance...comfortable in an ever-changing environment that demands creative shifts in communication with different kinds of employers, clients, and partners; attitudinally geared toward work that requires long, and often unsocial, hours; and accustomed...to a contingent, rather than a fixed routine... [a] free agent'.²¹

Or as Marx puts it "the capitalist desires nothing more than that the worker should expend his dosages of life power as much as possible without interruption".

This flexibility and adaptability, ends up amounting to being on the edge all the time. Feeling stressed. Feeling insecure for our future. We are the new precarious class. 'with precarity increasing and welfare programmes eroding, its not surprising that there should be an increase in depression and anxiety.'²²

But we are not all contingent in the way that Peter would like us to imagine. He makes it sounds like it was no one's decision. No one is accountable. But of course they still get paid and often have a stake in the company, giving them some power over the means of production and their own labour.

'Being constantly exposed to risk can eat away at your sense of character...You have the feeling that you are always starting over.'²³ It is now predicted that young people will have 11 or more different jobs in their lifetime. 'No long term is a principle which corrodes trust, and mutual commitment.'²⁴

David Cameron used the slogan ' we're all in this together' to justify the imposition of austerity in the wake of the banking crisis.²⁵ We now know that we weren't all in that together. There was austerity for the poorer classes and little for those at the top.

I, like my striking brothers hoped before me, would like to be the architect of change whereby people could control their own lives.²⁶ The question for us all now is, can we find enough solidarity among a fragmented workforce to effect change, or do we push on and try to develop the entrepreneurial skills and flexibility to adapt to the ever changing world of work. We must all ask ourselves:

How should I fashion my life?²⁷

Take this – I will take you to the St. Helen's Room where you can make your decision.

The End.

¹ *Now Thus Now Thus* – p72

² E.P. Thompson quoted in *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in The New*

² E.P. Thompson quoted in *The Corrosion of Character: The Personal Consequences of Work in The New Capitalism*, Sennett, R. W. W. Norton & Co, New York, 1998, p.39.

³ *Strike at Pilkingtons* p.41

⁴ *Strike at Pilkingtons*, Tony Lane and Kenneth Roberts, Collins/Fontana Press, London 1971. P42

⁵ From interview with Paul – past employee of Pilkingtons and NSG.

⁶ *Capitalism A Very Short Introduction* James Fulcher, Oxford University press, Oxford 2015

⁷ From interview with Paul – past employee of Pilkingtons and NSG.

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kaizen>

⁹ From interview with Paul – past employee of Pilkingtons and NSG.

¹⁰ HR director John Benson quoted in *Prism*, Issue six June 1999

¹¹ Sennett, p56.

¹² John Stumpf quoted by Elizabeth Warren at the United States Senate Banking Committee Hearing

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJhkX74D10M>

¹³ 'Dismantling the World of Work' in *The New Spirit of Capitalism* Boltanski, L. Verso Books, London, 2005.

¹⁴ Sennett P.86

¹⁵ John Kotter of Harvard Business School, quoted in Sennett, p.25

¹⁶ HR director John Benson quoted in *Prism*, Issue six June 1999

¹⁷ Bill Gates quoted in Sennett, p62

¹⁸ Sennett, p114

¹⁹ quoted in *Prism*

²⁰ Comment made by Psycho-Therapist Brian Langshaw of Talking Solutions based in Alexander Business Park the former site of Pilkingtons Glass.

²¹ Andrew Ross 'No collar labour in America's New economy' in The Socialist Register 2001 accessed at

<https://socialistregister.com/index.php/srv/article/view/5756/2652>

²² Mark Fisher interview on Occupiedtimes.org/?p=3454

²³ Sennett, p.84

²⁴ *ibid* p24

²⁵ Quoted by Mark Fisher in <http://zero-books.net/blogs/zero/capitalist-realism/>

²⁶ *Strike at Pilkingtons*, p.165

²⁷ Pico della Mirandola, quoted in Sennett, p116-7