

THE LAND OF LOST CONTENT

or

**A Journey Through the Country
Formerly Known as England**

1

Introduction

Making a journey through a country to discover it is a well-worn genre which began in England, in recorded form, towards the end of the 17th century perhaps because of a curiosity about a country which was beginning to change from a medieval to a burgeoning pre-industrial society. The best-known of these is Daniel Defoe who, in 1724 published his *Tour through the Whole Island of Great Britain* in which his choice of 'the Whole' seems a touch partial. Even so, Defoe did get around and he will be quoted here. The same is bound to be true of any of the subsequent tours such as those made by J.B.Priestley, Beryl Bainbridge, H.V.Morton and others. Their common feature is that wherever they get to in their journey, they always start from London. This time, just to be different, we will start from a northern town and we will travel through the northern parts of our country.

The topics which 'tourers' broadly set down include what people seemed to do, what the countryside looked like, various musings on life in general and, most common, the state of the lodgings and meals which were endured or, occasionally, enjoyed. What, after all, can one do in a few hours in a strange place without previous personal contact?

What none of them questioned, what indeed was an implicit assumption that needed no explanation, was the existential reality of the country, England, in which they roamed. Occasional steps into Wales or Scotland might precipitate some comment as to differences which might be ascribed to some loose idea of 'nationality' but so far as England went, nationality was simply a given apart from some difference in local accent or dietary taste. What was fundamental to nearly all accounts was some notion of class even when almost unconscious, a class division most neatly expressed by the other fundamental division that between town, or rather city, and country.

England is not, of course, a state; it is a region within a state albeit one that has a powerful internal belief that it is a nation with a clear and indivisible sense of nationhood.

This assumption that England is one indivisible nation remains so ingrained that it is an effort to realise just how unusual it is in modern Europe. Most large European states accept that they are formed from regions that have such different cultures that they are almost different countries in everything save the political formation. Just how unstable this makes the country varies widely. In Spain, Catalan and Basque independence perpetually hover on the edge of dissolution whilst in France, acceptance of separate national languages from Brittany to Nice to Alsace seem to satisfy most separatist desire. In Belgium, Flemish/Walloon contestation has led almost to the formation of separate countries. The thing that separates England from other large European countries, apart from the fact that it is not a country as state but, politically, a region within a state, albeit the dominant one, is that it has its own creation story based upon conquest. Other European countries tend to accept that they were created by a process of amalgamation or, in the case of some of the smaller countries, by the division of states even though this amalgamation or separation might have been, in part, based on war. England, historically, either conquered all the other constituents of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland or, in the case of Scotland, had a perpetually antagonistic relationship until King James, almost accidentally, brought the two nations together, nations which remain quite distinct.

England's creation story, perhaps myth is better, begins in the marshlands of Somerset where our founder-king hid before starting a long process of creating 'England', first by defeating the Danes at Edlington in 878 and then gradually extending the boundaries of Wessex north and east. His descendants later controlled Mercia, the part of England now broadly called the Midlands, and East Anglia. Getting rid of the Danes in Northumbria, a region much larger than present-day Northumberland, essentially the far-north beyond the River Trent and up to what is now called

Scotland, proved a much more prolonged business and, historically, was accomplished as much by agreed amalgamation as by outright conquest. Even so, the myth asserts that England was created by defeating the Danes. In real history, the Danes never really went away and in fact England was absorbed into the Kingdom of Denmark and Norway after Cnut's successful invasion in 1016 only to revert back to Alfred's descendants in 1042 after a power struggle between Cnut's sons, who all died rather quickly. Cnut himself was buried in the heart of England, Winchester. Ironically, Alfred's bones, once also buried in a church in Winchester have disappeared after several disinterments. What happened to Anglo-Saxon rule after 1066 when England became essentially an appendage of France is well-known. It would be nearly 250 years before England had a king whose first language was English.

Alfred's 'England' lasted a total of about 160 years and never ruled over all of what is now called England. It was preceded by several hundred years of variegated Saxon and Celtic rulers and before that by Rome, an occupation which left a far greater imprint on the lands than anything left by Alfred. Yet it is this legend of Alfred and his resurgence from Athelney which remains the defining moment of English nationalism. Consider this passage from a previous tourer round England, H.V.Morton, whose decidedly over-blown journal remains in print to this day:

I went on, thinking that if one were looking for the germ of the British Empire, it is to be found in this quiet little city of Winchester. The princes of this city emerged as the Kings of Wessex, after their long war with the Danes, and later became the Kings of England; and it was the royal city of Winchester which was truly the heart of England until Westminster Hall and the Abbey gathered around them the royal city of a new England.¹

The founding myth and much of subsequent history provided the basis for the key division of England, a settled heartland in the south and a troublesome north. The journey described here is about the latter so this division needs some thought.

¹ H.V.Morton, *In Search of England*, Methuen, 2013, p.14

2

The Grim North

The first problem is what it is or indeed what to call it other than simply The North. As in "It's Grim Up North" which was a 1991 single by The Justified Ancients of Mu Mu, the main lyrics of which, according to Wikipedia "*consist of a list of towns and cities in the North of England, set to a pounding industrial techno kick beat and percussion reminiscent of steam whistles, all of which segue into an orchestral instrumental of the hymn "Jerusalem". The track reached #10 in the UK Singles Chart.*"² Even this anthem seems uncertain as to just what it refers as the list of towns only goes as far north as York (which few would describe as grim) suggesting that even in Halifax, there are places, such as Newcastle and Sunderland, too grim to mention.

The Romans called it Britannia Inferior then Britannia Secunda, both of which sound familiar, and left it early before their main withdrawal leaving it with a capital city (Eboracum) and some straight roads. The point at which Britannia Inferior began appears to have been the lowest ford across the River Don where they built a fort which they called Doncaster. The Romans left behind various tribes of Hen Ogledd, the Old North, which ran up into southern Scotland, some of whom spoke various forms of Celtic and some in Northumbria, the Angles and the Jutes, speaking Old English. Then came the Danes when in June 8th 793, a raiding party of Vikings from Norway attacked the island monastery of Lindisfarne. Monks fled in fear and many were slaughtered. Bishop Higbald sought refuge on the mainland and a chronicler recorded "*The harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church by rapine and slaughter.*"

Was it these bad boys who first defined the grimness of the North? Certainly they hung around for a long time from around 800 up to 954 when Eric Bloodaxe, who has never received much praise for his kindness, was assassinated up on the moors of Teesdale, and Northumbria became a nominal part of England. It was an invasion by another Danish army which fatally lured Harold north before the defeat of his weary troops at Hastings. After the Normans came, it was the North which provided the main continuing opposition including a Danish army again invading in 1069. William 'harried' the north, starting it seems from the River Aire, reducing much of it to waste and replacing the old earls by his own Norman-French though many of the old laws and customs seem to have carried on. Certainly the language spoken up there would have been unintelligible to English speakers in the south – as it sometimes is today. (The dialect called 'pitmatic' and widely spoken until recently in Northumberland is based upon Norse). When Queen Margaret of Anjou, wife of Henry VI, led a Lancastrian army south in 1460, it was described by anxious Londoners as composed of "saracens and Turks" and certainly they do not seem to have behaved well. The North also provided the main rebels against the new Protestant religion in the Pilgrimage of Grace in 1536 and the rising of the northern earls in 1569.

Indeed in the confused politics of the time, there was uncertainty as to just where England stopped and Scotland began. If the only son of David I, King of Scotland, one Henry, Earl of Northumbria, had not predeceased him in 1152, then Scotland might have begun at the Humber or the Tyne. In Macbeth, written in 1605, Shakespeare allows the Scottish King to dispense both Cumberland and Northumberland as though they were Scottish territory.

These things may have defined a regional split within a country but, of course, what really defined the North was industry and, in particular, coal and the coal-fired mills which moved the North from a remote sheep-rearing moorland into the industrial engine of the country. It was not as though the

² www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwtSdJaPCSI if you are interested



North had lacked wealth. The great churches at Selby, Beverley and York (and for that matter, Doncaster) are evidence of the money which came from the wool from the Yorkshire hills and flowed out, mainly from Hull. Its export financed the Hundred Years War and its size can be seen in the great church of Holy Trinity in Hull built partly of brick brought back as ballast from the Flemish ports. (The true name of Hull is Kingston-on-Hull, the town named by Edward I in 1299 as the port on the Hull where export taxes on Yorkshire wool could be collected). Even in the early part of the 17th century, Defoe describes the West Riding of Yorkshire as full of the various parts of the wool business from the house-weavers of the Calder Valley to the waterways moving the fashioned cloth down to Hull. However, it took the advent of steam-power and the industrialisation of textiles to turn the North into the powerhouse of what, by now, was called Great Britain.

An Australian historian was later to pin down what he termed the Northern and the Southern Metaphors for what made England a nation based, essentially, upon this difference. Donald Horne, who did not think much of England, in 1970 defined these as:

In the Northern Metaphor Britain is pragmatic, empirical, calculating, Puritan, bourgeois, enterprising, adventurous, scientific, serious and believes in struggle. Its sinful excess is a ruthless avarice, rationalised in the belief that the prime impulse in all human beings is a rational, calculating, economic self-interest.

In the Southern Metaphor Britain is romantic, illogical, muddled, divinely lucky, Anglican, aristocratic, traditional, frivolous, and believes in order and tradition. Its sinful excess is a ruthless pride, rationalised in the belief that men are born to serve.³

Horne asserted that it was the Southern Metaphor that decisively won leaving the North as a land of dreary, dark and above all provincial cities. His caustic analysis of Britain in the 1960s includes the

³ Donald Horne, *God is an Englishman*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1970

the following summary of how he believes the southern Upper English, as he calls them, sees the inhabitants of northern industrial cities:

*... 'the natives', uprooted tribesmen piled into their hovels, a dirty, possibly dangerous people who, not understanding the civilisation around them, had to be driven to perform their simple tasks, in their own interest, and in the interest of the greater good they unknowingly served. The inhabitants of the native quarters were sometimes seen as knowing no more of life and wanting nothing more than their simple lot: in which case their deference, whether real or assumed, was praised... At other times the inhabitants of the native quarters were seen as a seething scum, dull-witted savages envying what they could not understand; in that case society was to be protected from their ignorant rapacity.*⁴

Horne, as an Australian, can be forgiven for his jaundiced view but it chimes with another more unexpected opinion of a native Northerner, George Gissing, born in Wakefield and educated in Manchester who wrote in 1903 in the semi-autobiographical *Private Papers of Henry Ryecroft*, that:

*The vigorous race on the other side of the Trent only found its opportunity when the age of machinery began; its civilisation, long delayed, differs in obvious respects from that of older England... The rude man of the north is... just emerged from barbarism, and under any circumstances would show less smooth a front [than the man of the south]. By great misfortune, he has fallen under the harshest lordship the modern world has known - that of scientific industrialism, and all his vigorous qualities are subdued to a scheme of life based upon the harsh, the ugly, the sordid.*⁵

John Wesley wrote of the Calder Valley in West Yorkshire that it was “*the most beautiful valley in England with the most barbarous people*” after he was hit by a stone when preaching in Halifax, this despite the ultimate victory of his nonconformism in the region as seen in its glorious chapels.

In 1981, an American, Martin Wiener, launched another caustic attack on the dominance in Britain of a southern English elite in a rather more focussed way than Horne, blaming what was then seen as Britain's economic failure on the disdain of this elite for any kind of scientific or engineering skills. He traces the rise and ultimate victory of this disdain in number of ways the most striking of which is the use of a rural and implicitly southern metaphor as standing for England. One of the most famous and striking of these is the peroration of a speech by Stanley Baldwin in 1924:

To me, England is the country, and the country is England. And when I ask myself what I mean by England, when I think of England when I am abroad, England comes to me through my various senses — through the ear, through the eye, and through certain imperishable scents. I will tell you what they are, and there may be those among you who feel as I do.

The sounds of England, the tinkle of the hammer on the anvil in the country smithy, the cornrake on a dewy morning, the sound of the scythe against the whetstone, and the sight of a plough team coming over the brow of a hill, the sign that has been seen in England since England was a land, and may be seen in England long after the Empire has perished and every works in England has ceased to function, for centuries the one eternal sight of England. The wild anemones in the woods in April, the last load at night of hay being drawn down a lane as the twilight comes on, when you can scarcely distinguish the figures of the horses as they take it home to the farm, and above all, most subtle, most penetrating and most moving, the smell of wood smoke coming up in an autumn evening, or the smell of the scutch fires: that wood smoke that our ancestors, tens of thousands of years ago, must have caught on the air when they were coming home with the result of the

⁴ *ibid* p. 58

⁵ quoted in Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, CUP 1981

day's forage, when when they were still nomads, still roaming the forests and the plains of the continent of Europe. These things strike down into the very depths of our nature, and touch chords that go back to the beginning of time and the human race, but they are chords that with every years of our life sounds a deeper note in our innermost being....

It is easy enough to mock this language though one should also remember John Major:

Fifty years on from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on cricket grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers and pools fillers and, as George Orwell said, 'Old maids bicycling to holy communion through the morning mist' and, if we get our way, Shakespeare will still be read even in school.

Orwell, another colonial, knew England rather better than Major and a fuller and more accurate quote would be “*The clatter of clogs in the Lancashire mill towns, the to-and-fro of the lorries on the Great North Road, the queues outside the Labour Exchanges, the rattle of pin-tables in the Soho pubs, the old maids hiking to Holy Communion through the mists of the autumn morning*” but it is Major’s emendation which sticks in the mind.

Baldwin, it should be noted, was born into a prosperous family of iron-makers, part of what became Richard Thomas and Baldwin, a company based mainly in Wales and Scunthorpe where loads of hay in the twilight are not easy to find. RTB’s steel plants are now mostly gone as is the smoke in scenes such as these which are certainly not part of Baldwin’s England.

As he himself recognised, much of Horne’s Northern Metaphor is now rendered almost meaningless with its virtues departed with the mills and mines and even its belief in struggle gone except as the struggle to survive without help from the local food-bank.

Just where the North begins is vague, in particular just where the ill-defined Midlands, neither complacent South nor grim North, ends. But we certainly begin in it.





3

A Journey

The Most Beautiful Bus Journey in England

This, of course, essentially doubtful given that I know little about English bus journeys. Perhaps I should read 'an unexpectedly beautiful bus journey' given that it starts in a most inauspicious place, Halifax Bus Station which has a rather grand entrance which soon dips into bus station mundanity.

There is much of this in Halifax, an old town, which has dropped into a pit of obscurity. Once it was a centre for trade and for money. The town received all of the wool of the upper valleys of the Calder and Colne, much in the form of woven 'pieces' or kersey sold at the grand Piece Hall, a trade financed by the banks which proliferated in the town. This, for example is the interior of what is now Lloyds Bank, once the West Yorkshire Bank

Defoe visited Halifax and was much impressed by its vibrant industry as well as being fascinated by its unusual mode of public execution; a kind of weighted axe which used to be found at the top of what is now Gibbet Street. He believed that this machine, introduced to curtail the stealing of the woollen kersey cloth which was traded in the town, gave rise to the proverbial saying:





WAINHOUSE TOWER

*From Hell, Hull and Halifax,
Good Lord deliver us*

though he is unable to account for the inclusion of Hull.

Our journey will start on the 592 to Burnley. If you are lucky it will be a double-decker and you can sit upstairs at the front. You may also be lucky and find a through bus, otherwise you will have to change at Todmorden.

It grinds up the remains of north Halifax until it passes the strange Wainhouse Tower, a huge folly, which is actually a now-disused factory chimney, which was built to this height and with the bizarre addition of two viewing galleries allegedly because a dispute between the factory owner, John Wainhouse, and a neighbouring landowner which had boasted that he had the most private estate in Yorkshire into which no-one could see.

After this the view over rolling upland pasture opens up with, down below, the canal port of Sowerby Bridge which marks the line of the intertwined canal. river and railway. It slowly travels down to Mytholmroyd, battered in the floods of 2015, and then starts its passage along the valley of the Calder River. Ted Hughes, who was born and received his early schooling in Mytholmroyd, called this country Elmet, the last Celtic kingdom in England, and wrote of it:

*Death-struggle of the glacier
Enlarged the long gullet of Calder
Down which its corpse vanished
Farms came, stony masticators
Of generations that ate each other
To nothing inside them.
The sunk mill-towns were cemeteries
Digesting utterly
All with whom they swelled.
Now, coil behind coil
A wind-parched ache,*

*An absence, famished and staring,
Admits tourists
To pick among crumbling, loose molars
And empty sockets.⁶*

It's fair to say that Hughes, who retired to fish in Dorset, has little love for his birthplace though he did insist that his first wife, Sylvia Plath, was buried in Heptonstall, a local village upon the hills.

Defoe was more impressed with the Calder Valley for its industry. He travelled from Rochdale over the Blackstone Edge, a rocky outcrop high-up above the valley, in a snow-storm in August, something which may have been slightly exaggerated for his readers. The valley itself was then impassable and the pack-trails lay in the pastures above it through which Defoe descended.

From Blackstone Edge to Hallifax is eight miles, and all the way, except from Sorby to Hallifax, is thus up hill and down; so that, I suppose, we mounted to the clouds and descended to the water level about eight times, in that little part of the journey. But now I must observe to you, that after having passed the second hill, and come down into the valley again, and so still the nearer we came to Hallifax, we found the houses thicker, and the villages greater in every bottom; and not only so, but the sides of the hills, which were very steep every way, were spread with houses, and that very thick; for the land being divided into small enclosures, that is to say, from two acres to six or seven acres each, seldom more; every three or four pieces of land had a house belonging to it. Then it was I began to perceive the reason and nature of the thing, and found that this division of the land into small pieces, and scattering of the dwellings, was occasioned by, and done for the convenience of the business which the people were generally employed in, and that, as I said before, though we saw no people stirring without doors, yet they were all full within; for, in short, this whole country, however mountainous, and that no sooner we were down one hill but we mounted another, is yet infinitely full of people; these people all full of business; not a beggar, not an idle person to be seen, except here and there an alms-house, where people ancient, decrepit, and past labour, might perhaps be found...

...This business is the clothing trade, for the convenience of which the houses are thus scattered and spread upon the sides of the hills, as above, even from the bottom to the top; the reason is this; such has been the bounty of nature to this otherwise frightful country, that two things essential to the business, as well as to the ease of the people are found here, and that in a situation which I never saw the like of in any part of England; and, I believe, the like is not to be seen so contrived in any part of the world; I mean coals and running water upon the tops of the highest hills. This seems to have been directed by the wise hand of Providence for the very purpose which is now served by it, namely, the manufactures, which otherwise could not be carried on; neither indeed could one fifth part of the inhabitants be supported without them, for the land could not maintain them. After we had mounted the third hill, we found the country, in short, one continued village, though mountainous every way, as before.⁷

The pastures are still divided but most of the houses are gone: too mean for the farm-house conversions which now dot the hillside.

On through happy, hippy Hebden Bridge, once the most devastated of the declining mill-towns where in the 60s, it was possible to buy a stone-cottage for a few hundred pounds, the reason why some moved in seeking an alternate life. Now, much boosted by tourism and commuting, the town

⁶ Ted Hughes and Fay Godwin, *Remains of Elmet*, Faber and Faber, 1979

⁷ Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through Great Britain*, p.491, Penguin Classics, 1978, ISBN 978-0140430660



is dominated by bars and cafes with just a few hulking abandoned mills on the outskirts to remind us of the past.

After Hebden, the hills close in with woodland with just glimpses of the hills above until the bus reaches Todmorden at the head of the valley where the road goes left to Rochdale or right to Burnley. The base of the church here, where the road divides, is medieval though the bulk of it is seventeenth century, much modernised. The Grade I listed building in Todmorden is the magnificent Unitarian church, built in the middle of the nineteenth century with an astonishing coloured marble interior.

It is just possible to see in the midst of the town, signs of the old coaching town before the mills came including the bulk of the Golden Lion, an old inn by the river.



The bus turns right for Burnley and winds through some old cotton villages until, suddenly, the vista widens out over the fields and moors with, on the left, limestone crags disturbed by the coal and clay mining which dug into the hillsides. At the top, the hulking mass of Pendle Hill emerges, a great, dark whale on the horizon. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the most notorious of the witch trials took place here when eleven accused, nine women and two men were tried for causing death by witchcraft. The area was, allegedly, "*fabled for its theft, violence and sexual laxity, where the church was honoured without much understanding of its doctrines by the common people*".

The bus starts to descend and gradually the flat mass of Burnley emerges, straddling across the plain under Pendle Hill.



Burnley

To call Burnley battered is almost to pay it a compliment for what is striking about the town is not so much a physical presence as an absence, a sense of 'goneness'. It is not an old place. Defoe would scarcely have registered it, though it does have a small medieval church on a hill above the river. Two things pushed it into its dominant local position; the arrival of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal in 1796 and the shallow Burnley coalfield to fuel the new steam-powered mills. By 1800, there were a dozen pits in what is now the town centre. It was the moment when cotton became the boom industry of Lancashire and in a few decades there were dozens of mills along the canal as well as foundries and factories to supply mill-parts. The Burnley Loom was known as one of the best power-looms in the world. By 1910, Burnley was the largest weaving centre in England, probably in the world, with 99,000 power-looms. Its population peaked at over 100,000 from just 4000 in 1801; now it is around 70,000.

The mills and factories have now mostly gone, as have all the pits, together with the thousands of small terraces built for mill-workers in the town-centre and largely demolished in the 1960s. It is this which gives the town its sense of absence, of wide spaces filled mostly by car-parks and large supermarkets. Even so, one of the more dubious records which the town holds is that of having the lowest average house-price in the country. Perhaps Burnley can be best realised in terms of two buildings that remain though not inside the town.

Towneley Hall, just a mile east of the town-centre, was the home of the Towneley family from around 1200. They owned extensive land both in Lancashire and Yorkshire. They were one of the principal Catholic families in what remained a Catholic stronghold after the Reformation. There is no clear record of the Towneley's ever having any interest in Burnley but they must have benefited greatly from the coal under their land and the mills built on parts of it though, of course, well away from the 180 hectares of the park. In 1901, the last of the family decided that upkeep of the house was too much and sold it to Burnley Council though for how much seems unrecorded. She stripped the house of all its contents and left. A junior branch of the family remained living outside the town.



About five miles north of the town is a much different house, the last Clarion House which, strictly, belongs to the heritage of Nelson, in particular to its branch of the Independent Labour Party. However, part-financed by Burnley money and, no doubt, much-frequented by Burnley workers, it can be included here as part of the town's heritage.

The Clarion movement grew out of the socialist Clarion newspaper first published in 1891 by Robert Blatchford, a Manchester socialist. It was based upon the provision of various kinds of health leisure activities for the working class with particular emphasis on rambling and cycling. The Clarion Cycling groups still flourish but the network of Clarion Houses, set up to provide bases for country walks, swindled to this last reminder. It was acquired in 1910 and surrounded by a network of walking trails from Nelson, Colne and Burnley. It has gone through various changes but still serves tea and buns on Sunday afternoons. And, as the sign above its door suggests, socialism remains its hope. Burnley also hosts one of the last Clarion choirs.





The finest building in Burnley is, rather obscurely, the Technical Institute built at the end of the 19th century to do what its name suggests and now sitting empty and abandoned on the edge of Thompson Park, a rather beautiful, formal Edwardian garden constructed, rather surprisingly, in the late-1920s by Burnley Council after a local cloth-manufacturer left £50,000 in his will to build such a facility. In the centre, much has been demolished to make way for a huge and largely empty shopping centre the Boot Inn, built in 1911, sits in rather isolated splendour. It offers a good burger and chips but is mainly occupied by rather worn, working-class men sitting over a pint and not talking much.

The beating heart of Burnley is probably its football stadium where Burnley FC hang on to their top division status. Though not as large as most Premier League grounds, Turf Moor normally holds nearly 21,000 fans. Once the North West boasted several top-flight sides outside of Manchester and

Liverpool. Now such as Blackburn Rovers, Preston North End, Wigan, Bolton Wanderers and Blackpool sink down the leagues. Only Burnley clings on to Premier status.



Burnley to Oldham via Wythenshawe

It is an easy ride from Burnley to Manchester on the X43 which rises up the gentle hills before descending again into the Rossendale Valley and then on to the centre of Manchester. It goes through small villages, mostly unremarkable with the usual empty mills. One reminder of the past on the route still exists in the small village of Crawshawbooth. The small Friends Meeting House was built in 1716 making it one of the oldest in the world and meetings may have been held in the neighbouring house before then. Its small meeting room is still in use. It is in aptly named Cooperation Street.

The X43 finally enters Manchester where one can choose which way to go amidst the forest of new apartment blocks. The easiest route to Oldham is on the tram which also goes south to Wythenshawe, once the biggest council estate in Europe encompassing 11 sq. miles, though now, after many rounds of right-to-buy, it is probably mostly privately owned. The estate was originally built in the 1920s on land bought by Manchester Council from the Tatton family. It has a population of over 100,000 but with motorways south and east it seems oddly cut off from the rest of Manchester, certainly from the affluent parts of Didsbury and Altrincham which surround it.



CRAWSHAWBOOTH FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE

Built as a garden estate to replace the foetid slums of central Manchester, so aptly described by Elizabeth Gaskell in *Mary Barton*, the reputation of Wythenshawe was not helped by setting the Channel 4 programme *Shameless* on the estate and it had a bad reputation for poverty and crime. There seems little justification for singling it out now, even though Manchester still has the highest crime-rate for any town outside London.

The green heart of Wythenshawe is Wythenshawe Park, also once owned by the Tatton family who resisted Parliament there in 1644. It was bought by the Simon family in 1926 and handed over to the Council. Ernest Simon was an industrialist involved in much of the slum clearance programmes in Manchester. He was given a peerage in 1947 by the Labour government.

Wythenshawe is as far removed from the tower-block hell of other inner-city estates as can be imagined; small terraces and semis arranged in crescents and squares.

The tram back bumps through the more recent tower-blocks of central Manchester built by private money. Just who lives in these is unclear. Perhaps some of the Chinese students, over 5,000 of whom form part of Manchester's huge student population of over 100,000. It was not always like this. In Hulme Park there is a monument to the Rolls-Royce factory which once built these cars in Hulme.

The tram continues to bump south until it finally comes to Oldham.



Oldham in 1831

Oldham

It is difficult to see Oldham as the rural space which once it was. In this picture of 1831 by a local artist, it is just starting its spectacular rise as an industrial city with its first factory chimneys and house fires. At this time, it had a population of around 21,000 which by 1860 was upwards of 90,000 rising to 137,000 in 1901. Oldham became the world's manufacturing centre for cotton spinning in the second half of the 19th century. Much of its product would have gone to the weaving centre of Burnley

In 1851, over 30% of Oldham's population was employed within the textile sector, compared to 5% across Great Britain. It overtook the major urban centres of Manchester and Bolton as the result of a mill building boom in the 1860s and 1870s, a period during which Oldham became the most productive cotton-spinning town in the world. By 1911 there were 16.4 million spindles in Oldham, compared with a total of 58 million in the United Kingdom and 143.5 million in the world; in 1928, with the construction of Elk Mill -- the UK's largest textile factory - Oldham reached its manufacturing zenith. At its peak, there were over 360 mills, operating night and day. There were also coal mines in and around the town. When the Elk Mill closed in 1998, cotton production in Oldham ceased. The mill was demolished in 1999.



ELK MILL

So where did all the money go? In producing over 10% of the world's cotton textiles it might be assumed that some wealth was generated. Certainly it did not go into great public buildings. Oldham's town hall, now being rebuilt as a cinema, is a pretty modest affair compared to the great municipal cathedrals of Bolton and Manchester. It is true that Winston Churchill started his political career on its steps but he seems not to have left any lasting imprint and was defeated rather ignominiously in 1906. It did give him a chance, however, to meet the working class.

There is a modest Masonic hall, now up sale, which does contain two ballrooms according to the estate agents but it still resembles a bank more than a setting for splendid nights of music.

One of the great buildings of the time still remains; the Empire Theatre built in 1897. Both Henry Irving and Charlie Chaplin performed there until its conversion to a cinema and its ultimate closure in 1969 when it became a night club. It has, however, had a renaissance and is now the home of the Rainy City Roller Girls, advertising themselves as the only "All-female full contact roller derby in the North West of England".



The other theatres in Oldham, there seem to have been a dozen or more, have gone except for the honourable Coliseum housed in what was once a circus building though much diminished from when it could house 2000 people.

Defoe never visited Oldham nor if he had passed by would he have seen anything. There is no coaching inn, no medieval chapel, to be found underneath its wreckage. It was built as a large factory town producing more cotton in its heyday than Germany and France combined. Its lines of redbrick houses matched the redbrick mills, and when they closed, its life drained away. The town's biggest employer is said to be the council. The wealth its workers produced went south leaving just brick residues. Even the spanking new yellow tram to Manchester just drains out life. Why get drunk locally when the bars of the Northern Quarter are just 15 minutes away?

Its most famous event remains the Oldham riots in 2001 which were particularly intensive in Glodwick, an area to the south-east of Oldham town centre. They were highly violent and led to the use of petrol bombs, bricks, bottles and other such projectiles by up to five-hundred Asian youths as they battled against lines of riot police. At least 20 people were injured in the riots, including 15 officers, and 37 people were arrested.

There is one factory left after all the closures. In 2007 Elbit Systems, a huge Israeli arms manufacturer, bought an old mill, once part of the defunct Ferranti group. What they make there is secret but it probably contributes to the drones which have become a major and lucrative feature of Elbit's products which have the great advantage over other companies of being continually tested against the Palestinians.

The Elbit factory is now the subject of regular pickets and roof-top occupations to protest Elbit activities. Perhaps they should enlist the help of the Roller Girls, perhaps the true descendants of the Danes.

There is one other memory which is preserved in the central art gallery in Oldham. In the 1930s, six young men from the town crossed France and the Pyrenees into Spain to fight for freedom and democracy. Their bones will lie somewhere near Jarama. There is a plaque to their memory in the Parish Church of St Mary.





Stoke via Macclesfield and Leek

The journey from Oldham to Stoke involves several buses after bumping back into central Manchester from Oldham. First, a slow trip through the interminable curry-houses of Rusholme ‘curry mile’ before the leafy auburn of Didsbury. Then the 130 which moves sedately through the leafy and prosperous suburbs of greater Manchester; Cheadle, Wilmslow and finally Macclesfield, mostly skirting the council estates which almost circle southern Manchester.

According to a ruling by the UN World Tourism Organisation, the famous Silk Road begins in Xian, the ancient capital of China, and ends 5,088 miles distant, in the Cheshire town of Macclesfield. Just why Macclesfield became the centre of silk-weaving in this country is unclear but there were 71 mills of various kinds operating at the beginning of the nineteenth century. One reason for its growth is that the Spitalfields silk weavers, once the centre of the English industry after the arrival of Huguenot weavers, obtained fixed prices for their product so the merchants left for the north where they had cheaper labour. It is an old place with a charter dating from the 13th century. Now it is a quietly prosperous commuter town blessed with mainline connections to Manchester.

The 109 takes one onward to Leek, another slightly battered old town set in the Staffordshire hills whose main claim is that it was the home of the prolific Sugden architectural practice which designed most of the town’s public buildings and much else beyond and was a friend and associate of William Morris. It is also the start of the 18 bus which goes down to the huge bus-station in Hanley, one of the six towns which make up the city of Stoke-on-Trent

Stoke-on-Trent

Not to be confused with Stoke-upon-Trent which is one of the six towns which together make up the city of Stoke-on-Trent, an urban entity often called just the ‘Potteries’. Once this was probably the most industrialised place in Britain containing as it did not just factories but also clay-pits and coal-mines. At its height, the city area contained thirteen coal-mines, two blast-furnaces and over 350 factories, mostly making pottery. In 1925, over 100,000 people worked in the pottery industry here and even in 1958 there were still 70,000 in such employment. In 2009, there were just 6,000 jobs left. It was recorded that in the 1950s, Stoke had the largest proportion of what was termed ‘derelict land’ of any borough in the country, much of this is now covered with the ubiquitous sheds of supermarkets and distribution centres. It was also said to be the smokiest place in Britain due to the numbers of coal-fired bottle-kilns in which the ceramics were fired. The illustration shows that

this was probably a justified claim. In 1958, there were still 2,000 of these; now such pottery as is still made uses electric kilns.

The six towns which make up the city were once small hamlets in rural countryside. It was the combination of easily accessible coal and clay plus plenty of water, lead and salt which turned Stoke in the metropolis of pottery. Coal was mined here in medieval times with reports that coal was being taken in 1282 and used to fire pottery. The North Staffordshire coalfield is comparatively small and is mostly contained within the bounds of the city. The Chatterley Whitfield mine was the first in Britain to mine a million tonnes. It closed in 1976, reopened as a museum which closed in 1991. The derelict building is classed as a scheduled ancient monument. The last deep-mine, Silverdale, closed in 1998.

In Hanley there is a museum which contains one of the finest collections of Staffordshire pottery in the world. In the next room there is a memorial to the miners of the 1984-85 strike, a stunning frieze made from coal drawn from the local Hem Heath colliery, two Davy lamps hanging from it, and flanked by busts of Joe Green and David Jones, both killed on picket duty. 'Lest we forget,' reads an inscription in a stone tablet. '966 miners sacked, 200 imprisoned, 20,000 injured and two killed on picket lines.'

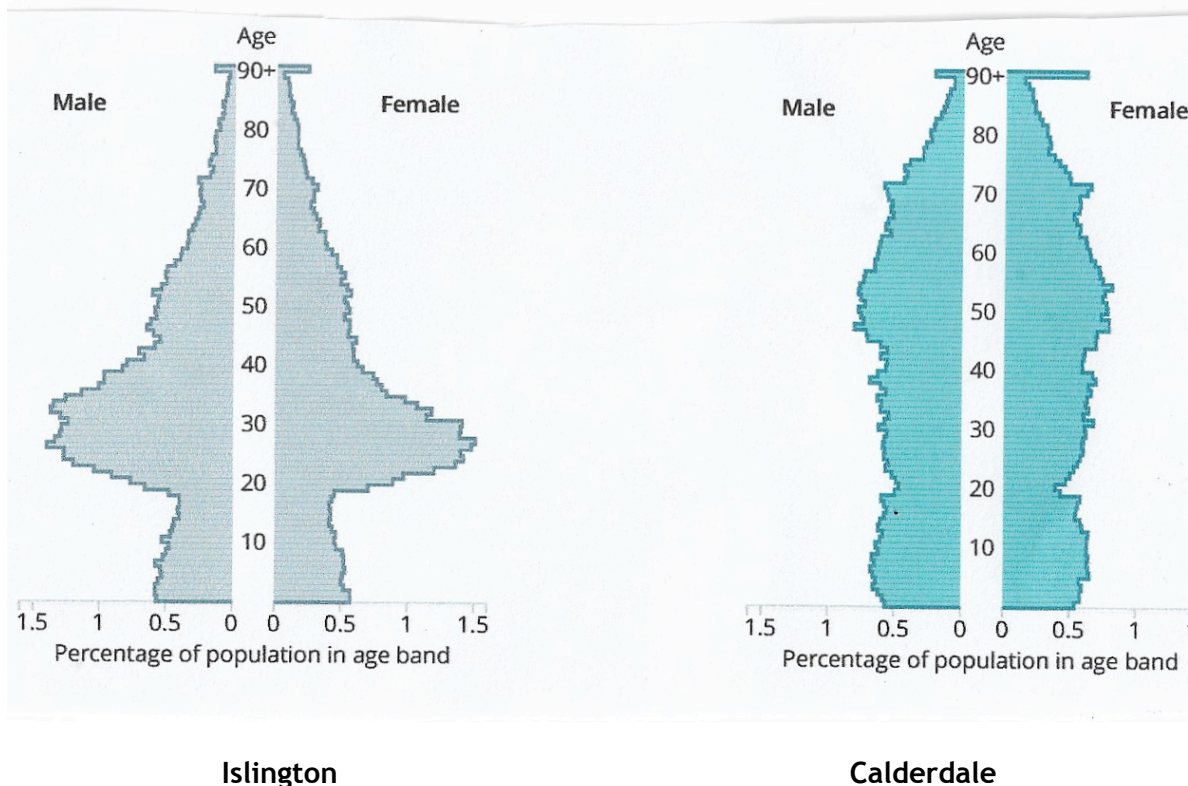
In the centre of Hanley there is an odd statue rather like a knight in armour though it is a steelworker advancing towards the hot metal with a probe in hand. The statue commemorates the battle of the Shelton Bar steelworkers to save their jobs in the 1970s. That fight was lost in June 1978, when the last blast furnace was shut down and two thousand people were laid off. Shelton Bar's rolling mill continued until 2000, when the works finally shut. At its height the steelworks had employed ten thousand people. The inscription on the plinth reads: *'I believe in the dignity of labour, whether with head or hand; that the world owes no man a living, but that it owes every man an opportunity to make a living'*.

There are no monumental buildings in Stoke. Each town had its own modest town-hall together with law-courts and chapels. Like Burnley, there is an abiding sense of 'goneness' in the towns of Stoke. The large supermarkets which now spread over the once-derelict land have destroyed the high-streets which exist mainly for fast-food takeaways and hairdressers. There are also myriad unlabelled sheds, presumably warehouses and distribution centres.

4 The End

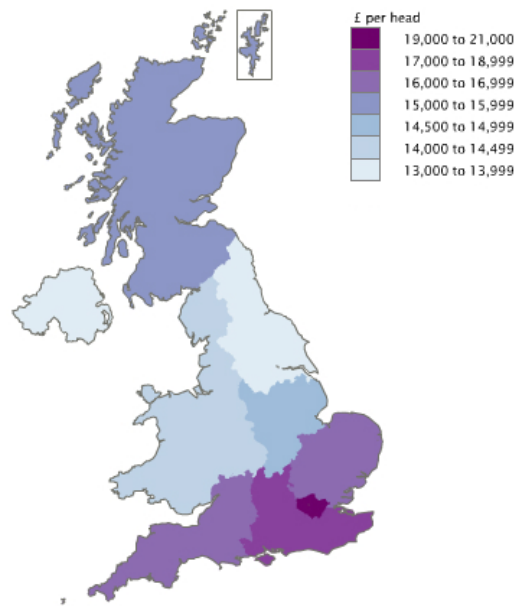
This journey has hardly touched the North going from west Yorkshire into Lancashire then heading south through Manchester and Oldham into Staffordshire ending in the six towns of the Potteries. It could have gone on to the large cities and pit-villages of Yorkshire, perhaps up to the prosperous towns of North Yorkshire. But Stoke seemed an appropriate place to end as winter began to lock in. It began in the autumn of 2019 and progressed in fits and starts over a couple of months. Starting writing in January, I realised that what had begun as a largely 'red' had turned mostly 'blue' on 15 December, the previous year. Halifax, a Labour constituency, stayed that way mainly because of a large vote for the still-active Brexit party whilst Calder Valley, previously a very marginal seat by 609 votes, became rather solid Tory. It was in Lancashire that the startling changes began with Burnley, Labour since 1935 apart from a brief flirtation with the Liberal Democrats in 2015, going Conservative. The hills of Rossendale down to Manchester have always been turnabout Labour and Conservative but are now Tory. Central Manchester and Wythenshawe stayed solid Labour as did Oldham East and West though with vote shares dropping by double figures. Macclesfield stayed just as solid Tory but the real shocks came in the seats of Stoke and around when four Labour seats went Conservative.

It would be hard to find a better indicator of what 'lost content' means. The people in these towns have shorter lives than the richer parts of the south, perhaps by three or four years. Partly this is because they are an ageing population with their children having gone south where the jobs are.



AGE DISTRIBUTION IN ISLINGTON AND CALDERDALE ⁸

⁸ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/subnationalpopulationprojectionsforengland/2016based>



INCOME DISTRIBUTION PER HEAD IN THE UK

The populations of these two boroughs are much the same, around 200,000, but in Islington there is a predominance of 20-40 year-olds whereas in Calderdale there is a much older and ageing population. These northern towns are also unhealthier. In Islington, the rate of clinical depression runs at 9.2% whilst in Stoke North it is 14.2%; dementia runs at 0.5% and 1.0% respectively whilst in these same boroughs obesity is 6.9% and 14.4%.⁹ It would be an exaggeration to suggest that Stoke is full of fat, sad and mad people whilst in Islington folk are young, happy and thin but there is a pattern.

They are also poorer. Analysis by Professor Philip McCann¹⁰ at the University of Sheffield has shown that the UK is more inter-regionally unequal than the United States, France, Germany, Spain, Sweden and South Korea. The only wealthy countries with higher levels of regional inequality are Slovakia and Ireland - so across a very broad range of indicators, the UK is inter-regionally more unequal than 28 other advanced Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

There is one other factor, deeper and less obvious – history.

There is little really old history in these towns, for that one has to go to the old wool towns in eastern Yorkshire with the great medieval churches at York Selby and Beverley and the castles at Pontefract and Skipton. There are a few old churches such as the minster at Halifax whilst Crawshawbooth has its unique Friends Meeting House. But history here has another meaning; that once these places produced wealth in prodigious quantities. Oldham's mills span the cotton that 100,000 looms in Burnley turned into cotton. Stoke produced not just some of the most beautiful ceramics the world has ever seen but also the heavy-duty stuff that furnished lavatories and washrooms around the world whilst Macclesfield was the end of the fabled Silk Road. There is little

⁹ <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/social-policy/health/constituency-data-how-healthy-is-your-area/>

¹⁰ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2019.1619928>



PETERLOO MONUMENT

trace left now of this wealth; it mostly went south to the country houses of what are, interestingly, commonly called the Home Counties. But there is also another history which accompanied this accumulation of wealth; struggle. Again, there is little trace of this now, perhaps its only monument to recent struggle is the statue of the steelworker in Hanley commemorating the attempt to save the doomed Shelton Bar steelworks. One more can be added of older struggles; that to the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, erected in central Manchester to commemorate its bicentenary. On it can be seen the names of the new industrial towns from where those who had come to hear Henry Hunt speak had come; Rochdale; Burnley, Leeds, Lancaster, Oldham and so on, some lying on our route.

Struggle in various forms continued after that almost without pause. In 1838, the Borough of Todmorden was the last pace to resist being forced to change from the old Poor Law which paid something to impoverished families to building a workhouse in which these unfortunates were incarcerated with families separated. Bailiffs raided the house of one William Ingham, the overseer for the district, after he had been fined for refusing to collect the required funds. One of the constables involved later reported that he was attacked by the mob on 16th November 1838 and 'held by the ears' while his cart was broken up and burnt. He was initially given refuge by Mr Ingham. On begging the mob to spare his and Constable King's lives, he was told that the local M.P. Mr Fielden had insisted their lives be spared.

Along with Burnley, Rochdale and Halifax, Todmorden was a strong supporter of the Chartist movement with 700 members who collected 8,400 signatures for the great Charter.

The words of a song composed by Ernest Jones, the Chartist leader, at the time, reflects this support:

*We're low we're low we're rabble we know
Yet at our plastic power
The mould at the lordling's feet will grow
Into palace and church and tower
Then prostrate fall in the rich man's hall
Cringe at the rich man's door*

*We're not too low to build the wall
Too low to tread the floor*

*We're low we're low we are so low
Yet from our fingers glide
The silken flow and the robes that glow
Round the limbs of the sons of pride
And what we get and what we give
We know and we know our share
We're not too low the cloth to weave
Too low the cloth to wear*

*We're low we're low we are so low
Yet when the trumpets ring
The thrust of a poor man's arm will go
Through the heart of the proudest king
We're low we're low our place we know
Only the rank and file
We're not too low to kill the foe
Too low to touch the spoil*

After Chartism, resistance spread in many directions, notably into forming trade unions and the socialist parties which later formed the Labour Party. One of the notable struggles was for the right for women to vote and one of its most celebrated leaders, Emmeline Pankhurst, was born in Manchester. Her statue now stands in St. Peter's Square not far from the Peterloo Monument.





Another statue to one of the only working class women to become a leader in the suffrage movement, Ann Kenney, stands in Oldham, where she was born and worked.

In time most of these towns apart from the leafy suburbs of Manchester became strongholds of the Labour Party, the so-called 'red-wall' which so surprisingly corroded in the 2019 election. In 1950, Burnley constituency recorded a turnout of 89.6% to return a Labour M.P. whilst the Stoke seats recorded around 85%, also returning Labour. In December, 2019, the turnouts were 60.6% and 57.5% to return Conservatives. Enough said.

Finishing this essay at the end, we hope, of the Covid crisis, it is becoming increasingly clear that the impact of the virus combined with the economic catastrophe of Brexit will have a devastating impact on these Northern towns. Their inhabitants already know that they are more likely to die from Covid than those in the south, presumably from the relative social deprivation of the towns. They will soon know that unemployment will soon be rising fast as the furlough scheme ends and the post-Brexit closures begin. Just how discontent will manifest itself then as lockdown ends and austerity continues to bite cannot be foreseen. Perhaps just as apathy, perhaps in voting for even more unlikely parties and movements. Perhaps the increasingly likely move to Scottish independence returning Britannia Inferior to its old status as a frontier province will provoke greater calls for regional independence. Or perhaps nothing will change at all.