

A political party to which we're all invited

There are tasks towards which we trudge a little gracelessly, impelled more by duty than passion. Of such a nature seemed my undertaking to travel to Manchester last Friday to open an exhibition of British political posters at the People's History Museum.

How wrong I was. This is the most amazing exhibition, now open until June: party propaganda since 1886, visually stunning, hitting you — each era in its own way — right between the eyes. Some are crude (a strong strand of xenophobia runs through the centuries). Some early Labour posters are beautifully and movingly drawn. And there's marvellous trivia: an amateurish sketch for a window poster for the tiny minority of Labour supporters who then had TV sets, inviting in passers-by to watch a Labour Party political broadcast. The sketch's draughtsman was a young Mr Anthony Wedgwood Benn.

I made my speech, pointing out that I am not (as the museum had at first

believed) among the queue of supposedly unemployed people in the famous 1979 "Labour Isn't Working" poster, and then the organisers took me downstairs to the museum's archive. A treasure trove. I saw the Labour minister Judith Hart's 1966 handwritten letter of resignation (over Rhodesia) — torn in half and never submitted; a young Mr Anthony Blair's toe-curling 18-page handwritten "gizza job" letter to the Labour leader, Michael Foot; and Mr Foot's kindly note penned to Margaret Thatcher when her son Mark was lost in the Sahara.

And did you know that the first draft of Labour's 1945 manifesto contained only two sentences about a national health service?

'Ello 'ello yet again

To the Peak District the same night, to speak at the Baslow Association for the Prosecution of Felons' 218th annual dinner. Formed in 1793 as a volunteer police force for the village, this is one of a handful still surviving from an age when there were thousands across England. They don't patrol these days: they just dine — for charity.



Over the treacle tart I observed that now we're in the Big Society, the BAPF should consider resuming constabulary duties.

Relegation (2)

At nine the next morning a photographer arrived from *Tatler* for a portrait photo of Darren, the llama. The magazine, having read of Darren in this column, has interviewed him already (they sent me the questions and I wrote down Darren's answers) and he is to appear in their series on celebrity animals.

"Shall I move closer in?" I asked, holding Darren's halter.

"No, we only want Darren," said the photographer. "But don't worry: we can airbrush you out."

A fortnight ago I lamented being overtaken by my partner on a Sunday paper's Pink List of influential gays. Now I've been eclipsed by my own pet. I'm merely a llama's amanuensis.

Shaft of light

And then on Sunday to an unexpected discovery in Staffordshire Moorlands. It's perfectly well known, of course, that copper was mined in Britain for thousands of years until the last century; and I did

know there was an old mine on a hill above the River Manifold. Friends I knew someone at the admirable Ecton Mine Educational Trust said she would take me down. Probably a few primitive and shallow excavations in a hillside, I thought — the helmets, lanterns and gloves for descending ladders struck me as overkill.

Primitive? Shallow? This mostly 18th-century mine is deep, massive and astonishingly ambitious. The mine shaft proceeds from just below the summit of Ecton Top, vertically down about 300ft right inside the hill until it reaches river level, where horizontal tunnelling gives access to the river banks.

It then proceeds — get this — another 1,000ft down (to below sea level) in what is now a flooded vertical shaft. In all directions there are tunnels and chambers (one housed a huge steam engine deep inside the hill). Everything is bored through soft rock or laboriously lined in internal arched limestone. The Dukes of Devonshire made squillions from the mine; how many died inside that hill?

Finding two £20 notes in my pocket I gave them to Lisa of the charitable trust, as a donation. "Oh how kind," she said. "People generally give us about £5. Three big mining houses used each to give us £3,000 a year, but two have pulled out now. We struggle."

Hey, come on, boys! Mineral prices hit new highs in the past few years. What would a few thousand pounds do to you for the preservation of this priceless monument to mining history?