

On Tuesday night we launched the 150th year of the Durham Miners' Association and the Redhills Appeal.

I think some of you were there.

It was a wicked night in many senses.

The weather must have been reminiscent of the chill November 20th 1869 when four good men met in the Market Tavern to form the DMA.

The conviviality and sense of purpose also, hopefully, rekindled their spirit.

Redhills – which houses the Pitman's Parliament – is a spiritual place – whether you are a person of faith or none.

Its acoustic echoes the ghost voices of the union men who achieved so much.

Its beautifully crafted wooden seats bear the numbers of the delegate's lodge – each one representing a colliery and community.

There are 298 of them in the Pitman's Parliament.

Murton 1
Langley Park 84
Easington 153
Dean and Chapter 142

And so on and so on.

From those seats those union men took decisions which changed the face of Victorian capitalism and socialised County Durham in a way unparalleled in any other coalfield.

They built welfare halls, where bands played, people danced and plays were performed.

They built reading rooms and libraries.

They sponsored and supported so many forms of cultural endeavour.

So, as we say, the past we inherit, the future we build.

On Tuesday night the assembly heard the DMA give a pledge.

A pledge to return Redhills – and all that it stands for – to the people of County Durham.

To the people whose grandfathers and great-grandfathers paid for it through their penny and ha'penny subscriptions.

Above the entrance to the Pitman's Parliament the licence for music and performance is proudly written up in an artisan's sign-writing.

It is a portent of things past and those to come.

The aim is to restore Redhills and build a new modern wing – to unlock the potential of this magnificent building.

We need for flexible for practice, performance and meeting space.

We've spent the last year testing the building and we know the roof leaks!

It looked brilliant lit up at Lumiere.

We hosted some sparkling prose for the Durham Book festival

We've sold out concerts and film showings.

We've staged avante-garde sax player Soweto Kinch.

We've shown the Sir Bobby Robson film More than a Manager.

We've hosted the punk folk phenomenon Richard Dawson

And we've brought back the brass band Christmas concert.

We now know that people will come to Redhills – in their hundreds.

The people of the county are now using Redhills for its intended purpose.

To practice, perform, make and learn about the rich heritage of our people.

It's richer than any of us now, I suspect.

As well as the known pitman poets, such as Tommy Armstrong, and the world famous marches of the Shildon brass composers, more hidden culture is coming up the shaft.

Alexander Barrass for one – down South Moor pit aged 8, worked as a sinker – the most dangerous job in the world – autodidact, except for Sunday school – spent his last 20 years of life in Winterton asylum in Sedgefield – writing the most mellifluous poetry.

One of his works – the Pitman's Social Neet – is on file in the Bri6iush Library.

How many of us have heard of him?

Barrass is just one example of the culture we need to resurrect, champion and build upon.

Then there's our very visible culture – the 27 brass bands of County Durham, the youth bands and the banner groups.

The latter fund themselves, There are 60 of them who raise the money to restore banners or make new ones. They work the year round to bring the bands and banners in to the Gala.

They've made it bigger than Glastonbury and bring an estimated £10 million to the city every second weekend in July.

They've kept it alive – the biggest celebration of working class and community values in the world.

Redhills and the DMA support of this wonderful endeavour.

Now we want to take it to the next level with the building becoming the focus and locus of our indigenous cultural and heritage development.

We've got some growing support from the cultural partnerships of the county and beyond.

The V&A is backing us and Historic England has voted Redhills in the top 100 of irreplaceable places.

We'd like to take a lesson out of the Celtic Fringe book.

Back in the 1970's the Irish saved the traditional music and culture from the sea of Brendan Shine and country and western.

The '80's saw the Scots rescue their dignity and heritage from cheap tartan, Edinburgh rock and shortbread (well almost).

We need to do the same. We have a deep, rich vein of art, music, textiles and the spoken word.

A people's culture to be proud of.

Redhills, hopefully, can play its part...

We're chasing a £5million funding – roughly a 1000th of the refurbishment bill for the other parliament cited as irreplaceable – the Palace of Westminster.

We'll get there.

After 150 years it feels like we're just making a start.

The past we inherit, the future we build.