The Grim North

or

The Land of Lost Content

Michael Prior

In the dark times
Will there also be singing?
Yes, there will also be singing.
About the dark times.

Bertolt Brecht (1936)

The contemporary photographs in this book are mostly my own efforts. Other have been acknowledged where possible. The old photos are taken from various heritage collections notably English Heritage or Pennine Heritage. Others come from local history groups acknowledged mostly in the text.

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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.*"[1] 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 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- "*On the 8th June, 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 certainly up to 954 when Eric Bloodaxe, who has not received much praise, was assassinated up on the moors of Teesdale, and Northumbria became a nominal part of England. It was an invasion by a returning 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 replaced 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 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.

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 North had lacked wealth. The great churches at Selby, Beverley and York (and for that matter, Doncaster) are evidence of the money which flowed from the wool which came from the hills and flowed out to Flanders, 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 region was thinly populated however and had few towns. It took the advent of steam-power and the industrialisation of textiles to turn the North into the powerhouse of 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 shift. 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.*[2]

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 the following summary of how he believes the southern Upper English, as he calls them, see 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 stooges envying what they could not understand; in which case society was to be protected from their ignorant rapacity.*[3]

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.*[4]

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 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 corncrake 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 day's forage, when they were still nomads, and when they were still nomads, and when they were 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....The love of these things is innate and inherent in our people. It makes for that love of home, one of the strongest features of our race, and it is that that makes our race seek its new home in the Dominions overseas, where they have room to see things like this that they can no more see at home. It is that power of making homes, almost peculiar to our people, and it is one of the sources of their greatness.*

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 pool 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.

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. It has become the regional stronghold of the Labour Party so, once again, it has become the threatening menace hanging over southern England, the wild moors of *Wuthering Heights* hanging over the rural pastures.

This is some of the places which define this menace. They are somewhat defined by the travels of Thomas Rainsborough in the north, a man who, like me, was born in London, travelled the world and came north, largely by chance, ultimately to meet his end.

Doncaster

It has to be accepted that Doncaster is a mess. Leaving the railway station, it is easy to stumble into a 1970s shopping centre without any obvious way of leaving. Yet, despite appearances, it is an old place. The Romans came here and built a fort because it lay on the highest navigable point of the River Don. There was a ford over to the territory of the Brigantes, a Celtic tribe with whom the Romans had a difficult relationship, sometimes allies, sometimes foes. It had a large medieval church which burnt down in the nineteenth century to be replaced by a grand faux-Gothic structure designed by Gilbert Scott. It became a transit port for the booming wool trade moving wool down to the Humber and beyond to the Flemish towns. In the eighteenth century, it had something of a social season. The oldest English classic horse race, the St Leger, was founded here in 1776 and has been raced ever since on the course on the town moor, though with some transfers elsewhere, one in 1989 due to mining subsidence.

Doncaster Minster

Spared any bombing it was the ‘modernisation’ of the 1960s with a wave of shopping centres and through roads which seems to have altered the townscape most but it is still possible to

High Street

Mansion House

see the outlines of the eighteenth century Georgian town, a coaching stop on the way north and a small port on the Don, much like dozens of other small southern and midland towns. There is not a mill or a mine or a factory to be seen. It remains the entry point to the North.

The construction of the Mansion House was interrupted by the southward march of the Jacobite army in 1745 moving as ever across the Don ford. In just the same way, it was the natural place for Rainsborough to stop on the way north to lay siege to Pontefract Castle. He passed the night in an inn near the Minster church, probably the Black Bull though this is not the original just a faux Tudor frontage. His killers burst in and slaughtered him before riding off. They were Royalists from Pontefract though dark rumours circulated at the time of involvement of by Parliamentary leaders including Cromwell.

It was mining that transformed the town, the deep pits in the concealed coalfield sunk after the mines begun on the exposed coalfield to the west had exhausted their reserves of the rich Barnsley seam. Bentley mine, whose headworks could be seen from the race-course, was sunk in 1905. Hatfield colliery, just north of Doncaster, sunk in 1915, was one of the last deep mines working in the country. Ringed by the new mining villages but not itself a mining town and on the main railway, Doncaster became the shopping and entertainment centre of the area. Developed in the 1960s with three huge shopping centres, it is still full of pubs and bars though on a Friday night, most seemed empty.

The highlight of any visit to Doncaster has to be the fabulous art-deco Earl of Doncaster hotel, built in 1938 at the height of the coal boom and still the fanciest dining in town.

There was plenty of real money around as well. Brodsworth Hall was originally built in the eighteenth century by various minor aristocrats who appeared to regularly lose their money and pass the estate on to others until finally it was bought by one Peter Thellusson, who came from a family long established in European commerce. Originally French Huguenots (Protestants), they were later Swiss merchants and financiers.

Peter Thellusson settled in England in 1760, acting as an agent for the family and other banks. His activities included providing loans and insurance to slave-ship and plantation owners, and as a result of defaults on debts he gained interests in Caribbean plantations. He commissioned a Palladian villa by Thomas Leverton at Plaistow near Bromley in the 1780s, before buying the substantial Brodsworth estate.

Peter Thellusson died in 1797 and is best known for his will in which he left the bulk of his fortune in trust for as yet unborn descendants. The protracted legal battles between family members which followed – and from which the lawyers and trustees seemed to benefit most – may have been one of the examples that inspired the labyrinthine case of Jarndyce *v* Jarndyce in Charles Dickens's *Bleak House*.

Brodsworth colliery was opened 1905, the largest mine in Yorkshire and employing up to 3000 men. It closed in 1990 and the Hall is owned by English Heritage.

Brodsworth Hall

Brodsworth Colliery

Travels in Goneland

It is easy enough to see the remains of the earliest industrial revolution if one knows where to look; along the steep watercourses that powered the first mechanised mills. Now overgrown by trees and bushes, these stone basins and channels provided the water-power for these mills with power looms and spinning frames. They also provided the spark for the first industrial labour-protests, the Luddites, mostly handloom weavers, who smashed the mechanised mills and were themselves broken on gallows in York and Manchester.

Staups Mill and waterfall, Jumble Hole Clough, Hebden Bridge

The next stage of the industrial development based on coal also can also still be seen in the remaining chimneys of the mills and factories of northern England and the Scottish lowlands. The huge buildings of the final stages of this revolution are impossible to miss, close to the centres of Manchester, Leeds and all the northern towns and cities which sat on the coal measures. It was this which has defined Britain to this day. Travel south from Stoke, east from Leeds or north from Newcastle and it is easy enough to see where the accessible coal seams ran out. Population thins out and settlements are located in natural places on valley bottoms along rivers rather than up hillsides where the coal seams outcropped. There are few traces left of the mines. The headworks are gone and diligent work has mostly removed or vegetated the spoil heaps which once disfigured much of the countryside. Even so, the photographic record of the mines which once covered much of Britain remains immense

Kellingley Colliery before closure

After the fire which shut Daw Mill in 2013, only Kellingley and Thoresby remained, both closed in 2015.

The mills and factories powered by coal remain in most northern cities and towns. These are the Dean Clough mills, once Crossley, the largest carpet mills in the world employing over 8,000 people. Now about 2000 work there in hotels and small enterprises.

The third phase of industry, if something as complex as industrialisation can be reduced to simple phases, was the growth of the steelworks, shipyards and engineering factories which define almost any vision of the north of England, south Wales and the central lowlands of Scotland in the first half of the twentieth century.

This is the entrance to Swan Hunter on the Tyne, at least as it is now.

Once, when it built liners and warships, it towered over the terraces where its workforce lived.

Now, if one passes through the imposing entrance there is just a wasteland of concrete quays from where they once launched the ‘Mauretania’.

But at least there is something visible.

The British Electrical Industry

One of the major industries which developed rapidly in this third phase was manufacture of electrical goods ranging from the turbines which produced the power through transformers to the goods which actually used the sparks; electric trains to light bulbs.

Britain was not a leader in this area. The German and American companies led the way and many British firms were subsidiaries of such giants as Siemens, Westinghouse and General Electric. British Thomson Houston (the clue is in the name) in Rugby was a subsidiary of the American giant General Electric formed in 1894; Metropolitan-Vickers in Manchester (1902) of Westinghouse. The American companies were transformed into British entities in WW1 to allow them to bid for government contracts and were merged in 1928 to form Associated Electrical Industries (AEI).

The factories of German Siemens at Stafford and Woolwich were seized in WW1 as belonging to enemy aliens and formed the heart of the English Electric (EE) group formed in 1919. Only the third of the triumverate of British electrical corporations which emerged after WW1, the General Electric Company, was not formed from foreign companies and even this had its

origins in a German immigrant. GEC traces its origins to G. Binswanger and Company, an electrical goods wholesaler established in London in the 1880s by a German Jewish immigrant Gustav Binswanger.

However, under the impetus of the rapid spread of electricity supply throughout the land and the development of electronic goods, in particular the radio and various kinds of domestic appliance, the British electrical and electronics industry grew very fast.

This is an aerial view of the Metro Vickers factory in Trafford Park Manchester, once the largest factory in the U.K. perhaps in Europe. In 1935, Metro Vickers became the first factory in the world to manufacture jet engines. In its heyday, over 20,000 people worked here.

This is the imposing, if abandoned, Trafford Park Hotel almost the last remnant of Trafford Village, once the largest industrial 'village' in Britain built by the British Westinghouse Company in 1912 to house the workforce of Metro Vickers. This was built on a grid system, streets one direction, avenues at right angles. The street signs preserved in what is now a wilderness of depots and anonymous sheds betray these US origins. There is a small museum near the hotel which displays some photos and other memorabilia of the village.


1902
TRAPPORD
PARK HOTEL


3RD
THIRD
AVENUE

Smaller but comparable in scope of production was the English Electric factory at Stafford

English Electric, Stafford works

and the British Thomson Houston factory at Rugby, pictured in 1929, which made the heavy stuff such as turbines, transformers and train-sets as well as the first jet-engine tested here in 1937.

BTH works, Rugby, later A.E.I.

The General Electric Company,which mainly produced consumer products such as light bulbs, also had factories throughout the north.

General Electric, Salford, c. 1910

General Electric, Stoke Works, Coventry, 1926

Smaller British companies involved in making electrical bits and pieces included Plessey, formed in 1917 and run by a German engineer, William Heyne, with dominant American shareholders, the Clark family. Plessey grew in the 1920s by making the components for the radio and the television industries. In 1929 the television pioneer John Logie Baird had his first production televisions produced by Plessey. It may thus be said to be the first television manufacturer. Its main factory was in Vicarage Lane, Ilford and then in Swindon. In the 1970s, Plessey moved into computer manufacture before being taken over, unwillingly, by GEC in1985.

The Marconi Company was a British telecommunications and engineering company that existed from 1897 until 2006, undergoing numerous changes, mergers and acquisitions during that time. The company was founded by the Italian inventor, Guglielmo Marconi, and was originally known as The Wireless Telegraph & Signal Company. The company was a pioneer of wireless long distance communication.

Marconi was linked to the invention by Alexander Fleming of the diode valve which formed the basis of radio and other early electronic equipment and was a pioneer in long-distance radio broadcasting. It opened it main factory in New Street, Chelmsford in 1912, as the first radio manufacturing facility in the world, and a research laboratory at Great Baddow, Chelmsford in 1939. It was taken over by English Electric in 1946.

Plessey, Ilford

The 1930s office block and art-deco factory of Marconi in New Street, Chelmsford.

Sebastian Ziani de Ferranti, born in Liverpool, was, as the name hints, the son of an Italian immigrant. He founded his eponymous company in 1885 as a pioneer in installing electricity systems. The company became known in particular for work in the area of power grid systems

and defence electronics. In addition, in 1951 Ferranti began selling one of the first commercially available computers, the Ferranti Mark 11. (For the very first, see below). In 1961, it produced the Atlas computer, at the time the most powerful commercial machine in the world. At one time, Ferranti had nine factories in Manchester plus several in Scotland and its archives are now in the Manchester Museum of Science and Industry. The firm went bankrupt in 1993 after various legal and financial scandals .

Ferranti Crewe Toll factory in 1970s

Ferranti Atlas Mk 1 computer, 1963

C.H. Parsons got into the electrical business via manufacturing steam turbines for ships in the nineteenth-century alter moving into turbine generators for the power industry. In the 1960s, its Heaton factory in Newcastle employed around 7,000 people. After various mergers, the factory was acquired by Siemens and currently employs about 400 people.

Parsons, Newcastle

Parsons factory on Fossway, Newcastle

Goneland

None of the factories seen above exist today except as pale shadows, service centres or distribution warehouses, often for the same foreign companies from which, a hundred years ago, they were formed.

Yes, it may be asked, but so what? No one expects to work in pits anymore nor to tend looms so why worry about the demise of these vast sheds in which women and men mostly did repetitive assembly work on machines for which there is little demand today. There is little dignity of labour in assembling television sets.

Perhaps a detour into personal memory will explain.

In 1965, I graduated with a second degree in physics and looked for a job. It was pretty easy. In June, the careers office gave me three possible places and by September, I accepted a job at an industrial laboratory in Newcastle; International Research and Development on Fossway, opposite the great Parsons factory. The laboratory had been set up by Parsons and a couple of other companies on the back of nuclear power development and had a particular speciality in superconductivity. It developed the first superconducting electric motor. I moved on after a year to the central research laboratory of A.E.I. at Rugby on the edge of the factory that was still locally called BTH. In 1967, A.E.I was taken over by G.E.C as part of the great consolidation the British electrical industry aided and abetted by one Anthony Wedgewood-Benn, as he still was, Minister of Industry in the Wilson government. The laboratory was closed in 1968 and I was transferred to the Hirst Research Centre in Wembley where I lasted about two months before I gave up science and went back to university to study economics.

The three years which I spent doing industrial research were, in retrospect, exciting times. It was a moment when the first integrated semiconductor devices were being made and the prospect of small electronic devices incorporating computers was gradually being realised. Now, a single integrated circuit contains thousands of transistors, capacitors and resistors but then they contained just a handful, enough, for example, to put an amplifier on to a single chip. At Rugby, I worked on the properties of a semiconductor called cadmium sulphide, part of a group called II-VI semiconductors, which had peculiar properties which might or might not have had uses in this new world.

After nearly forty years working as an economist, mostly abroad, I looked around Britain from my small town in the north and I wondered what had become of all this endeavour. I started what became these travels around goneland beginning with the place where I once tried to understand the acousto-electric properties of cadmium sulphide.

Associated Electrical Industries

As we have seen, AEI was formed in the First World War by the amalgamation of the subsidiaries of two American electrical giants. The two disparate parts, Metro Vickers and British Thomson Houston never really merged but as part of the process, a central research laboratory was developed at the BTH site in Rugby. In 1947, Dennis Gabor invented the hologram at AEI Rugby, for which he later received a Nobel Prize, and though he moved on to Imperial College, work continued on diffraction microscopy.

Original AEI research laboratory building built 1924 in Rugby

Initially the main part of AEI basic research activity after 1945 was at Aldermaston Court, where the first private nuclear reactor in Britain, the Merlin project, was opened in 1959. However Aldermaston Court was abandoned in the mid-1960s and basic research concentrated at the new laboratory built in 1963 next to the Rugby factory where I worked in 1957.

The entire BTH site has been abandoned for manufacture though part is now owned and run by the American GE apparently as a test facility.

BTH is not entirely forgotten however. It is remembered in a street sign and in a war memorial designed by Lutyens. There is also a faint trace of the research laboratory, demolished and the site of a new executive housing estate developed under the name Edison Place, presumably by someone else with a science degree who sought better opportunities elsewhere.


THOMSON HOUSTON
WAY


IN MEMORY
OF THE MEN
OF
THE BRITISH

Site of A.E.I Central Research Laboratory, Rugby

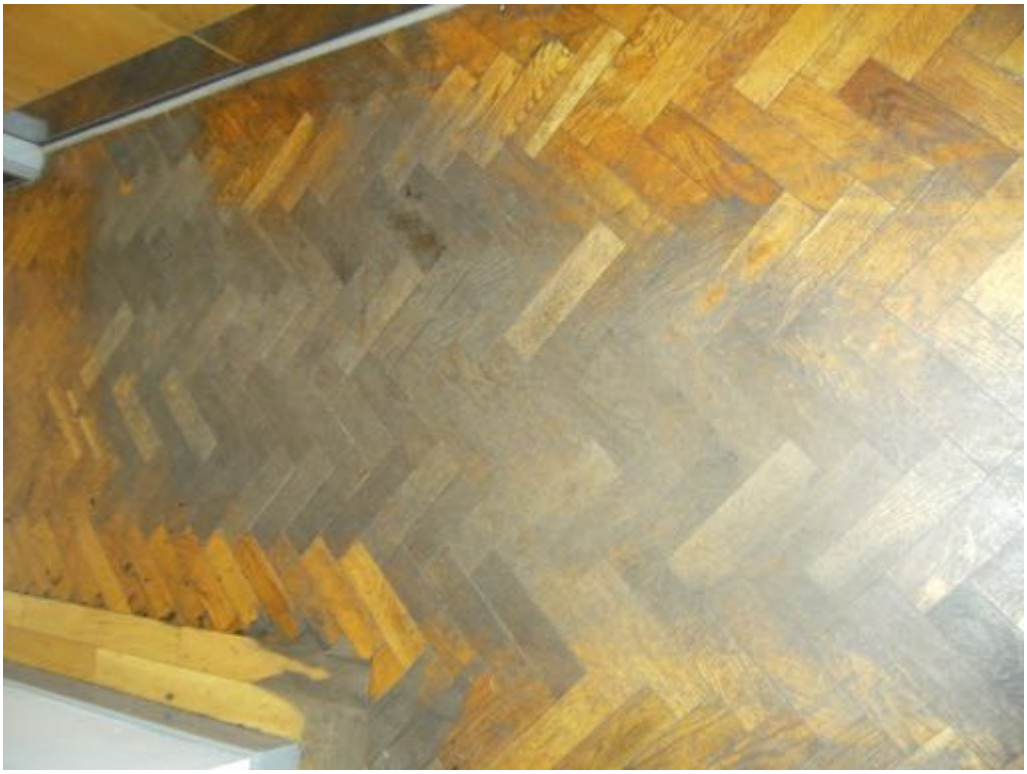
There was also an A.E.I. research laboratory in Manchester on the Trafford Park site which helped in the development of the first fully transistorised commercial computer in the world, the Metrovick 950, and the first British axial-flow jet engine, the Metrovick F.2. Like all else in Trafford Park, this is long gone.

It hardly needs mentioning that, soon after the AEI merger with GEC, the development laboratories of AEI (Woolwich), the companies telecommunication arm at Harlow and Woolwich were closed.

English Electric

English Electric was set up in 1919 primarily out of seized assets of German companies, primarily Siemens. It set up a central research laboratory in the 1920s, the Nelson Laboratory named after the company chairman. The company was taken over by GEC in 1968 and the Nelson Laboratory closed down. Its site is now part of the car-park for North Staffordshire police and partly on the site of Staffordshire University computer department (soon also to be closed). There is some trace of it in the university library now sheathed in yellow brick but inside an unmistakable 1930s building and named for no explained reason, the Nelson Library.

But the oddest memory of the laboratory is a mile or so away in a building that is now the refectory, Food for Thought, of the Public Health Department of the university, also now sheathed in bright brick. This was the building where the first commercial computers in the world were developed and assembled, the DEUCE machines. These were valve-machines and to protect these precious and fragile things if dropped, the wooden parquet floor of the building was covered in black rubber matting. All the buildings on the site including the refectory are now covered with a dull grey sisal carpet except for on small vestibule at the back entrance which has the original parquet black stains on it. These are the marks made by the rubber matting when it was torn up as the laboratory was decommissioned.



That's it. No plaque nor the slightest sign. But someone must have remembered to leave just this one space uncarpeted as the slightest of memorials. Or perhaps it was just that the contractor ran out of matting.

General Electric Company

In the early 1920s, the General Electric Company founded the Hirst Research Laboratory which spread out as rows of single storey buildings behind which a distinctive 60m radar mast built in WWII as part of the laboratories key role in developing radar, in particular the cavity magnetron.

It remained as this rather rambling building into the 1960s when I joined it for a brief period.

1. This is how the GEC Hirst Research Centre appeared during the 1960s.

In this decade, GEC plunged into a massive round of takeovers incorporating AEI and EE as well as Marconi to form the huge conglomerate then seen by the Labour government as the route to international industrial competitiveness. GEC soon showed its ambitions by closing the research laboratories of AEI and EE, in principle to focus the groups' research at the Hirst Centre. The laboratory was closed in the 1990s as GEC declined to eventually disappear into oblivion. The site is now a large housing development with the familiar ghostly street names shared with BTH in Rugby.


LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT
EDISON DRIVE
HA9


LONDON BOROUGH OF BRENT
HIRST CRESCENT
HA9

Other places

In this slaughter there were other places as well.

The Mullard Valve Company was formed by one Captain Mullard immediately after WWI though it was soon sold to Phillips, the Dutch electronics company. The company had a large research laboratory alongside the railway near Redhill employing around 500 people. It had the distinction of rejecting me for a job. The laboratory was demolished in 2009.

Marconi had its main laboratory and factory in Chelmsford. The 10 acre site was originally built in 1912. It was home to the first radio broadcast in 1920. Marconi operated from there until 2008, when it sold the site to Ashwell Property Group. The freehold of the entire site has now been sold to Bellway, one of the UK's largest house builders.

The Central Electricity Generating Board maintained laboratories at Leatherhead, Marchwood and Berkeley which at privatisation employed 3000 people, now all closed.

Plessey opened its Allen Clark Research Centre in 1964 at Caswell. It was taken over by GEC in 1989.

Finally, there is my first job site, the International Research and Development laboratory in Newcastle. Opposite the new shopping centre, once the site of part of the Parsons works and just up from the Siemens depot which takes the rest, there is a bare space which may be used for housing if a current planning application is allowed.

Site of I.R.D. laboratory, Newcastle

That's it, the place where the first superconducting electric motor was developed.

In the end does it matter? Within the memory of oldish people such as myself, Britain was a country with a dynamic electrical and electronic sector with a history full of firsts such as inventing computers and television and many other less well known but still important

innovations. Now it isn't. The companies which spurred this this enterprise have gone, their names are vague shadows. The industrial laboratories which produced such innovation are now housing estates or shopping precincts, the great factories of the North, which fed on the innovation of the places are also gone. They are gone like the pits and the mills.

It depends very much upon how one sees the future of Britain. Perhaps the service sector, the financial institutions, media companies, tourism and suchlike will provide a reasonable and sustainable future. Or perhaps these too will be sucked out to Shanghai or San Francisco, all except guided tours around the Tower of London or Stratford to Chinese visitors, curious to see the remains of Britain. The North as Goneland

Oldham

Oldham from Glodwick (1831)

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.

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.[5] There were also coal mines in and around the town.

Holebottom Colliery (Courtesy of Oldham Local Archives)

Elk Mill, Oldham

When the Elk Mill closed in 1998, cotton production in Oldham ceased. The mill was demolished in 1999.

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. (They are those chaps in caps behind him, I think).

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.

Empire Theatre

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 it 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.

Rainy City Roller Girls

Rainsborough never visited Oldham nor if he had passed by would he have seen anything. There is no coaching town, 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.

Still there are always 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.

Chapels

They stand as sentinels over parts of the north. Not so much Lancashire, which was always rather Catholic, nor in the lush western part of Yorkshire with its great minsters at York, Selby, Beverley and, once, Doncaster but over a broad swathe of the Pennines as great monuments to non-conformist religion.

Originally, non-conformism was a way of conducting Christian practice in remote areas away from the settled practice of the official church though after the Act of Uniformity in 1662 it came to mean those who failed to 'conform' and were ejected from their parishes and whose followers were for a time subject to some degree of persecution. In the words of a local historian (from whom much below is derived); "*Forbidden by law to go within five miles of their previous churches, homeless and with a constant threat of imprisonment, they naturally became evangelists. Willing to wander amongst their flocks and share their poverty, they brought a personal and dynamic Christianity to remote communities for the first time*".[6]

The Quakers, who refused to bear arms, pay tithes or swear oaths had a particularly hard time. The Established Church of England had great powers to hunt out and punish those whose thoughts, deeds or religious loyalties were elsewhere. In Todmorden, the curate throughout the period from when the Friends began to meet until shortly before the Toleration Act in 1689 was Henry Crabtree. He despised the Quakers and made it a priority to rid his catchment area of all dissenters. The Friends were persecuted, had their homes raided, were fined and imprisoned. Lydia Crossley, the wife of Richard Stansfield of Shore, was imprisoned at York Castle for refusing to pay a fine towards the stipend of the minister at Cross Stone Church. Although well able to afford the fine, she acted according to her conscience and refused. She died whilst in the prison.

Such were the Showbread Quakers who purchased a small plot of land around 1690 near Todmorden to bury their dead.

Showbread Quakers burial plot

It is the Quakers who seem to have set up the earliest meeting places in the Valley with the lintel of a house in Sowerby Bridge recording the date 1679 when one Joshua Smith, who also served his time in York Castle, set up a chapel in Sowerby Street.

After the aptly named Toleration Act in 1689, things eased somewhat for the non-conforming Christians and more chapels were built. At first they were modest buildings, not greatly differing from domestic houses. Then as congregations expanded and the new mills were built, their size and eminence grew (apart from the Quakers whose ambitions remained modest). They were also a fractious bunch with splits over minor devotional issues or, perhaps more often, over the egos of the ministers involved. They were not unlike the left in the 1970s except for their architectural ambition. After a visit to Todmorden, the Methodist preacher, Charles Wesley commented in a mood of Christian toleration that the local Baptists were "*a carnal, cavilling, contentious sects, always watching to steal away our children, and make them as dead as themselves*"

These non-conformists of whatever stripe were not Calvinists, they did not hold with pre-destination but held that salvation would be found by good works which could, of course, mean many things. For some it could mean assisting with building the huge chapels, for others agitating for social changes whilst it always implied the commitment to a good day's work; slackness and idleness were always the gravest of sins.

The buildings gradually grew in size and, dare one say it, grandeur

This modest Ebenezer chapel in Hebden Bridge built in 1777 was replaced by the Hope chapel further down the street in 1858 at a cost of £3,750.

The chapels were built facing square on to the road. God is everywhere and there was no patience with fripperies like aligning the building to the east. The interiors are plain with no statues or images, just appropriate texts though occasionally a touch lavish as in this slightly mad Unitarian church in Todmorden with its columns of coloured Italian marble.

The acoustics are usually superb providing ready-made venues for concerts even as the congregations dwindle.

Hope Baptist, Hebden Bridge

Unitarian Church, Todmorden

Hull

What would Rainsborough have seen in 1643 as he swept into mouth of the Hull River, one of the few safe harbours on the east coast, albeit twenty or so miles from the sea up the wide Humber estuary? Certainly the great tower of fourteenth century Holy Trinity church, built in part from bricks carried back as ballast in ships taking Yorkshire wool to Flanders.

He would probably have found the church divided by a wall along its transept as the army was stabling horses in one part. The church was already stripped of coloured glass and any pictures or statues; Hull was a very Protestant town. In 1643, it was under siege so he would also have seen the manned town-walls and the great bastions built at the eastern mouth of the Hull to prevent any seaborne invasion. All gone replaced by the docks which took over most of the riverside in the nineteenth century, now also gone.

What he would not have seen is Hull's monument to its Protestant past, a great gilded statue of William III erected in 1734; King 'Billy', and "Our Saviour" according to the legend on the base.

The Town Council issued a proclamation in 1688, the year of the Glorious Revolution that William of Orange had "*miraculously delivered the nation from those eminent dangers which threatened the perversion of religion and the introduction of tyranny and arbitrary government*". In the nineteenth century, ornate public lavatories were added underground the statue. Now closed, they are listed and have glass cisterns in which, legend has it, goldfish swan. Unfortunately this appears not to be true.

In truth, there is little else to see in Hull other than The Deep, a huge aquarium. One reason for this clicks in after walking around the centre for a couple of hours: Hull is mostly new. In bombing raids throughout 1941/42, 95% of Hull's houses were destroyed or damaged and most of the city centre went. The raids went largely unpublicised during the war because of concerns that the extent of the damage might inform the Germans so cities such as Coventry and Liverpool became much greater symbols of devastation. The result is a city centre that seems rather characterless. Drifting in on a railway from the west, past perhaps the most

The Pier and Humber Dock, Hull.

beautiful structure in England, the Humber bridge, Hull's outskirts seem mainly to be miles of sheds, probably distribution centres for what is now the main function of the city, an entrepôt for the 'stuff' which arrives at the docks now situated just downstream.

Hull has always been tied to the sea. It was set up by Edward I as an an outlet for the wool which was England's main export trade taken over the North Sea to the Flemish textile industry. Its full name, Kingston-on-Hull, is derived from the fact that it was the 'kings town'. The trade was both the main financier and also one of the main reasons for the Hundred Years War. Through the following centuries, Hull remained the port through which 'stuff' produced in the north was exported across the North Sea. Wharves along the Hull were replaced by docks built into the heart of the city, dozens of berths for small cargo vessels and ferries.

Hull was the centre for the Wilson Shipping Line founded in 1825 by one Thomas Wilson and initially based on importing Swedish iron ore. It grew under his sons to become the largest private shipping line in the world owning over 100 ships, the names of which all ended in 'O'. Bought by the Ellerman Line in 1916, it has now dwindled to two ro-ro ferries trading to Gothenburg. The success of the sons as ship-owners is now largely forgotten. Arthur Wilson is best remembered for the 'baccarat scandal' in 1890 when hosting Edward, Prince of Wales, and others, at his country house, all to up to see the St Leger. Accusations of cheating led to the disgrace of one guest, Sir William Gordon-Cumming, a 42-year-old decorated lieutenant colonel in the Scots Guards.

Downstream of the city, there is still a busy port mainly running ferries and importing goods. Little enough stuff goes out; mainly cars. The Humber Dock is now a marina.

There are decent pubs in Hull including the White Hart where legend has it, the good citizens decided in 1642 to exclude King Charles from the city thus precipitating the Civil War. Perhaps it was all the fishermen looking to spend the money earned from a tough trip though now the

one trawler left, the boldly named Arctic Corsair, is tied up as a museum. Mostly the pubs seem to hold the spirit of Philip Larkin sitting, one imagines, rather morosely in a corner. His statue stands in the rather fine Paragon Station apparently going somewhere though perhaps just leaving the bar of the station hotel, the Royal, which is rather besotted with the visit

fleetingly made by Queen Victoria, husband and five children in 1854.

Larkin does not seem to have been impressed with the bar at the Royal:

Light spreads darkly downwards from the high
Clusters of lights over empty chairs
That face each other, coloured differently.
Through open doors, the dining-room declares
A larger loneliness of knives and glass
And silence laid like carpet. A porter reads
An unsold evening paper. Hours pass,
And all the salesmen have gone back to Leeds,
Leaving full ashtrays in the Conference Room.
In shoeless corridors, the lights burn. How
Isolated, like a fort, it is -
The headed paper, made for writing home
(If home existed) letters of exile: Now
Night comes on. Waves fold behind villages.

The only real difference now is the absence of ashtrays.

Kiveton Park

Kiveton is an old place, at least according to the industrious local historical society[7]. Its name goes back to the Saxons, it was part of the estate of one, William de Warenne, a Norman companion of William at Hastings and thus a beneficiary of large chunks of England. It even had a very grand country-house, Kiveton Hall, one of the residences of the Dukes of Leeds until it was demolished in 1812, the disastrous result, so legend has it, of a another bet with another Prince of Wales. This is probably not true but, like anything else grand in Kiveton, it has gone. Even the rather grim Primitive Methodist chapel was demolished to make way for a Coop store.

Kiveton Primitive Methodist chapel

What Kiveton had in abundance was coal. First, picked up from outcrops, then dug out of small bell-mines then in December, 1867, the first shaft down to the Barnsley seam reached at a depth of 401 yards. Progressively the shafts went deeper to the Thorncliffe at 670 yards then the Silkstone. The Barnsley was worked out in the 1970s and the pit was shut in 1994.

The pit-head went soon after though the huge colliery baths, a Grade II listed building, stayed until demolished in 2013. Now the whole area is grassed and named, rather ominously, the Kiveton Community Woodland entered by the only reminder of the pit, the odd colliery offices.

Kiveton Colliery

Kiveton Colliery Baths demolished 2013

Kiveton colliery offices

The saving of Kiveton is that it is on the railway up to Sheffield. The old terraced pit-cottages were largely replaced by council housing and now it is mostly quiet commuter land with a lot of elderly men smoking leisurely in the street. Upon the grassy hill which was once the spoil-tip there is one of the steel sculptures that decorate many old industrial sites.

I used to know Kiveton rather well when I edited a coal-industry newsletter in the days when Britain had a coal industry. The company which owned this was registered there. In December, 2002, I wrote about the town and how it linked with the Rio Earth Summit held that year in which the theme had been 'sustainability'. Part of it went (forgive the heavy irony):

Kiveton park is where CICS Ltd, the publishers of UK Coal Review have their stainless steel and glass office complex. We are the cutting edge of its publishing and consultancy service, one of the dynamic growth areas of a modern economy. It is also the home of an underground mine, one of only three along with Maltby and Silverwood, now left within the boundaries of Rotherham Council. Ten years ago there were thirteen. The mine employs just over 700 men directly and maybe the same number indirectly. It takes away something over a million tonnes a year from the rocks beneath Kiveton Park and it is a struggle in a seam which is usually 1.3 metres thick. British Coal have put Kiveton on their closure list, and in the various alternative plans put forward to save the industry, Kiveton seldom features.

It would be difficult to call Kiveton a beautiful place. Tucked away alongside the M1 motorway, it hides itself in that seldom-visited part of England where Yorkshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire all meet. The coal lies under each. Kiveton is linked underground to the old Derbyshire mine of High Moor. It is rolling, rather vague country with narrow roads that seem uncertain where they are going. And yet, although the small towns and villages of the area seem oddly sited, at odds with the natural lie of the land, they are still old places. There is a Norman chapel down the road and a few fine houses, now mostly converted to some commercial use. But there is nothing in Kiveton to suggest much age nor precious little to suggest beauty. Almost all the villages in the area were built to serve mines, mostly long gone, which defined the purpose of the area.

Coal has been taken here for centuries and turned into wealth for those who owned the mines. Hundreds of millions of tonnes have poured through these valleys, going to the furnaces of the Rother Valley or further afield. It is an old coalfield and what is left is pulled from deep seams and pockets left untouched by those who were there before. Opencasting now goes back over the shallow seams, laying waste the fields to take the few tonnes left in them. But the best reserves are now deeper and thinner, less productive and less profitable…

… The actual beneficiaries of the wealth of the Yorkshire coalfields are not easy to pin down to a family or a person. But there will be plenty of embellishments to the Hampshire or Gloucestershire countryside which were bought by Yorkshire coal. Little ever went back to build either monuments or new businesses in Kiveton.

If, when, Kiveton closes, the thousand or so men made redundant will, almost inevitably, follow the same path as those from the other Rotherham pits whose progress has been charted by various studies from local universities. Two years after closure barely half will have found other jobs. Male unemployment in Rotherham stands at 22.8% and counting. The average age of the men will be 33, too young to get anything like the maximum redundancy payments. Most of the few thousand pounds will go to paying off the mortgage on an unsaleable house. Some will go towards starting up small businesses, advice about which will be available from local banks. The banks will be as helpful as they can. But mostly their advice will be negative, for the chances of a little boutique surviving in Kiveton are slim. And there won't be hordes of tourists to stop at a new wine-bar.

The centre piece of the Rio declarations was "sustainability". A fine, if somewhat elusive word which, as it happens, forms the centre of the Maastricht Treaty: "Sustainable growth in harmony with the environment" to be precise. John Major is hot on sustainability. There are many definitions but when it comes down to is simple enough; a principle of economics and social life that will leave a world for our children which is as well endowed as the one we received from our parents.

Kiveton is endowed with two main resources, coal and people. No one pretends that mines should never close nor that people should never move home. But if sustainable development is to mean anything then it must mean that we have to look hard at anything which discards the assets which we are given in favour of moving on to others. There is a phrase for a society which simply takes the best from a given place then discards the rest and simply moves on - frontier economies. It is supposed to be a bad thing not done by modern sophisticated societies. But when does closing down our coal reserves and moving on to those of Columbia's cease to be frontier economics and become conforming to the discipline of the market, something supposed to be good for us? Just when does it become sustainable to discard communities for which we have no further use and simply tell them to move on?

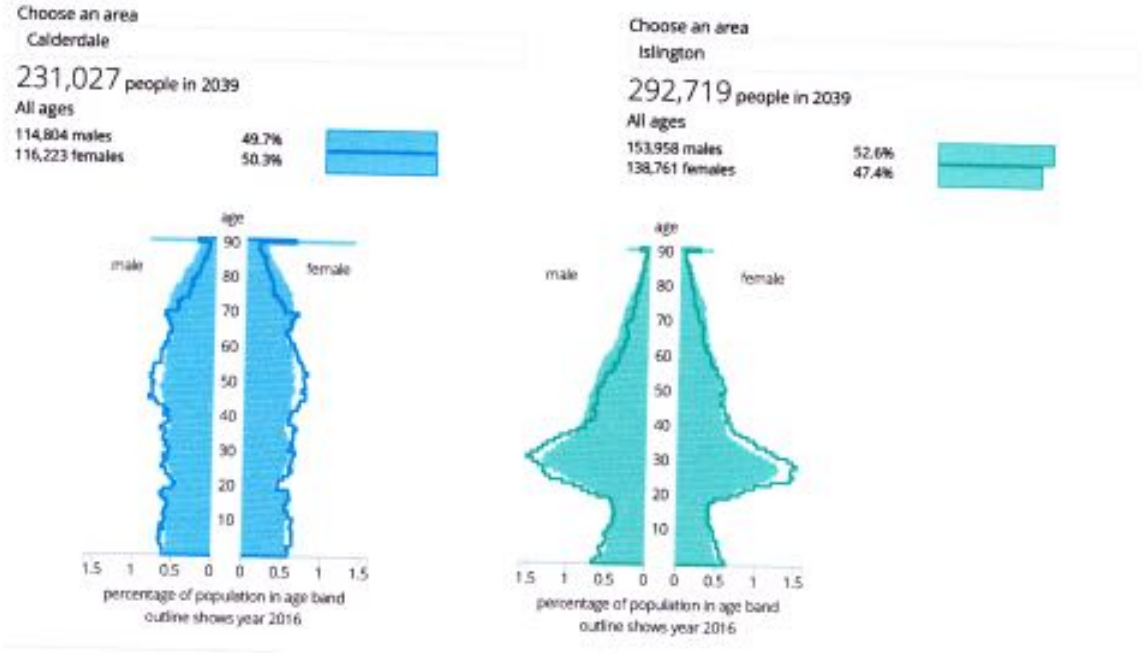
It is, in fact, a short step but a hard one to go from Rio to Kiveton Park. It requires a shift from rhetoric and good intentions to the concrete application of those intentions. Sustainability is not some constraint applied to developing countries if they are to receive our aid. It is how we handle our own resources and pass them on to our children.

Kiveton's children will decorate their trees, go to pantos and wake up early on Christmas Day just like everywhere else in Britain. Their dreams and their fears will be as real as any others. It is Christmas and whatever one feels about its religious content there is one absolutely specific vision of its story. That the hopes and fears of all the years are focussed down on one specific and concrete scene, one single child of one poor family. This is what we have, this is our endowment, this is the place from where we must start not from some imaginary land of plenty and great beauty. How we treat them will be a marker for how we propose to treat out world.

The extent to which Kiveton has been tossed aside in the same way as Oldham or Doncaster or Hull or many other such places in the north could be debated. It remains for some a pleasant place to live their lives. But the fact remains that some, at least, of those elderly men, who now smoke quietly in Kiveton Community Woodland, have never worked since leaving the pit for the last time in 1994 and that what has been lost in their lives and the lives of their children is a loss to us all.

Epilogue

The statistics do in this case tell the story.The Office of National Statistics recently released its forecasts of population growth in England.[8] These confirm the obvious; that the population of London will expand by 4.1 million by 2024 followed by similar, if slightly lower growth in the south-east. Other regions will also grow but much more slowly mainly because of an ageing population stubbornly refusing to die. Our children will flow to the south to share over-crowded houses whilst we grow older together. In 2039, it is projected that just over a quarter of the populations of both Doncaster and Calderdale will be over 65, almost exactly double the proportion in Islington whilst in Tower Hamlets, the projected go-to part of London, no doubt because it is the poorest, less than 10% will be over 65.



As the young flock to the south, it has never been clearer just how dramatically Horne's southern metaphor has won out. Essentially, his northern metaphor can be reduced to work and struggle whilst the southern metaphor means money and leisure. It is not that simple, of course, but the fact is that most northern towns have now lost that function which once defined them. Without much work and without struggle.

Leaving Oldham or Hull, Doncaster or Kiveton or a thousand places like them there always comes a single question; what's their point? Why are they there? This is a question never asked of, say, Salisbury or Guilford or a thousand other southern towns. Indeed, there are a swathe of northern towns, York, say, or Hexham which do not need to have any purpose, they are simply *there* and have been there effectively for ever without needing purpose or function.

The difference is that these towns of the grim north were founded with a specific function, work; the pits or the mills or the docks, the remains of which remain as brooding presences. Now that these are gone, there come these questions which cannot have any answer.

[1] www.youtube.com/watch?v=HwtSdJaPCSI if you are interested

[2] Donald Horne, *God is an Englishman*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1970

[3] *ibid* p. 58

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

[5] All according to Wikipedia

[6] Amy Binns, *Valley of a Hundred Chapels*, Grace Judson Press, 2013

[7] http://www.kivetonwaleshistory.co.uk

[8] https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationprojections/bulletins/subnationalpopulationprojectionsforengland/2014basedprojections#projected-age-structure-population-aged-65-and-over-growing-fastest