

Hi, I'm Henry. This is a piece called We Don't Know How To Talk To Each Other.

[Henry's voice]

I've never been good at nattering, to be honest  
But I'm good at listening,  
Hearing all about what pieces make up the picture  
And what might be missing.  
I could give you a drawn out weaving speech  
Like the River Tees through green  
Or build up a story of my own walled-up home  
Add my own path-level sheen.  
I'll be honest, between you and me,  
I'm not great at chats  
I leave that for other people with back-and-forth skills  
I just listen and scratch  
Conversations into the pages of my mind  
Or pages of my notebook

I've never been great with neighbours  
Though I like to think I'm neighbourly  
But I like to think, in my own way  
With my own round-the-houses brain  
I'm OK at community  
I never quite managed the over-the-washing line conversation  
With gossip-dripping  
But I know the effects of a connection rippling.  
Where someone knows someone else who went through the same  
Where people nod and remember stories at the drop of a name  
Half-remembered details of the last time we hung out  
And the pubs and clubs and parks and markets marking  
The call to come out.  
So let's party!

[Henry's voice with construction work in the background]

It's not too big and not too small. We're a Goldilocks town. We're Northern but not brazen, we're tough but not unbreakable. Former Port town now people come for water sports from all around.

I don't care what anyone says there are a lot of positive things about this town. The critics can say their muddy words, squelch up flecks of problems, flecks of issues.

I wish there were more big shops. Things will happen. I'm an optimist. I have to be, or otherwise this town would be too small. But it's always evolving. It's sometimes quiet, sometimes has the chug of machines knocking around building. It's not a blink-and-you'll miss it town, it's a "oh, when did that get decided?" place. It's the sort of place that, if you know it well enough, you'll spot the changes over time. Good or bad, you'll spot them.

Things are looking up. I'm looking forwards. There's a new urban park. There's the future. We've been around a while, through other eras and industries and wars and other ways of working in this world. Let's see where this town goes next.

Look at that river, it's beautiful. It illuminates my day. They can chip away and knock down and do us down, but every day I see that water on the last sprint of its journey. 85 miles is a long trek from the Pennines, looping like a dancer through the North. It neatly bumps up from the south side of the town. A gentle nudge in the side that says, "hey, I'm here." Then skirts past Middlesbrough and splashes into the North Sea. Things work.

Have you heard of the Battle of Stockton?

[A woman's voice]

You could feel it in the air. It was like something was ready to spark off, like a simmering flame before you throw in some more coal. The Blackshirts were coming to Stockton.

I heard it first from Peggy next door, she's heard from Mrs. Cohen down the road. Jack came home from the meeting saying the same. Jack was full of it, waving

his paper around. "It's the same as Berlin!" he was raving. "Same as Rome! They start in the streets" he said "then they take power." I sat him down with a cup of tea. Not here, Jack, I promised him.

[Henry's voice with construction work in the background]

They are knocking down all the listed buildings. The Rookery set sail last decade, and capsized and sank. The Swallow Hotel fluttered away. The Castlegate Shopping Centre is being besieged. The castle will fall, tumble like some fantasy film.

It used to be thriving. Things were kicking off. It was a town people visited, whether to work or play. Maybe some of them stayed, maybe not. But we were on the map. Plans get made, and press releases trumpet the latest future we're offered.

The smell of oily machines seem to invade this town. High-vis and multiplying orange cones and Hard Hat Zones. Bulldozers roving around like great, metal hounds. Loose and savage, battering down the walls of my town. I hear the words "radical rethink" and I think the town might sink under this weight of redesigners and redevelopers and wheels of HGVs.

But then plans get abandoned. People get abandoned. I'm sorry if I sound cynical. Actually, no, I'm not. I've learned a bit of suspicion. I'd love to be proven wrong.

Have you heard of the Battle of Stockton?

[Lisette's voice]

It was the usual breezy September Sunday. The streets felt quiet. It had been quiet those last 4 years since the slump, but today maybe felt like a secret was being pressed into chests. Then they came in on coaches. I counted around 100 of them, the British Union of Fascists they called themselves, all looking like horrible devils in their pitch black uniforms.

One of them stretched his legs, took a stroll up to me and Jack like we were old friends. “Long trip from Manchester” he said, casual as-you-like. “You marching with us?” he asked Jack. I could tell Jack’s fists were rumbling for a fight, so I stuck my nose in, asked this man why he was marching. The things he said, about foreigners, about power, about the Jews, I’ll not repeat here.

Well, thank God we didn’t have to listen for long, because all around us people had started shouting, yelling, jostling the Blackshirts. They all rallied together, like a herd of black sheep, and made their way down the High Street, towards the Town Hall. One of them got out a loud hailer and tried to speak. They did all their silly salutes like a daft dance.

But by then, Market Cross was packed with people, my friends, my neighbours, shouting down the fascists. Booing and jeering, words you shouldn’t hear on a Sunday. I joined in with my best insults. I don’t think Jack had ever heard that language in my mouth before, bless him.

[Henry’s voice with construction work in the background]

This is a lovely open town.

Just don’t stay staring at the surface. Splash in and see what the water’s like.

But people are struggling. They say tight times but when do those times end? Eras last a long time, and you can only struggle for so long. If you ask me, there are no jobs, there aren’t enough police and things are not equal.

There are always going to be critics. They talk us down. They say we get by. They say we survive. That’s what change is about. Surviving. But what use are our embered lives just flickering from one slog to the next? On the surface we nod and even smile at one another and crack on. And then people write articles and make soundbites about our resilience to nod and smile and crack on.

There is a lot of poverty. The stats say it all. The sights say it all. Just talk to someone, just listen. If you need help, I can reel off a Food Bank list off the top of my head. 4-6 West Precinct. Hebron Church. Hardwick Road. Imperial Avenue. I

always remember the quote: "What kind of drug dealer would swap drugs for a tin of beans or pasta? It's just not true."

Things are not equal.

Have you heard of the Battle of Stockton?

[Lisette's voice]

They broke ranks and legged it down Silver Street, but we had them pinned and bubbling, like a kettle left too long.

We chucked things at them, and I managed to clock a couple with stones. I saw someone squeezing razor blades into potatoes and lob them at the fascists. I thought: what a waste of good potatoes.

Eventually they hopped off to the Thornaby side of Victoria Bridge, escaping onto their coaches. They should have just gone to Whitley Bay for a paddle instead.

And we all just went home, or to the pub, or off to work. We just got on with things. Over the years I heard they tried the same in Worthing, Rhondda, Leeds, London, all over. Jack would come home from the meetings, with his paper, proving the rumours were true. Now Spain's gone the same as Germany and Italy.

Jack wants to be a hero. I don't know what to tell him. It's one thing to boo and spit down the Blackshirts, another to pick up a rifle in a foreign land. I'll ask around. Talk to Peggy, see what the neighbours reckon.

[Henry's voice]

Be kind.

It's what I've tried to live by. And many other people too.

Kindness sometimes lacks a bite, and I like snapping back too.

I like sharpness and I'll take rough over smooth

I'm sorry if I upset you.

I'm listening, and sometimes that's a kindness.

It requires a decent stoking of trust.  
I was offered two words: Don't resist  
My stomach recoils like a snakey hiss  
Coiled and defensive, rearing to bite  
I love resisting, but I'm also listening.  
So I won't resist these conversations  
These statements of truth, dredged from  
Deep chats and rants brewing beneath the surface.  
We don't know how to talk to each other  
I have been trying to learn my whole life.  
Learning how a conversation ebbs and flows  
Like a river through town-to-town to sea  
Or a town seeing new eras and ages and plans.  
I guess my brain is built a certain way  
And change is complex, but change happens  
In lots of ways, overnight and overtime  
Over conversations and over cups of tea  
Over to you and over to me  
And we walk away different people.  
Or definitely even more that exact same person.  
Be kind.

We Don't Know How To Talk To Each Other was commissioned by the ARC Theatre & Arts Centre, inspired by the words of the residents of Stockton-on-Tees. It was written by Henry Raby, featuring the voices of Henry and Lisette Auton.