

# **The Black Country environment of the mid-20th century through the poetry of Jim William Jones**

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*A talk given at the Black Country History Day on November 9<sup>th</sup>, 2024, at the Black Country Living Museum.*

## **Introduction**

We saw earlier how glimpses of Black Country history could be found through the paintings of John Louis Petit, and in this presentation, we do something similar through the medium of poetry. We will look at the Black Country environment of the mid / late twentieth century, through the poetry of a particularly sharp-eyed observer and the picture, while necessarily more subjective and personal than some of the material that has been presented earlier but is no less valid. The poet in question is Jim William Jones, so I begin by giving some brief biographical information to set the scene.

Jim William Jones was born in Coseley on February 15th, 1923, and spent his childhood and school years there. After leaving school he began work with the engineering firm Joseph Sankey and Sons as a junior clerk. He was conscripted into the army at the age of 18 in 1941, taking part in the Normandy landing in 1944 and also serving in India and Ceylon, reaching the rank of Warrant Officer. After the war he returned to Sankey's and was trained in works management, before leaving industry to join local government in 1955 where he worked in education administration. He was a qualified teacher of

speech and drama and a member of amateur dramatic societies, hosting a radio programme on Beacon Radio and working with the Black Country folk music group Giggetty. He had a strong Christian faith and was a gifted speaker and Methodist local preacher. He became a very well-known Black Country poet, both for his dialect poetry – the Black Country ballads - and for his poetry in more conventional English. Some of these can be found in three small publications by the Black Country Society – “From under the smoke” from 1972, “Factory and Fireside” from 1974, and “Jim and Kate” from 1986, all sadly long out of print. Some of his poems were also included in a 1976 anthology “Widening circles”. He contributed numerous poems to the first 25 years of the Society magazine, the Blackcountryman from 1967 to 1992. He died in 1993.

In what follows we will read to you a number of both the standard English and the dialect poems. I will read the former, and the latter will be recordings produced by Emma Purshouse. The difference between us of course is that Emma is actually a poet and knows how to read poetry! We divide the poems into three – those describing the industrial environment, those describing people, or if you will the social environment, and those describing the built environment of the Black Country. There is of course much overlap, and the division is an artificial one to some extent. But the other major distinction between the poems – those in standard English and those in dialect - is important too. The Black Country dialect, or as one might put it, the linguistic environment, is a defining feature of the history of the area, and as important as the other aspects.

In total we will read sixteen poems - ten by me in standard English and six by Emma. Those that Emma will read are rather longer however, so the time will be split fairly evenly between us. Each

poem will be illustrated by one or more images, mainly, but not solely, taken from the Black Country Society Calendar Collection. Mostly the connection of poem and image is quite loose and at best illustrative.

We begin then with poems that illustrate the Black Country at Work – the industrial environment.

## The Black Country at Work - the Industrial Environment

*We begin with a dialect poem that relates to an earlier time than that of Jim Jones, when coal mining was largely by hand, in very hazardous conditions. Emma will read “**Gairbriel from Gornal**”, from “*Factory and Fireside*” published in 1974.*

Ar'm thinking o' Gairbriel,  
Gairbriel from Gornal,  
The chap as waiked by me  
At the coal fairce below.  
'E dae dew much talkin'  
About wheer 'e cum from,  
'Is fam'ly, 'is life.  
Kep' 'isself to 'isself.

Just a quiet chap ar thought 'im,  
Gairbriel from Goral,  
A'airnin' 'is livin',  
Never botherin' wi' none,  
Till one day it 'appened.  
Down theer at the coal fairce,  
The rewf timbers groaned,  
An' the stoones spluttered down.

Then up springs this Gairbriel,  
Gairbriel from Gornal,  
'E props 'is great shoulders  
Wheer the rewf threatened me,  
" Gerrou, yer saft gawbee!"  
Says 'e, " Yo' got childrin!  
Ar doe mind a'dyin',  
'Cos theer'Il nob'dy mourn me."

Ar dae try ter stop 'im,  
Gairbriel from Gomal,  
'Cos ar wuz a coward,  
An' ar run fer me life.  
Ar run an' ar stumbled,  
The blind fear wuz on me.  
Ar thought o' me childrin,  
An' ar thought o' me wife.

Now ar think about Gairbriel,  
Gairbriel from Gomal,  
A'lyin' theer smothered  
Moore than 'arf a mile down.  
An' ar calls 'im softly  
In me 'eart ar calls 'im,  
"Yo'n got some'dy wot mourns yer  
Me ode mairte-yo' got me!"

*And now to the 1940s. A **night on the Galusha** from the Blackcountryman in 1972. Jim Jones himself writes in introduction:*

Dedicated to Joseph Jones of Penn, alas now deceased, who was affectionately known as “American” Joe because he had lived and worked in the USA in his younger days, and with whom I spent many happy, but often uneasy nightshifts on an industrial gas-production plant at Sankey’s Rolling Mills, Lanesfield in the late 1940s. A Galusha was an industrial gas production plant, long discarded.

The night is hugging its own shapes  
Beyond the square pool of yellow light,  
Where the giant’s ashy excreta  
Steams and trickles and settles itself.

The great steel anus of the tower  
Is now sealed with almost fearful care;  
No air can be allowed to enter there  
To rise and belch with fury through the fire.

The steel stairway clangs like crackled bells  
As we climb back through the gas-filled gloom:  
On the first floor the murky air, like warm wool  
Swirls and clings to our bodies, drawing sweat.

The odour of yellow marsh gas  
Is homely; strangely reminiscent  
Of kettle boiling and the promise of tea  
With butter and jam heaped on a knife.

Joe looks at my bright new tea can  
Sparkling blue; as new to toil as I,  
Feeling as strange as I in the smoke and the dust;  
I lift the lid and take my cap.

Joe is a broad chap with thick arms;  
Skin brown as old oak from sun-filled wanderings  
A character from one of Steinbeck's novels,  
Casting a big shadow when he moves.

At 2 a.m. the real work begins,  
Breaking down clinker through the poke holes,  
The fire must be kept black to produce good gas;  
Our sweat falls and steams on the steel floor.

At 4.00 a.m. and still sweating,  
We feed the monster with anthracite;  
I fill the fast-moving hopper, while Joe,  
Seventy feet above controls its speed.

The moon's fire banked with ashes of cloud  
Ignites the white shroud of morning mist  
As we meet to light pipes on the high cat walk  
And puff the smoke into serious talk.

About work, or families, our homes,  
The risks involved working with the gas;  
How a simple error could wreck the whole plant.  
Or blow a man into a mangled pulp.

At 5 a.m. we ash-out again;  
Joe shows me how easy it would be  
To let air in during this messy process;  
What a mess we would make exploded.

We laugh, as men do at death dormant  
Under some industrial guise, controlled  
By human hand; kept at bay each night and day  
In a channel of power for human need.

The last drags of cold tea from my can  
Wash away the grey dust from my throat;  
I get my coat in readiness to leave;  
6 a.m. and sixteen hours reprieve.

Day becomes unreal for night workers,  
We bear traces of the long dark hours  
In our eyes, the stale sweat of our bodies;  
And our shadows fade like ghosts in the sun.



*We move now to the iron industry – specifically a rolling mill.  
“Breakdown—No 2 Rolling mill (a Recollection)”. This ends by  
describing the machine / man relationship in master / slave terms –  
which is no doubt how many would have thought about it.*

A volley of shouts  
Rises above the disjointed thunder  
Of splitting iron rolls:  
Glossy sheets of fine steel  
Crumpled like discarded paper  
Eject and slither across  
The plated floor,  
Slowly with rattle and groan,  
The mill dies,  
Heaving its coal smoked breath  
Into silence

In a circling cloak of warm air,  
There is a cadence of images:  
Frantic managerial faces  
Caught in a sudden screen  
Of sunlight, jostle their commands  
Into pewter gloom,  
Goaded limbs, in silhouette,  
Contort the saffron rays  
Of pent furnaces.  
Above the black oily miasma  
Of the great wheel's pit,

Vizor'd spectres.  
Locked in cocoons of blue lightning  
Spray molten stars  
From their burning wands.  
In deeper gloom,  
Tired mill workers  
Tackle their reprieve  
With cold tea and tobacco  
Making jungle eyes  
With the grimy stubs  
Of cigarettes.

Now hovers the singing crane.  
Maneuvering new rolls.  
With electric edginess.  
Tension begins to ease;  
A new shout triggers out.  
From the brain's muffled explosion:  
The monster resurrects  
Bounding into thunderous life.  
Its world agog. Its slaves smiling.

*We stay in the rolling mill for the next poem. Over the decades industrial disputes were common and individually painful for many as loyalties were tested. Emma reads the dialect poem “**Jonah an’ the Wheel**” from the anthology “Widening Circles” of 1976.*

Now Jonah wuz a graiser  
Down at the Rollin’ Mill;  
‘Is job wuz very ‘umdrum,  
An’ dae require much skill.

‘Is ‘onds wun like a baby’s  
From yewsin’ soo much graise,  
But ‘is yed wuz grey and grizzled,  
An’ ‘ard luck ‘ad lined ‘is fairce.

‘E’d clock on ev’ry mornin’,  
Lung fower we others cum,  
‘Cos ‘e lived all on ‘is lonesome,  
An’ the mill wuz mooer ‘is ‘um.

‘E’d goo round wi’ ‘is graise-pot  
Ter lewbricate aich wheel,  
An ‘e’d dew it all ser cheerful,  
No matter ‘ow ‘e’d feel.

We ‘ardly ‘ad a breakdown  
Wi’ Jonah on the scene;  
‘E luved them wheels an’ spindles  
‘Ter goo round graised an’ clean

One day a “Bolshi” fella  
Cum wairkin’ wi’ we lot;  
‘E started meckin’ trouble  
‘Cos ‘e dae care a jot.

‘E said as ‘ow the gaffers  
‘Ad kep we short o’ bread  
Ter fill theyre own fat ballies;  
“Comrades, let’s strike!” ‘e said.

Some o’ the blokes got restless,  
A listin’ tew ‘is gob;  
Ode Johan took no notice,  
Jus’ gorrom wi’ ‘is job.

The “Bolshi” said ter Jonah  
“Yer blewmin’ saft ode fewl!  
You’ll jine us, or regret it,  
Yo’m nothin’ bur’ a tewl!”

‘Twas on a Monday mornin’,  
The strike was at its height;  
Outside the gairtes we waited,  
All full of ‘ate and spite.

Then up walks poor ode Jonah,  
An’ says, “Let me cum by!”  
But none on we ‘ud let him,  
Soo ‘e begun to cry.

“At gorra dew me greasin”  
Says ‘e, “Let me cum threw!”  
Says we “Theer’s no wheels tairnin’:  
There note for thee ter dew!”

The Jonah gor’ ‘is pluck up  
An’ fote wi’ all ‘is might;  
‘E punched the ‘Bolshi’ fella,  
Who went out like a light.

Ode Johah pulled the switches  
An’ started up the mill;  
‘E gor’ ote of ‘is graise-pot,  
An’ went round wi’ a will.

The ‘Bolshi’ bloke recovered,  
An’ staired we up agin;  
We run into the rollin’ mill  
Like bewmin’ lewney men.

We picked up bars an’ oommers  
Ter smash up and’ distriy;  
The gaffers all skidaddled  
When we cum rushin’ by.

There wuz a great big fly-wheel  
Wot med the rolls spin round  
Ten foot above the flooer  
An’ ten foot underground.

Ode Johah wuz a grasin'  
Ter keep it gooin' fast;  
The 'Bolshi' chucked a sponner  
As 'e went rushin past.

The fly-wheel cracked an' rumbled,  
An' robbled all about;  
Then cum another crackin' sound,  
An' some'dy gid a shout.

They laid ode Jonah on the floor  
'Is yed all cairked w'i blud  
An' some on we as knowed 'om  
Jus' blaarted where we stood.

'E'd jumped down where the fly-wheel  
Went down below the flooor  
Ter fetch the sponner out agen,  
But now 'e wuz no mooer.

We got the 'Bolshi' fella  
An' beat 'im up real good,  
'Cos 'e'd caused poor ode Jonah  
Ter peg it where 'e stood.

Ode Jonah died a'wairkin',  
'Is graise-pot in 'is 'ond.  
'E'd taught we blokes a lesson  
As we cud understand.

The wairld keeps on a 'tairnin'  
An' never meks a sound;  
It's thanks ter blokes like Jonah,  
Wot keeps it gooin' round.

*Back to a foundry this time – the 1972 poem from “From under the smoke”, “**Derelict foundry**” – a haunting description of a dying industry, and a glimpse of Jones’ religious faith.*

The foundry, vast in its desolation, is haunted  
With the hollow murmurs of departed time.  
Grey phantoms of waning light  
Move fitfully across the dusty floor.  
Echoes from the past  
Seem to linger where the rusting girders  
Thrust into the distant roof,  
And there is that yearning emptiness  
One finds in vacant places  
Where men once lived and toiled together.

Could one share in this unconsecrated air,  
A feeling of sanctity,  
As in some cool and spacious church,  
Where the deepest passions of the soul  
Have risen, blended and distilled?  
For here there is no altar,  
No stained-glass saint, no clean white stone;  
Yet suddenly, one feels constrained to kneel  
In the gray sand and flaking rust.  
And sense a superb fitness in the fact  
That one should feel His presence here,  
Amidst this mass of ruinous gear  
Where once men wrought with glowing steel,  
Defined its shape on lathe and wheel,  
And rich in strength made richer still,  
The spirit of toil, the power of skill.



## Black Country People – the social environment

*Now we move on to consider a number of Jim Jones portraits of Black Country folk. We begin with Emma reading “**Big George the striker**”.*

When ar wuz a kid ar'd goo down the forge,  
Ter tek me dad's dinner, and' ter see Big George;  
Theer wuz six mighty anvils set theer in a row,  
Six great big fires as 'ud quickly blow,  
Inta such a rairdiant 'ell-fiyer 'eat,  
As the sweat 'ud squeeze out from yer yed ter yer feet.

It 'ud run dahn the fairces o' them as med chairne,  
And' drap off theyre noses agen an' agen,  
As they plucked out the iron from bairnin' red gleeds,  
An' the scairle 'ud fly out like bright hosted beads,  
When the 'ommers cum dahn wi' a smakettysmack;  
Them wun good days fer me an' ar wish they wuz back.

Big George the striker, 'e'd gor' arms like logs,  
All 'airy an' brown, an' 'e weared moleskin togs;  
'E swung a great 'ommer ah tho' it wor theer,  
An' manny's the time ar've felt full o' fear,  
As the yed might fly off an' knock some'dy flat,  
But George wor a mon ter dew annythin' like that.

'E yewsed ter remind me o' that bloke nairm Thor,  
As we lairned on at schewl, bur' ar do'e know wot for,  
Yo' know, 'irn as throwed a big 'ommer abaht,  
Whenever 'e'd gorra sort somebody out,  
Big George wuz like Thor in 'is figga an' fairce,  
Bur' 'is 'ommer wor magic an' stopped in its plairce.

'E'd stewp dahn an' tickle me under me chin,  
Wi' them great 'onds of 'is, an' then 'e'd begin  
A' strikin' the links while 'is mairte 'eld 'em fast,  
An' ar'd watch the bright fragmints o' scairlie flying past.  
An' then 'e'd say 'P'raps when yo' grow up yo'll be  
A mon as meks chairn like yer fairther an' me! '

But when ar growed up ar went tew a schewl  
Wot taiched me tew act like a gent ( or a fewl);  
Annyroad, if ar'd wanted ter wairk meckin' chairn,  
I 'ad'na the strength nor the pluck, 'cos it's plairn,  
Yo'n gorra be born a reel mon fer that job,  
Yo' do'e need smart clothes nor a posh-spaikin' gob.

Now them wun the days when o'de England wuz great;  
'Cos men 'a' ter wa:irk then fer wot they got t'ate,  
An' wot's mooer they took a reel pride in theyre wairk,  
Big George wud a'thought it a crime jus' ter shairk.  
We do'e see 'is sort in ower country terday,  
They wantin' saft jobs now, but double the pay.

Big George 'ad retired when ar growed tew a mon,  
When ar sid 'im agen well, it put me one on,  
'E wuz on'y a lickle chap abaht five foot eight,  
An' me six foot tew-well, ar felt pretty great,  
Till ar looked at 'is 'onds an' 'is fairce, then ar sid,  
'E still wuz the giant, and' me still the kid.

*And now a recollection of a character from Jones' youth "**Night Watchman**".*

Night watchman of old,  
Watching the night go by,  
Full of spangling stars in a big sky,  
Or the moon bouncing through clouds;  
Keeping your red lamps trim,  
Guarding a hole in the road,  
In case it got stolen,  
Or sneakily filled in.  
Or (more sensibly),  
To avoid accident  
To unwary passers-by;  
Your brazier firmly aglow  
Boisterous with sparks.

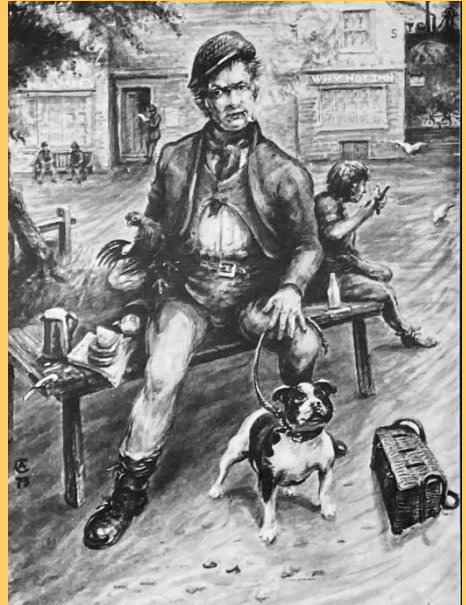
Beyond its radiance  
You sat, illumined  
In your little box,  
Like some sacred Buddha  
Framed in wood,  
Bound for Nirvana  
With your hands on your belly;  
Lulled by the night sounds,  
You dozed and dreamed.

Then in the mornings,  
Stirring your fire aflame  
With a scrubbed shovel,  
Cooking bacon and egg  
On its hot iron blade,  
Sending up food-fragrance  
To mouth-water the air:  
The sweet aroma of tobacco,  
Smoked with old fashioned relish  
In a good brier pipe.

All this made  
The hole in the road  
A pleasure to endure  
These days most likely,  
You would be attacked,  
Beaten up, your lamps smashed,  
Your simple life made miserable,  
By a strange new breed  
You would never have understood;  
You were beloved of children;  
You brought a homely excitement  
To our street,  
For which, my memory, thanks you.

*Now a poem that appeared on a Black Country Society Christmas Card of 1980, a commentary on the picture on the front of the card shown below - “**The Sportsman**”.*

Sportsmen all,  
Man, beast and bird;  
Girth and grit,  
Muscle of resolution;  
Iron jaw,  
Fang and claw;  
Born in the iron echo  
Of the foundry's din  
The engine's beat:  
Fire and flame  
Is the surge of their game,  
Animal power,  
Primitive lust for blood  
Stirs their ferocious pride.  
A violent trinity –  
The man, their manipulator,  
Their urge, their driving force,  
Their mentor:  
They, his children,  
His champions,  
They are his challenge  
To the world,  
His fight against life



*Now a morning poem – an evocative description of the Black Country and its people coming to life on a Monday morning. “**Morning images**”. The morning is one of the main themes in Jones’ poetry and clearly held a special fascination for him.*

Upright smoke  
Hunches its shoulders under a raw sky:  
Silver roofs are sweating and steaming -  
Reflecting the pewter matt finish  
Of secretive sun-peering light  
Tangled in threadbare clouds.

Traffic sucks and puffs and scrapes;  
People come shuffling in  
Tap-dancing their routine  
On a pavement stage:  
Smiling their artificial Monday smiles,  
Talking their artificial Monday talk:  
They slow to a kind of martial walk  
At the High Street check point -  
Tesco corner, the Woolworth Wall,  
Office, banks, market hall -  
Damp awning over stripey stalls  
Sagging like cold udders of striped cows  
Dripping watery milk on to cold hands:

The pace of the crowds  
Has become funereal,  
A procession of doom  
Out for a day's death of the soul -  
The office prisoner,  
The shop fawn,  
Production liners so forlorn.  
A sweating tea shop slave  
A labourer digging his grave,  
Sick money-gleaners finger licking  
Notes and coins; chinking pockets,  
Smoking 'revenue' mixture rolled in Bank paper,  
Coughing out copper breath  
And blowing silver down their noses.

Then come the slack-eyed office cleaners  
Smelling of mops and slops and table-tops  
And polish sprayed under their arms.



*More somberly – a reminder of the reality of childhood mortality in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, as seen from the 1980s. “**A child’s grave in Gornal**” The picture is of a graveyard in Gornal, that made the news recently because of its overgrown state.*

An old jam jar  
Holds a few battered daffodils  
And two shrivelled sills  
Of frost-bitten green;  
And the stones are green  
In the crumbling wall:

An infant’s grave....  
It seems to rock  
In the biting breath  
Of bitter winter’s lingering death;  
Only an illusion:  
It is the pitiful flowers that rock  
In the glass jar’s jellied slime;

A tiny grave...

From those old times,  
Framed with bits of old brick,  
And littered with old stalks  
Of long-forgotten flowers;  
Sixty years they say  
Since this infant passed away:  
His short life  
Was in a day  
When poverty held sway,  
And disease stalked  
Where children played and walked  
And ran in and about  
This Gornal street.

A lonely man....

Eighty-two now,  
Remembers the young boy,  
And comes stealthily,  
Out of the shadows of day,  
With his wistful flowers:  
And as the light vanishes,  
The cold muffling darkness,  
Seems a huge and crying thing.

*In the latter part of the last century, the wind down of industry, at first slowly and then dramatically, led to many losing their long-held jobs, and of course much more besides. Jones describes the human cost in another ballad that Emma will read “**Unimplied**”.*

The chap wot lives jus' ower the road  
'As cum 'um from wairk in 'is car,  
'E's rubbin' 'is 'onds theer an' lookin' all smug,  
Now 'e's lightin' a tupp'ny cigar;  
'Is missus, all smilin', 'as cum ter the dooer,  
'Is kids am theer all overjiyed;  
Ar feel as ar've cum ter the end o' the road,  
'Cos fer three wicks now, ar'm unimplied.

The boss, 'e sent fer me. " Jack!" 'e says,  
" 'Ow lung 'an yer wairked fo' we now?"  
Why neely ten 'ear!" ar says, " Why dun yer ask?"  
"Well, it's like this," 'e says, spakin' slow,  
We'm 'avin' ter cut down-yo' know 'ow things bin?  
Soo it means yo' 'avin' the sack;  
Ar'm sorry, o'de tairter that it's cum ter this,  
Bur' it aye nuthin' pairsonal Jack!"

'E gid me me cards all stamped up right,  
A fine testimonial an' all;  
Ar cum 'um ter fairce me dear missus 'an kids,  
But me back wuz right up ter the wall;  
When yo'm forty-eight yo'm an o'de moo these days,  
Soo it's 'ard ter ger' a good job,  
An' when they keep sayin' " We want yunger men!"  
Well, it's jus' like a punch in the gob.

Ar never thought as ar'd cum ter this,  
A' skulkin' about wi'out wairk.  
Ar've never bin rodney, like some blokes ar know,  
An' it's brought me right up wi' a jairk.  
'Cos theer's manny a yung moo wot wairked 'long o' me,  
Wot femaiged, an' wuz 'bolshi' an' all,  
An' these wun the ones wot wun gid the bes' jobs,  
While the likes o' me went ter the wall.

Ar've alliz bin a machine-tewl mon,  
Apprenticed ar was fer fower 'ear,  
Theer's nob'dy cud dew mar job better ner me,  
But theer's som'dy 'ull 'ave it ar fear.  
An' ar back yo' it's one o' these 'ere ' bolshi ' kids.  
As doe care a damn fer the fairm,  
Wot'll coj the job annyroad jus' fer doe,  
An' then goo on strike jus' fer a gairme.

Ar wunder whether tryin' yer best,  
An' strivin' ter dew a good job,  
Is reely the way ter ger' on in this life,  
When the plums goo ter some rodney slob,  
As leans on 'is yewnion ter ger' 'im off ' Scot,'  
If 'e gets sacked fer dewin' bad wairk,  
Then praiches o' rights fer the wairkers an' that,  
Which is note but the jam wi'out cairke.

Me wife an' kids aye goona goo short,  
Soo ar doe care wot job ar dew;  
Tho' it seems a wairste as a mon wi' mar skill,  
'As ter stond in the unimpliyed queue;  
This country is gooin' ter the dogs ter be shewer,  
An' the trend on it's cum from outside,  
Ar feel as we'm near ter the end o' the line,  
When the likes o' me get's unimpliyed.

The chap wot lives jus' over the road  
'As cum 'um from wairk in 'is car,  
'E's rubbin' 'is 'onds theer an' lookin' all smug,  
Now 'e's lightin' a tupp'ny cigar;  
Bur' 'e's got blewin' munny ter bairn,  
It shewer meks me think, tho' ar've raiched forty-eight,  
As ar've got such a lot ar con !aim.

That car 'e drives 'ull want a new clutch,  
An' 'is M.O.T.'s about dew,  
Ar reckon ar'll 'a'ter goo'n gie 'im a nudge,  
Else 'e'll find as 'e'll be in the stew;  
Yo'n gorra dew summat when the days am ser lung,  
'Cos yo' cor sit about an' jus' pine,  
An' besides that it giz me a chawnce agen,  
T'ave a look at the car as wuz mine.

## Black Country Places – the Built Environment

*Moving on now to Jones' description of Black Country places, we first hear "**Black Country Slaughterhouse**". I don't know to which slaughterhouse it refers – either Marsh and Baxter's in Brierley Hill or, probably more likely, Palethorpes in Dudley Port.*

The executioners bestride the road,  
Their white gowns flecked with blood,  
Their arms are thick and dark with hair,  
Swift in movement, eyes aware,  
As they form their grisly barrier  
Across a sunlit morning street  
Slowing the tramp of morning feet;  
Halting the rumble and the rhyme  
Of wheels, with the imminence of blood.

The smells of death and cringing fear  
And fleshly rottenness are here.  
Intermingling in the air  
We breathe its odour with despair,  
And retch in our souls' clean depths,  
For the carnivorous strain  
That keeps us on our carnal plain  
Of hungering for fresh killed meat  
And the salt-sweet taste of blood.

Now the doomed herd tumbles forth  
In close packed hordes of jostling pink,  
Squealing, leaping on each other,  
Running the rubber-booted gauntlet  
Of those white-gowned, blood-flecked giants  
Who crouch and weave; and flex  
Their hairy arms like trees in wind.  
Watching for the pig with shifty eye  
Who might espy an opening and fly  
Blind with fear into the watching street,  
To dodge the wheel and crowding feet  
And seek escape, he knows not where,  
Nor why!

When they are gone, or life moves on;  
Forgetting soon, the tragedy we looked upon.  
Nor could we ever comprehend  
The blind unreasoning race to death  
Of pigs, whose tiny, pink-toed feet  
Ran fearfully across a sunlit street



*The next poem is entitled “**Closing of Trinity Church – Great Bridge**”, in which Jim Jones Christian faith is made explicit. But it also speaks to the importance of non-conformity in the history of the Black Country up to the middle of the last century, and describes a common pain felt by church members on the closure of their church.*

There was a day  
When this old building  
Rang with song,  
And mighty was the throng  
That came to hear the Word  
Preached with fervour and devotion

As in that other time,  
On a mighty wind  
The tongues of flame fell here,  
And found in many hearts  
A place in which to burn.

What do we learn  
From looking now  
Upon its desolation?  
Has God closed its doors,  
And shuttered up its windows  
In despair?

Ask yourself....!  
Does a seed  
Sown in fertile soil  
Cease to grow  
Because a door is shut somewhere  
Or here and there  
A stone may crumble?

Man cannot board God up  
Or bury him in dust,  
Or sell him out to commerce.

Trinity is closed!  
But God has gone His way  
About the streets of Tipton,  
Large and powerful  
In the hearts of men  
To grow, and thrive, and speak again.

*Now Emma will read to us “**Park Lane (Tipton)**”. The picture shows Park Lane school on an old postcard.*

You'll see no top hats here,  
Unless someone is getting spliced,  
And even then . . . a trilby or a cap  
Perhaps ! But like as not, no hat at all;  
Just hair, shifting in the breeze,  
And the bridegroom steadying his knees,  
While someone quips 'Yo've dun it now!'

You'll see no Bentleys here!  
Drawing up in the silent hours,  
With bejewelled occupants, sable wrapped,  
Fresh from the theatre or some Ritzy bar,  
Slightly tipsy with champagne;  
But, in the rain, there may be seen,  
Some lovelorn chap, walking with his queen

You'll get no caviar here!  
'Who wants it annyroad ? ' they'd say,  
'That Russian stuff! 'Ar've 'ad enuff o' that,  
Aforer ar try it! Gi' me fish and' chips  
Or peas; pigs puddin' or cheese,  
Good 'olesome fittle, that's what we like,  
But caviar . . . ar'd goo on strike!'

You'll find no hotels here!  
A pub or two, with lots of beer,  
And lively talk... some warm and friendly folk,  
A church, with clean cut spire; a school,  
Some shops; nothing to call fine.  
But east or west, this Park Lane is mine!  
One feels significant down here.

*And now a wholly realistic and unsentimental description of the grime and muck that defined so much of the Black Country in its late industrial days. “**Milltown Waterways**”.*

I, standing on iron bridges,  
Dream of clean rushing waters,  
Washing black rocks with white spume;  
Born in mountain fastnesses  
Where the sky touches the earth,  
Leaping to lower reaches,  
Through sun-drenched glades  
Redolent with pure nature,  
Lively mirror for coloursapes,  
Held in the heart of England.

I, standing on iron bridges,  
See oil and rust and flotsam,  
Languidly blending in swirls,  
After the passage of laden barges;  
Sullen green water lacking life,  
Stealing movement from wind  
Or the passing pull of craft;  
Mirror for drab landscapes;  
Foul grave, in lonely reaches,  
For discarded rottenness and filth.

*The closure of the Blast Furnace Elizabeth in 1977 made a strong impression on many in the Black Country and seemed to speak of the finality of the death of the iron industry. Jim Jones writes in the introduction to his poem "**Death of a Blast Furnace**" in Jim and Kate from 1986.*

The closure of British Steel Works, Bilston (formerly Alfred Hickman's and after that Stewarts and Lloyds) was a great blow to the Black Country. This poem was written on the day the great Blast Furnace "Elizabeth" was demolished by explosives.

*Emma reads "**Death of a Blast Furnace**".*

Another landmark gone –  
Toppled over like a dyin' mon  
Blasted ter the ground.  
With never a sound  
Except – the sickenin' rumble  
Of a giant's tumble,  
Meckin' the earth shudder.

What a landmark it was an' all  
Towerin' its awesome might,  
Seetin' out fire at night  
Shimmerin' wi' fervent heat,  
Meckin' dwarfs o' men roun' its feet:  
Spewin' out sun-bright spanglin' steel,  
Wot 'ad the feel of hell as it passed yer by  
Meckin' a path wi' its own inner thunder.

The nearby chindey stacks,  
Like soljers wi' drill-stiff backs  
Havin' a quiet smoke:  
A loff an' a joke  
While the gaffer wor a lookon'  
Leanin' on the blue sky  
While summer went sneakin' by

'Elisabeth' mar wench,  
Yo'm all smoshed up –  
Yo' never thought in yo're young days  
As it 'ud come ter this;  
Well, ar never did anyroad,  
But ar'm thankful ar knowed yer  
An' thankful ar showed yer  
Ter mar kids, afore yo' died.  
Bilston wo' be the sairme  
Wi'ot the splendour of yo're mighty frairme.

*Our final poem “**Across the Leas**” from the Blackcountryman of 1989, reflects on the trauma of the industrial decline of that decade and contains for me an unforgettable description of the Black Country as a sick dog, lying down, no fight left.*

In the night  
You would hear the big steam trains  
Shouting to one another  
Across the leas.  
And the bark of their funnels  
As they strained  
At the snake-line of singing trucks  
Loaded with coal, pig-iron,  
Sheet steel from the mills.

In those days  
The Black Country was an ‘empire’  
Of industry; fire and smoke,  
Iron and steel,  
The wrenching of coal from deep earth,  
And limestone  
For the flux of boiling furnaces;  
Foundries, rolling mills; big men  
Grappling with great power.



And women,  
Aproned in sacking, head-tied.  
Tough as the men they married,  
Working as hard,  
And bearing crowds of children,  
Some to die  
In the constant battle to survive  
In the boxy cottages, back-to-back  
Sometimes six to a bed.

In the night  
You would see, like an early dawn,  
A yawning glow of red fire  
Across the leas;  
And hear the heart-beat booming  
Of pistons.  
Thrusting great wheels and heavy rolls;  
And the furnaces puking  
Their radiant vomit out.

In those days  
Factory sirens would start the day  
In grand symphonic manner;  
What wondrous notes!  
With the sun's baton beating  
And the sky  
Shouting 'bravo', with clapping clouds  
Giving standing ovations  
From the galleries of heaven.

In these days  
The Black country is lying down  
Like a sick dog, no fight left:  
Iron and steel -  
The dribblings of an old tack tin;  
Crumbs of fire  
From the kicked ashes of bygone days;  
Foundries, rolling mills, all dead,  
Like the men who gave them life.

And there we end, hopefully having given you a different kind of historical view of the Black Country environment. We have only used a small sub set of Jones' poetry of course, and the range of his work is much greater than that we have covered. Should you be interested in looking at more of his poems then "From under the smoke" and "Factory and Fireside" are available as free pdfs to Society members on the Society web site, together with a pdf of a compilation I have produced that includes some of the poems first published in the Blackcountryman. Alternatively, if you aren't a member, each of these can be purchased for £5 from the Society online shop, or £10 for all three.