

# **THE LAND OF LOST CONTENT**

or

A Journey Through the Country Formerly Known as England

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

**Bertolt Brecht (1936)**

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# INTRODUCTION

This book began as a journey by myself, a voyage to discover the region in which I had lived for twenty-five years, the North, having moved from the region in which I had been born, grew up and spent most of my adult years, the South, in particular London. In this time I had travelled widely but never much into the region which had in many ways shaped my country. After describing this journey, which involved many deviations and separate visits, I finish with some thoughts about what I had seen.

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 a lot 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 rather odd situation is almost defined by this state's name; the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, usually reduced to the U.K. Exactly what comprises 'Great Britain' goes unstated, presumably the kingdoms of England, Wales and Scotland. The peculiarity of this nomenclature can be seen annually in the rugby tournament, the Six Nations which includes the legal states of France and Italy plus four other 'nations', England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland.

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 first, all the other constituents of the country which came to be called England, then the rest of what came to be called 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 remained 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.<sup>1</sup>*

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.

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<sup>1</sup> H.V.Morton, *In Search of England*, Methuen, 2013, p.14



## 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.*" 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, nominally 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. King 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 in recent times 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 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 full 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.<sup>2</sup>*

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 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*

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<sup>2</sup> Donald Horne, *God is an Englishman*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1970



*they could not understand; in that case society was to be protected from their ignorant rapacity.*<sup>3</sup>

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.*<sup>4</sup>

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 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 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:

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<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p. 58

<sup>4</sup> quoted in Martin Wiener, *English Culture and the Decline of the Industrial Spirit, 1850-1980*, CUP 1981

*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 our journey in it.





## A JOURNEY

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### The Most Beautiful Bus Journey in England

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

*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.



WAINHOUSE TOWER

After this the view over rolling upland pasture opens up with, down below, the old 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.<sup>5</sup>*

Its fair to say that Hughes, who retired to fish in Dorset, had 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.

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<sup>5</sup> Ted Hughes and Fay Godwin, *Remains of Elmet*, Faber and Faber, 1979

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.<sup>6</sup>*

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

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<sup>6</sup> Daniel Defoe, *A Tour through Great Britain*, p.491, Penguin Classics, 1978, ISBN 978-0140430660



TODMORDEN UNITARIAN CHURCH

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"*.







*BURNLEY UNDER PENDLE HILL*

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



*TOWNELEY HALL*

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 there 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 the the nearby town 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



*CLARION HOUSE*

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





*BURNLEY TECHNICAL INSTITUTE*

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 just clings on to Premier status.

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### **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. 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



*CRAWSHAWBOOTH FRIENDS MEETING HOUSE*

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.

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## **Oldham**

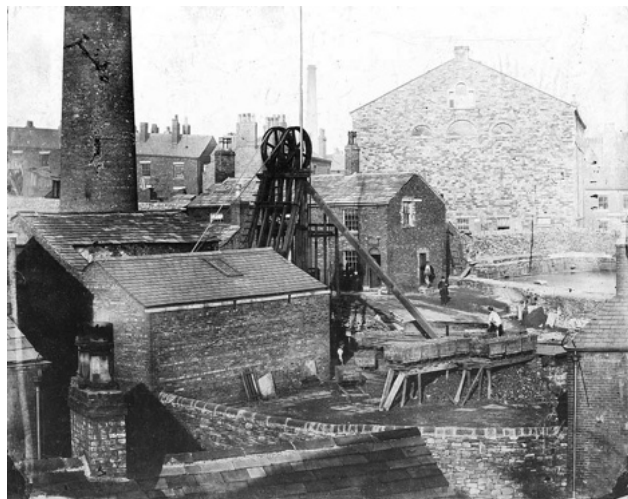
It is difficult to see Oldham as the rural space which once it was. In this picture of 1831 by a local artist, it is just starting its spectacular rise as an industrial city with its first factory chimneys and house fires. At this time, it had a population of around 21,000 which by 1860 was upwards of 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



*OLDHAM IN 1831*

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.

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.



*HOLE BOTTOM COLLIERY, OLDHAM*





*RAINY CITY ROLLER GIRLS*

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. In 2023, it announced its final closure.

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





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

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### **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, Stoke is 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. 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 read: *'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.

My bus journey ended in Stoke but this was not the end of my northern journeys which took me by other routes to other places.



## OTHER PLACES

### 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.

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 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 town's 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 Thomas Rainsborough, the Leveller leader, 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. 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.



*DONCASTER MANSION HOUSE*





EARL OF DONCASTER HOTEL

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.

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. The 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.

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*

## Hull

What would Thomas 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*".

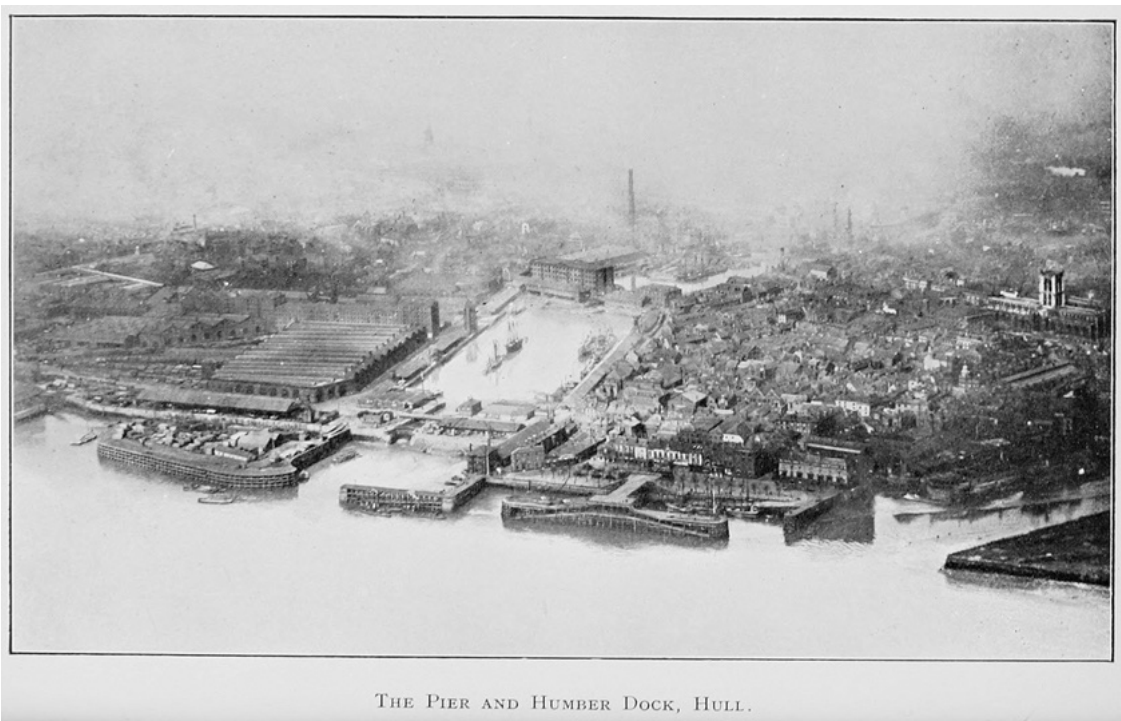




In the nineteenth century, ornate public lavatories were added underground the statue. Now closed, they are listed and have glass cisterns in which, legend has it, goldfish swam. Unfortunately this appears not to be true.

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 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 outlet for the wool which was England's main export trade taken over the North Sea to the Flemish textile industry. Its full





ROYAL HOTEL, HULL

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.

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## **Kiveton Park**

Kiveton is an old place, at least according to the industrious local historical society<sup>7</sup>. 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 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.

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 remainder of the old 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 leisurely smoking in the street.

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, 1992, 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.*

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<sup>7</sup> <http://www.kivetonwaleshistory.co.uk>

*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. Open-casting 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 economies 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 our 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, some visited on these journeys, could be debated. It remains for some a pleasant place to live their lives. But the fact remains that some 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.



# TRAVELS IN GONELAND

This chapter is about a rather different journey, one which charts not any specific route but rather a drift through my own history, in particular the industrial research laboratories where I started my career. It begins with a brief history of industrial development.

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.

The next stage of the industrial development based on coal also can 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

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 mill in the world employing over 8,000 people. Now about 2000 work there in hotels and small enterprises.

*CROSSLEY MILL*







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.

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## **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 triumvirate 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.



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

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



*BRITISH THOMPSON HOUSTON LATER A.E.I, RUGBY*

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 in 1985.

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 its 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.

*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.

C.H. Parsons got into the electrical business via manufacturing steam turbines for ships in the nineteenth-century after 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.

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## **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 Wedgwood-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.

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## **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.

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 where I worked in 1957 built in 1963 next to the Rugby factory.



*ORIGINAL RESEARCH LABORATORY, A.E.I., RUGBY*

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.



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.

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## 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.

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## 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.

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.



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## 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 and closed.

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 old 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 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

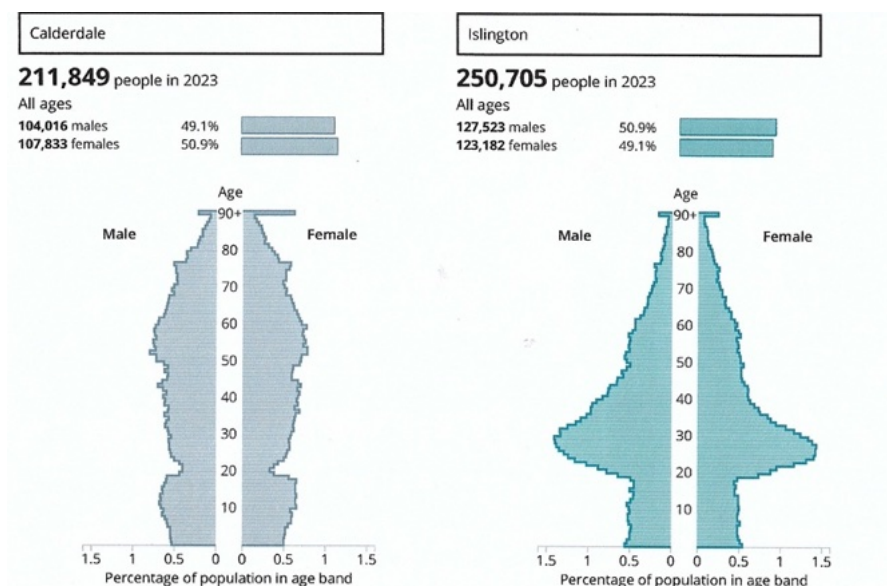
# THOUGHTS

There are several journeys described in this book undertaken over several years, the last made by bus in 2019 before the Covid epidemic forced us back into our homes.

The bus journey 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 to write this in January of 2020, I realised that what had begun as a largely 'red' had turned mostly 'blue' in the election of 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 Conservative 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.

The statistics do in this case tell the story. The Office of National Statistics recently released its forecasts of population growth in England.<sup>8</sup> These confirm the obvious; that the population of London will expand by 4.1 million by 2023 followed by similar, if slightly lower growth in the



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

south-east. Other regions will also grow but much more slowly mainly because of an ageing population stubbornly refusing to die. The age distribution in two boroughs, one in Yorkshire and one in London are shown above. 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 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.

The statistics of income also spell out the story. To take specific examples; in Bradford, the mean household income was £19,900 in 2018, in Bolton, £22,400 and in Middlesbrough, £20,700 whilst in Islington, it was £41,900, in Harrow £41,400 and in Tunbridge Wells, £43,900. Overall, according to the ONS:

*Of the 50 areas with the highest incomes:*

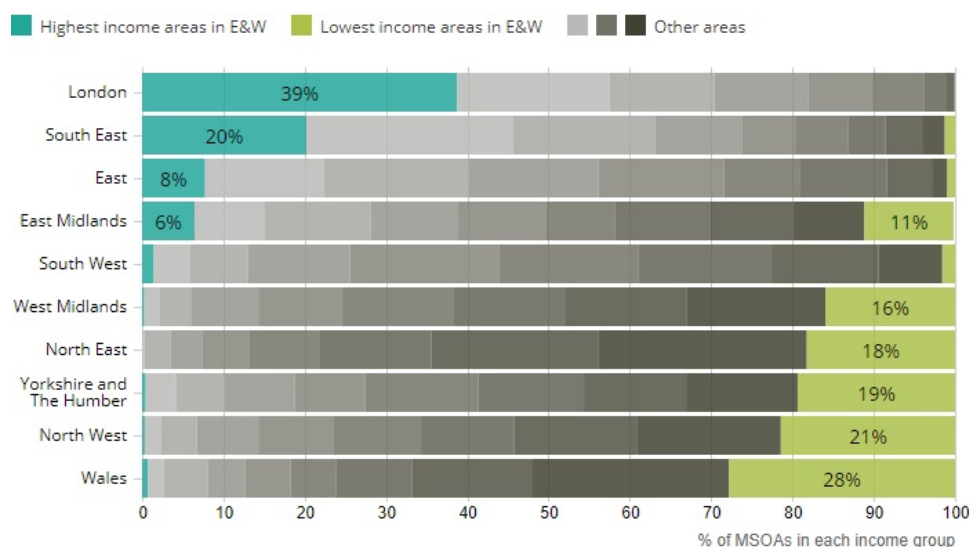
- 41 areas were in London, including areas within the local authorities of the City of London, Wandsworth, Richmond upon Thames, Westminster, and Kensington and Chelsea
- three areas were in the South East, within Wokingham, Vale of White Horse, and Basingstoke and Deane
- two areas were in the East Midlands within Nottingham

*The North West (Manchester), the West Midlands (Birmingham), the East (St Albans) and Wales (Cardiff) each had one area in the top 50 for income.*

*The North East, Yorkshire and South West regions had no local areas in the top 50 for income before housing costs.*

*There was a more even split between the regions in terms of the local areas that were in the bottom 50 for income before housing costs, than there was for the top 50.*

*Yorkshire had the most local areas in the bottom 50 (19 of 50), including areas within the local authorities of Bradford, Calderdale, Leeds and Sheffield. The East Midlands was next with 14 of the bottom 50 areas, all within Leicester and Derby.*



Source: Income estimates for small areas, Office for National Statistics

*There were small numbers in the West Midlands (9 of 50), all within Birmingham, and the North West (7 of 50), and one in Wales (Cardiff). The North East, East, London, South East and South West had no local areas in the bottom 50 for income before housing costs.<sup>9</sup>*

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 though struggle remains.

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. Of course, there are also 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.

The loss of work has been put into startling reality by the work of Makin-Waite in Burnley. He writes:

*Over 30,000 Burnley people held manufacturing jobs back in 1950 (nearly 60 per cent of the town's employed population). This number declined in the 1970s, largely offset by jobs in services. But then, in the decade from 1981, the number of manufacturing jobs in Burnley fell from 17,786 (45 per cent of the town's workforce) to 12,870 (36 per cent). At the same time, employment across **all** industries and services fell from nearly 40,000 to just over 35,000. The 1990s saw further substantial job losses, and by 2003, manufacturing employed just 26 per cent of Burnley workers. The early 2000s saw particular attrition: by 2008, there were half as many manufacturing jobs in Burnley as there been in 1999.<sup>10</sup>*

One can exaggerate the importance of manufacturing jobs, as such they have often been dirty and dangerous, and after all most of the jobs in London are in the service sector. But the kind of service jobs offered in Burnley are badly paid and offer little like to sense of pride which once came from actually making things.

As the population graph shown above shows, the populations of the two sample boroughs in London and the North 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%.<sup>11</sup> 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.

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<sup>9</sup> [www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/smallareamodelbasedincomeestimates/financialyearending2018](https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/personalandhouseholdfinances/incomeandwealth/bulletins/smallareamodelbasedincomeestimates/financialyearending2018)

<sup>10</sup> Mike Makin-White, *On Burnley Road, Class, Race and Politics in a Northern English Town*, Lawrence and Wishart, 2021

<sup>11</sup> <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/social-policy/health/constituency-data-how-healthy-is-your-area/>



*PETERLOO MONUMENT, MANCHESTER*

Of course, they are also poorer. Analysis by Professor Philip McCann<sup>12</sup> 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 spun 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 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 travelled; 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 place to resist being forced to change from the old Poor Law which paid something to impoverished families into building a workhouse in which these unfortunates were

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00343404.2019.1619928>



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*

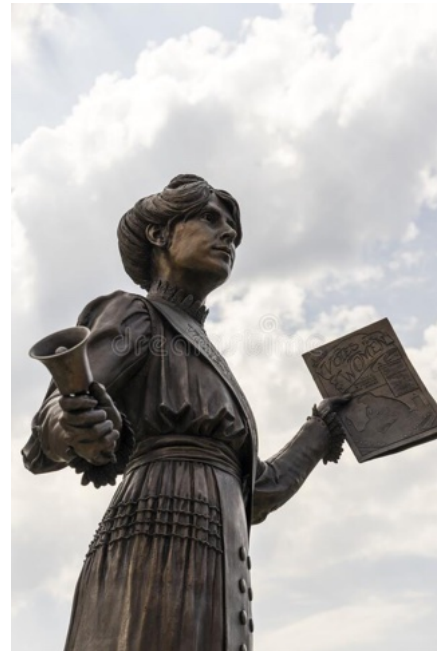
After Chartism, resistance spread in many directions, notably into forming trade unions and the socialist parties which later formed the Labour Party. One of the notable struggles was for the right for women to vote and one of its most celebrated leaders, Emmeline Pankhurst, was born in Manchester. Her statue now stands in St. Peters 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.



*EMMELINE PANKHURST*



*ANN KENNEY*

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 has had 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.

There is no simple solution to this issue of grinding inequality. There have been efforts to move jobs, indeed entire institutions north such as putting the headquarters of the NHS in Leeds or part of the BBC in the fancifully named Media City in Manchester. But the apparently inexorable pull of London where the money is continues.

The political future of this country is precarious not to say disturbing. The progressive left has been internally riven by the overthrow of Jeremy Corbyn and the resulting schisms. It is certainly true that Corbyn offered little more than the old nostrums of the 1970s decade in which he was politically tutored but the new leadership of Labour has little to offer. Meanwhile protest movements such as Extinction Rebellion swirl around with little coherence other than protest.

The only point of reference I can offer is not a pleasant or optimistic one. Sitting in lonely exile in the USA, Auden wrote a despairing poem about another key moment in human history, 3rd September, 1939:

*I sit in one of the dives  
On Fifty-second Street  
Uncertain and afraid  
As the clever hopes expire  
Of a low dishonest decade;  
Waves of anger and fear  
Circulate over the bright  
And darkened lands of the earth,  
Obsessing our private lives;  
The unmentionable odour of death  
Offends the September night.*

...

*Faces along the bar  
Cling to their average day:  
The lights must never go out,  
The music must always play,  
All the conventions conspire  
To make this fort assume  
The furniture of home;  
Lest we should see where we are,  
Lost in a haunted wood,  
Children afraid of the night  
Who have never been happy or good.*

...

*All I have is a voice  
To undo the folded lie,  
The romantic lie in the brain  
Of the sensual man-in-the-street  
And the lie of Authority  
Whose buildings grope the sky:  
That there is no such thing as the State  
And no one exists alone;  
Hunger allows no choice  
To the citizen or the police;  
We must love one another or die.*

*Defenceless under the night  
Our world in stupor lies;  
Yet, dotted everywhere,  
Ironic points of light  
Flash out wherever the Just  
Exchange their messages:  
May I, composed like them*

*Of Eros and of dust,  
Beleaguered by the same  
Negation and despair,  
Show an affirming flame.*

History shows that his despair then was not wholly justified. Let us affirm his final message: that we must love one another or die.