IAN McMILLAN

'A BLAST OF FRESH AIR' *OBSERVER*

NEITHER NOWT NOR SUMMAT

IN SEARCH OF THE MEANING OF YORKSHIRE

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian McMillan has lived all his life in Darfield, a village near Barnsley. He counts himself a proud Yorkshireman, and he knows that his affection for his home has shaped him in more ways than he understands. So Ian embarks on a journey in search of Yorkshire past, present and imaginary, to try to find out what lies at the heart of Britain's most independant-minded county and its people, and perhaps learn something too.

From Elsecar Old Colliery to York Minister, via Ilkley, Hull and Jesus Not Horsbury, Ian tries to answer important questions like: is Yorkshirethe most competitive county? What is Yorkshire Time, and how long is 'in a bit'? And what do you hear if you hold a pork pie up to your ear?

Irreverant and heartfelt, funny and sincere, *Neither Nowt Nor Summat* is a beautifully written account of Yorkshire, by one of its favourite and most dedicated sons.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ian McMillan always wanted to be a writer but all the books in the library were written by people who lived in Surrey, not the Yorkshire Coalfield. He attended North Staffordshire Polytechnic, drummed in Barnsley's first folk-rock band and worked in a tennis ball factory before finally becoming a writer. He's been Poet in Residence at Barnsley Football Club and 'Beat Poet' for Humberside Police. He currently presents *The Verb*, Radio 3's cabaret of the word, and has also worked extensively for Radio's 1, 2, 4 and Five Live. He's performed in schools, theatres, arts centres, fields and front rooms.

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NEITHER NOW NOR SUMMAT

IN SEARCH OF THE MEANING OF YORKSHIRE

IAN McMILLAN

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To ‘Mad’ Geoff Utley, who cut Darfield’s hair and told Darfield’s stories

IN MY END IS MY BEGINNING

WE'RE IN DARFIELD, a village in the heart of the old South Yorkshire Coalfield, about five miles from Barnsley and ten miles from Doncaster on the old salt route that became the A635; a settlement that was recorded in the *Domesday Book* as a field full of deer near a river, a place that has gone through changes so incremental as to be barely noticeable and so sudden as to be like that moment when a car windscreen shatters as a chucked rock slaps it. Put it another way: the Saxon stones in the tower of All Saints' Church have weathered quite a bit over hundreds of years, and all the local pits closed in the space of a turbulent decade between the 1980s and 1990s, leaving a moonscape that was quickly grassed over or left to rust.

It's that time of year when autumn waits round the corner like someone who's going to jump out and surprise you. Summer is ready to stumble and fall, gasping for breath.

I wake up early, like I always do, and I remember my scary and repetitive dream:

I'm ambling down Wombwell High Street, two miles from Darfield, on a dramatically foggy morning; I've been to the butcher's and I'm carrying a pork pie like a servant of the royal family might carry a golden and symbolic gift at a ceremony. Suddenly, as is the way in dreams, I'm surrounded by a menacing group of people in ragged clothes who, as though they are the chorus of a musical, are singing, 'Not Yorkshire Enough! Not Yorkshire Enough! Tha might think tha'r Yorkshire, but tha'r Not Yorkshire Enough!', like a crowd at a Conference North game.

I'm disconcerted in my dream. I hold up my pork pie as a badge of Yorkshireness. 'It's a Potter's un, tha knows!' I say in what southerners call my Fruity Yorkshire Brogue. I take a huge bite from the pie to show how very Yorkshire I am. Yet the crowd are not impressed; they advance towards me, their eyes shining with a terrible light, shouting, 'Not

Yorkshire Enough! Not Yorkshire Enough!' The words make my head ring like a ship's bell and pie-detritus escapes from my mouth, twisting and turning in the air like smoke, because this is a dream …

I glance at the clock: 04.06. Pit time, my wife would call this. It used to be time for the early shift, the shivering wait for the miners on the corner of Nanny Marr Road and School Street, hoping the Houghton Main Colliery bus would turn up soon. This dream, and variations on it, is one I've been having on and off for months now. Like all dreams, I guess it's a distorting mirror of my real thinking, which is: am I Yorkshire Enough? Am I really, truly Yorkshire Enough? And what would it mean to be Yorkshire Enough, anyway? How do I get to the bottom of the idea of what Yorkshire is, and where I fit into its ever-shifting mosaic?

Now, though I was born in Darfield and I've lived here all my life, I've got a confession to make: I'm keeping a secret as dark as this bedroom. I'm only a half-tyke; my mother was from Great Houghton, the next village to Darfield, but my dad was Scottish. He was from a place called Carnwath in Lanarkshire, a village so obscure that when Carnwathians went into town they went to Biggar. My parents met as pen-pals in the war, got together a couple of times for nervous afternoon tea in settings like the Queen's Hotel in Leeds and then, in October 1943, got married on a 48-hour pass in Peebles before my dad disappeared to the Far East with his Royal Navy ship and my mam, who was in the WAAFs, went back to base at RAF Blackbrook where they arrested her for going AWOL. AWOL for love: it's our family's abiding myth, of the Yorkshire lass and the handsome tartan sailor boy, love across the border, across the water.

And maybe because of that enduring story I sometimes feel that the county is somewhere to visit like my dad did, somewhere to go to rather than somewhere to be from, somewhere to romanticise and make fabulous. I feel like

I’m an outsider, someone who will forever be standing in the slightly overheated conservatory of the house called Yorkshire, tapping on the window, wanting to come in and sit down on the settee.

Never a sofa in Yorkshire, of course: always a settee.

And maybe this is what makes me want to describe the county, as much to myself as everyone else. Maybe this is why I want to write this book.

I’m often called upon to write about and comment on Yorkshire as some kind of home-grown expert but it strikes me that I don’t really know the whole of it at all, I’m just familiar with my wrinkled neck of the woods: villages like Darfield, Great Houghton, Wombwell, Elsecar, Goldthorpe, Grimethorpe, Thurnscoe and Jump, towns like Barnsley and Doncaster, regions like the Dearne Valley and the old metropolitan county of South Yorkshire but there’s so much more to Yorkshire than this, and I’m going to try and find it. I’m going to define the essence of this sprawling place as best I can, to me and to anybody else who’ll listen. I can’t really be a Professional Corner-of-Yorkshire-Man, after all. I’ve got to be a Professional Yorkshireman, if you’ll pardon the cliché. Normally I don’t like that phrase when others use it of me, but if I use it of myself that’ll be okay. As I often say, when prodded, I’d rather be a Professional Yorkshireman than an Amateur Lancashireman.

Only joking. No, I’m not joking.

I’m going to confirm or deny the clichés, too, holding them up to see where the light gets in.

You know the ones I mean: Yorkshire people are tight. Yorkshire people are arrogant. Yorkshire people wear blinkered Yorkshire glasses that see places like Lancashire as a fetid swamp. Yorkshire people eat a Yorkshire Pudding before every meal, including Christmas dinner and Chinese takeaways. Yorkshire people solder a t’ in front of every word they use. Yorkshire people are rarely called Alphonse and if they are they shorten it to Alph. Yorkshiremen call

their wives and girlfriends Our Lass unless they're in Sheffield in which case they call them Our Gert. People from Yorkshire start every sentence with, 'Well, speaking as a Yorkshireman/woman…' Empty lies, the lot of them.

Most of them.

I'm going to start here, in this village, and radiate out like a ripple in a pond. I don't want to go to the obvious places, either; I want to be like a bus-driver on my first and last morning on the job, getting gloriously lost, turning up where I shouldn't. That's what Dr Johnson and James Boswell did, of course, when they went on their trip around the Hebrides in 1773; they had an itinerary but they kept, literally, getting blown off course because they did the trip on the grip of winter. If you can be blown off course on a train that's what I want to happen to me.

I want to have chance encounters of the sort I had when me and my mate, the late Martyn Wiley, recreated Johnson and Boswell's trip for a radio programme in the early 1990s. We'd ended up on the Isle of Coll in the Inner Hebrides and we'd approached the anti-nirvana that all makers of travel programmes end up in sooner or later: Interesting Character Fatigue. We'd interviewed so many amusing crofters with excitable dogs and eccentric ancients in Cro-Magnon cardigans that we didn't want to talk to anybody ever again for the whole of our natural lives.

We left the recording equipment in the room of the pub we were staying in and went to the bar.

'Two pints of bitter!' I said, using a loud voice like Johnson used to when he burst into smoky hovels to harangue the Gaelic speakers huddled round a dying peat fire.

A man on a high stool looked at me. He was completely covered in soot because he was the island chimney sweep, I learned later.

‘I can guess where you come from in three guesses,’ he said, a cloud of soot escaping from the area around his mouth into the afternoon. ‘Just order that beer again.’

I did so, then I looked at him.

‘Barnsley!’ he said.

‘Close,’ I replied, pretending to be distant and cool, but secretly impressed.

He stared into space, thinking hard. More soot-flurries escaped. ‘Wombwell,’ he announced with a hint of triumph.

‘Closer,’ I said. He drummed his fingers on the bar. He scratched his stubbled chins. Finally, he spoke.

‘Darfield. You come from Darfield.’ I was amazed.

‘How on earth can you do that?’ I asked. He shrugged.

‘It’s just something I’ve always been able to do,’ he said, and glugged his half-and-a-dram.

‘Can I get my tape recorder and interview you?’ I asked.

He said that I could, but that I’d have to meet him in the churchyard in half an hour because he was just off to cut the grass around the gravestones. I went to the room to check the batteries were working.

Half an hour later, Martyn and I wandered to the churchyard where we found him slumped on a tomb, limp as a glove-puppet between shows. In the gap between talking to us and performing his grass-cutting duties, he’d somehow got spectacularly and disastrously drunk. I held the microphone in front of his beery breath.

‘Just tell me what you said before, about Wombwell and Darfield,’ I said, despairingly.

He responded with the old Andy Stewart number, ‘A Scottish Soldier’, his voice breaking with emotion.

I asked around afterwards and people said he’d never shown that skill before but it made me feel obscurely proud of the way I spoke, and of the way it could be so easily identified with a square mile or so.

The ferry came and we left the island, so I never had chance to ask him anything else, which is a shame but it’s

also a relief because maybe, as I surmised years later, he'd just read my address on the hotel registration card. Still, it was a neat trick.

I want to be like my Uncle Charlie who couldn't read or write so couldn't follow signs and was flummoxed by maps but would drive for miles in his green Ford Anglia, registration number 4095 HE, relying on guesswork, dead reckoning, and the kindness or wickedness of strangers. When he got bored he'd jerk into reverse for a laugh, which frightened Mrs Fareham when she was walking to the dancing club. I might try that, too.

Today, though, I'll do what I always do: go downstairs and venture out on my early stroll. I've been walking these streets for more than half a century, and I've been shaped by them in more ways than I care to remember. My stroll always take me down to the newsagent's and then down Snape Hill past the place where the post-box used to be that I dropped a threepenny bit in as a child because I thought it was a rebellious and transgressive thing to do, and past my old junior school, which was called Low Valley Primary, and is now rebranded The Valley Primary. Low has gone.

I was born in 1956 so that means I went to school in the West Riding of Yorkshire, a glorious education authority run by a god-like genius called Sir Alec Clegg who said that all children were creative; he wanted the young people in his schools to feel that education was about making them better human beings, more rounded citizens, often through the media of poetry, art, music and contemporary dance to music clattered out by enthusiastic infants on shining glockenspiels.

Sadly, Clegg wasn't a Yorkshireman; he was from Derbyshire, but he was transplanted here and flourished like a pot plant placed with love on the right sill. We accepted him, though. He became ours, another outsider who shaped the county in his own image from 1945 until

his retirement in 1974 when the West Riding was screwed up and thrown away.

A string quartet came to our school each term, made up of peripatetic music teachers; each time they came they played a piece by Haydn that stops and starts again, and each time it fooled us, even the kids in the top class who'd heard it many times before. They'd stop: we'd clap. They'd start again: we'd go, 'Awwww,' and wait until the end, when we weren't sure whether to clap or not. Mrs Roche always had to start us off, slapping her leg like a principal boy.

A van would arrive packed with abstract art and stuffed animals. We'd gaze at the pictures and someone would ask what it meant and Mr Manley would say, 'It means what it looks like, lad, and this afternoon you'll be drawing something like it,' and that's exactly what we did. We didn't know it at the time, but this was an education driven by something you'd have to call Love.

In a speech given at Bingley College of Education just before he retired, Sir Alec Clegg quoted a reference Michelangelo had brought with him to show the Pope before he got employed to paint the Sistine Chapel: 'The bearer of these presents is Michelangelo the sculptor … his nature is such that he requires to be drawn out by kindness and encouragement – but if love be shown him and he be treated really well, he will accomplish things that will make the whole world wonder.'

I'm very lucky to have been educated like that, even if my rendition of abstract collage did make Mrs Yelland shake her head and purse her lips. Yorkshire for me has always meant love, though. But don't tell the lads at Oakwell next time Barnsley are losing 3-0 to a team from south of the Trent.

Clegg also had some odd ideas, mind you: we had a few visits from a temperance activist who warned us of the dangers of alcohol. I knew all about these dangers because my dad was a lifelong teetotaller who had signed the

pledge as a young man in the Royal Navy in the late 1930s, giving up the tot of grog that they still handed out in those days. Indeed, in the tiny upstairs room in our house on Barnsley Road that he called the lobby, I once found his framed copy of the pledge, with a frightening picture of the great god Neptune stabbing a sea serpent with the words THE DEMON DRINK etched on its scaly flanks.

Two of the temperance man's illustrated arguments stick in my mind. He would hold the audience, even the squirming infants, with his gaze of tempered steel and say in a deep voice that rumbled and rolled and has lingered in my audio memory: 'A friend of mine went for a long walk on a summer's day and at the end of the walk he was hot and tired so he went into a pub and asked the publican, "My man, could you give me a cheese sandwich and a pint of beer?" and, do you know, boys and girls, I can understand the cheese sandwich but I can't …' And here he would slow down and each of his next few words would be beaten out with a steady rhythm '… understand. The. Pint. Of. Beer.'

He stopped with a flourish and I tried to understand why you had to understand a pint of beer.

About halfway through his talk, he did something startling and radical. He put his hand in his pocket and pulled out what was obviously, even to our junior school eyes, a piece of brown wool. He shook the wool dramatically.

'This, boys and girls, is a worm.' I could see Mrs Hudson trying not to roll her eyes. 'I'll drop it in this glass of water and, look, it's happy to wriggle around and swim in it because …' The percussion began again. '… Water. Can. Not. Hurt. The. Worm.'

I thought Mrs Hudson's eyes were going to roll out of their sockets and round the corner to Pitt Street. He fished the wool out of the water and dropped it into a second glass.

‘Now, boys and girls, in this glass we have beer. Bitter beer.’

Mr Owen was trying not to smile. He was probably reciting the names of the kings and queens of England and the manner of their deaths in his head.

‘And look: The. Worm. Is. Dead.’ He pulled out the wool and it lay limply over his hand. ‘Boy and girls. That is what beer can do.’

He nodded to Mrs Hinchliffe and she began to play ‘Hills of the North Rejoice’ and we filed out, unsure whether to sing or not. I turned round and saw that he was putting the wool into a tiny cardboard box. Maybe it was a worm after all.

A wonderful example of the West Riding’s immersive attitude to the curriculum was The Day Mrs York Chased the Goat. It would have been 1963 and I was in Mrs Hudson’s class. A note came round from Mr Owen as we were doing our sums. Mrs Hudson read it to herself and frowned. She folded the note away and slipped it into her drawer.

‘We won’t be going out to play today, children,’ she said, ‘We’ll do some drawing in the classroom instead.’ We could detect an unusual note of nervousness in her chapel-alto voice.

Suddenly we heard a clattering kerfuffle and we saw Mrs York, the considerable school secretary, charging across the hall brandishing one of those long wooden poles you opened the window with. We crowded to the window, misting it up with our trembling breath. Mrs York, like Don Quixote in a skirt and top from Thurnscoe market, was tilting at a goat. The goat scuttled away, its feet rattling and slithering on the floor that the caretaker, Mr Rothin, had polished to perfection the night before. Mr Owen appeared, waving a vivid red fire extinguisher, even though neither Mrs York nor the goat was alight. However, the

combination of the window-pole and the fire extinguisher subdued the goat and it was hustled outside where it ran off towards the Drapery Co-op, scattering some women who were just making their way to the Knit'n'Natter at the church hall.

The whole class sat down again, reluctantly, trying to prolong the magical moment for as long as possible.

'Well,' said Mrs Hudson, 'we know what we're going to write about today in our news books, don't we? And why don't we see if we can write a poem about what happened out there with the goat and Mrs York and Mr Owen? If you need help with your spelling, come and see me, but let's get some ideas down on paper first.'

I think that the man I am now was born then, in the distant 1960s at Low Valley Primary School, in a goat's sharp absence and my recreating of it in a WRCC exercise book, my concentrating tongue protruding. In a room that was briefly noisy with the sound of the Camplejohn's bus taking the afternoon shift to Darfield Main, changing gear as it turned the corner by the Astoria Ballroom. In a room that smelled of crayons and brimmed with the idea that to write experience is to make it real.

Not Yorkshire Enough, eh? Let's see.

THE DISTANT PAST AND ME

SOMETIMES I'M ARROGANT and stupid enough to imagine that Yorkshire somehow didn't really exist until that snowy day in January 1956 when I slithered into the county crying in a Barnsley accent. I don't think that's just me, it's everybody: we find it hard to slip from memory to history and to see the links between the two. A lot of us find it hard to imagine a world without us; we're solipsistic beings. I imagine it's something evolution has painted into our corners to help us survive. If you don't think you're important you won't worry about the sabretoothed tiger as it approaches through the trees, as Darwin should have said if he'd come from Yorkshire.

I need to step outside this self-made temporal corral to show myself and others exactly how small I am on the map of the Ridings, and to understand what Yorkshire is and how I fit into it I'm going to start in my own back yard.

I'm going to meet John Tanner. You see, John works for Barnsley Museums, and he's got history running through his veins. Well, we all have, but you know what I mean. If you cut him he'd bleed history and then he'd mop it up and put it on display with interpretative signboards in several languages including Braille. I first came across John when he started working as Museums Officer in Barnsley and was instrumental in opening the new Experience Barnsley museum that sprawls excitingly across a floor of the town hall and reflects Barnsley people back to themselves. And there's a great café where the cakes aren't historic and the espresso is tack-sharp.

He’s going to take me on a dawn meander around some ancient and more recent sites across the Dearne Valley, an area that was until recently topographically shafted by the coal industry but which has now settled into a kind of uncertain warehouse and call-centre present. If I want to get to the bottom of this county I need to begin here, the place that nurtured me, and John’s an excellent guide. He’s always breathless with history. I once sat with him in a place that was to my simple mind devoid of any cobwebbed hinterland but, as far as John Tanner was concerned, we could have been sitting in one of the mausoleums of the ancient pharaohs. It was a Portakabin on the site of Experience Barnsley as it was being constructed and John metaphorically peeled away the layers of chipboard to reveal the lurking and informative treasure below, riffing on the idea of old Portakabins and linking the idea of the Portakabin with the idea of the first shelters people made from wattle and daub. And speak of this quietly, but John isn’t from Yorkshire at all. He’s from the Lancashire mill town of Rochdale; a place that’s a bit like Barnsley with looms. There’s a pattern here: me, Sir Alec Clegg, John Tanner. None of us are fully from Yorkshire. Maybe you have to be an outsider to completely understand the glory of a place. Perhaps that’s why Buzz Aldrin liked the moon so much.

I clamber into his car and, oddly, we shake hands. I think I’m shaking hands because I know I’m at the start of a great adventure which will take me towards the meaning of a place I think I know. Autumn has slipped me into a jumper and the morning is chilly. We set off towards the secret location of a Romano-British site that’s not too far from my house in Darfield and we get lost trying to find it. Presumably because it’s secret.

‘I should have brought a better map,’ he says as we swerve and almost make history of a rotund man on a suffering bike.

The poet in me notes that phrase: ‘I should have brought a better map.’ It is a metaphor for writing and discovery, but then an obvious question occurs to me: if it’s secret, how can it be on the map?

John explains in the patient voice of a man who’s gone over this many times before in many different settings, that a number of years ago, before he came to work in Barnsley, an archaeologist came and identified the site and put it on a map which, in John’s carefully chosen words, ‘may not be 110% accurate’, perhaps for reasons of continuing security.

‘I think this is the layby,’ John says and we grind to a halt, and that’s not really a metaphor for anything; it’s the fourth time he’s said it of the same and different laybys and one patch of gravel that had never been a layby and would never ever be a layby; it could have been a child’s drawing of what a layby might look like. The bloke on the bike passes us, gesturing timelessly. The layby is next to some thick tangled woods of the kind you encounter in a folk tale. A crow sits in a tree like a Goth in a bedsit.

One of John’s verbal signatures is the phrase, ‘How are you for …?’ and he certainly doesn’t disappoint today.

‘How are you for walking through brambles?’ he says, and before I can answer we’re doing the front crawl through what appears to be a huge green and prickly cardigan. On John’s map the Romano-British settlement is a faint ghost of a perfect circle, as though somebody has rested a coffee-cup on the paper.

‘It’s very close. How are you for walking through gorse?’

He looks in all directions, rotating in the style of a traffic cop at the start of his shift in a huge city.

I get a sense of the layers of history I’m walking on in my muddy boots; these woods would at one time have been the wildwood that covered most of England like a hair-shirt. Hundreds of years ago people must have roamed these spaces, the ones that we now call Yorkshire, hunting but mainly gathering like those swift-limbed women at the Rag

and Louse Market in Barnsley on a Tuesday. For years and years nothing much would happen and hardly anything would change. Seasons would roll by unannounced but acknowledged by either visible breath in the air or sheens of forehead-sweat, and yet this feels like a special place. If Yorkshireness is something that evolved then it might have been in anonymous spots like this where it began it crawl out of the swamp. Yorkshire is a place built on arrival, on off-comed 'uns making their mark and making a home. The Romano-British people would have tramped over a hill and made a circle in these trees for reasons even John can't work out. They'd have settled here, close by the Rivers Dearne and Dove, not too far from roads that were elderly even then. They'd have made fires that flickered in the evening and, almost imperceptibly, with a flattening of a vowel and the spark of an attitude, they would have started to become RomanoBritish-Yorkshire people, a real step forward for civilisation, in my opinion. I realise I'm probably the only person alive who finds the idea of this moving, but I do.

Later, this settlement would be abandoned, and the descendants of those early tykes would have moved into the farmsteads and hamlets that dotted the hills and flat spaces near here. Again, nothing much would have happened for a long time, except that they would have started to dig coal out of the ground; permission was given to the local landowner Earl Fitzwilliam in 1367 to mine in the area, and a number of tiny pits scraped coal from the unforgiving ground to heat houses and smelt iron.

As the Industrial Revolution in the eighteenth century moved from a canter to a gallop and covered this part of the country in smoke and steam and sparks and people shouting, there would have been a moment replicated in all the big houses across the valley, when a bloke with big mucky hands would have rushed into the dining room as the local landowner was eating his lunch.

‘Coal, sir, we’ve found coal!’ he would have yelled in the voice of a Brian Blessed alarm clock and the landed gent would have whooped because he knew he would be made for life and the man who found the coal would have been kept in turnips in perpetuity or until he died in a pit accident, whichever came first. This was happening in my part of South Yorkshire because of the rapid expansion of the canals that ensured the coal could be got to the ports more quickly and pits sprang up, if a pit can spring up, everywhere.

John and I are standing very still. This really is a moment. We can feel those ancient Yorkshire people all around us; we can almost hear the songs they must have sung to keep away the night. We are standing in their footprints and, as my eyes become used to the trees’ half-light, I can see that we’re in the middle of a hesitant circle that’s almost like a ring drawn in the mist on a bathroom mirror. Or on a classroom window as a goat hurries by.

We don’t speak as we walk back to the car. The secret location has remained secret, just, but I’ve got a sense of the history of Yorkshire layered like a cake, like a wallpaper palimpsest in a 1930s semi. The morning is expanding, as though we’re unfolding it.

Time to move on, towards Elsecar, one of the cradles of the Industrial Revolution. Lots of places claim to be this cradle, of course, but Elsecar’s right in the middle of the nursery.

This industrial and post-industrial part of Yorkshire is well used, let’s face it. Any sheen has been rubbed off years ago. The aforementioned besuited gentry who danced jigs and gavottes when the coal turned up really did shape and reshape the land round here, and nobody more so than Earl Fitzwilliam. He was the uber-toff, descended from a long line of landowners and the pits he sunk on his land, Elsecar Old Colliery, Elsecar New Colliery and Simon Wood

Colliery, helped to make his family one of the richest in Europe, giving him vast wealth and his own private railway.

To understand a little of the influence of the Fitzwilliam family on this part of South Yorkshire you should drive through their picturesque estate village of Wentworth, not far from Elsecar, with its astonishing big house, Wentworth Woodhouse; two stately homes back-to-back, the longest single-fronted house in Europe, a place that once had a window for every day of the year, where you had to have a box of confetti to sprinkle on the corridors to find your way back to your room if you went for a ball. Building began in 1725 and wasn't completed for decades. As you trundle down the main street, you'll notice that a lot of the drainpipes and letterboxes and fences are painted a kind of pea-soup green because Earl Fitzwilliam liked that colour; he liked the cottages in his village to wear a smart uniform and metaphorically doff their caps to him as he passed. There was always a rumour when I was younger that the Yorkshire Traction buses that went through Wentworth on the main road had to have a pea-soup stripe on them too, and I hope it's true.

So now John and I are driving across the valley towards Earl Fitzwilliam's industrial powerhouse, Elsecar. In the early 1990s the old National Coal Board workshops at Elsecar were turned into a heritage centre and tourist attraction by the borough council and it's true to say that not everybody was convinced. You could go to the Dales, yes, or Whitby, they were places that sold Yorkshire postcards of picturesque views, but Elsecar? So soon after the miners' strike when vanloads of coppers roared through your village at four in the morning with their sirens going just to wake you and the kids up? So soon after the union man brought the food parcels to your father-in-law's house just as he was having what he called A Good Wash at the sink in his vest?

The heritage centre opened and flourished briefly and brightly in the 1990s. I took my kids there a lot on long Sunday afternoons and we once stood next to a trad jazz band as an exasperated granddad tried to tell a boy who in my memory is called Rollo that the trombonist's straw boater was not a miner's summer helmet.

At around the same time, I remember meeting some Japanese tourists in Wombwell who held up brochures from Elsecar and raised quizzical eyebrows. I mimed elaborately that they should turn left, go up the hill to the station and take the train in the Sheffield direction. I thought I'd done well until they turned right and walked confidently towards the Summer Lane Fish and Chip Shop.

For a while at the turn of the millennium and into the new century, the heritage centre just trundled along but now thanks to people like John Tanner and his phalanxes of workers and volunteers it's beginning to blossom again.

John speeds into the car park and stops suddenly as though he's run out of petrol. He's already been excited today at the secret location and now he's really excited. If he was a kettle he'd be coming to the boil. We leap from the car, cop-show style, and trip briskly towards a structure festooned with scaffolding.

'How are you for climbing up scaffolding?' John asks.

I'm fine, I say.

He gestures at the scaffolding. 'The Newcomen beam engine!' he intones, like a butler announcing a celebrity at a black-tie dinner.

The Newcomen beam engine is John's pride and joy because it's the only one of its kind that's still in its original setting and still, potentially, in working order. Thomas Newcomen invented his eponymous engine in 1712 and as the eighteenth century progressed, thousands of them were in constant use throughout Europe, principally pumping water out of mines and making them safer and, perhaps more importantly, more profitable. Newcomen ended up

seeing his creation overshadowed and usurped by James Watt's more sophisticated steam engine but, like Ducks Deluxe and the Sex Pistols, you couldn't have had one without the other. Sadly, Newcomen was another builder of our identity who wasn't from Yorkshire; he was what my dad used to call a 'stout denizen of Devon'. I think there's an unYorkshire pattern developing here.

From the late 1700s until the early 1900s, the Elsecar Newcomen pumped water out of the nearby pit, pounding away for 12 hours each day like a martial drum or, more fittingly, a beating heart.

'It must have been great when it stopped!' I say to John, imagining the equivalent of that special silence you get after noise, like when a car-alarm cuts off.

I can tell by his face that he isn't so sure; he likes the idea of the noise saturating the village, slicing up local time into bumps and thumps, and I realise that if I want to make sense of Yorkshire I've got to listen as well as look. There are several ways not to be Yorkshire Enough, and I'm slowly beginning to learn them. For John, history is noisy, and in that noise you can begin to fathom how Yorkshire people lived. Listen and learn, kid, as some mythical mill owner might have said in volume four of a family saga.

Thanks to the Newcomen engine, Earl Fitzwilliam entrepreneurially had mines sunk and railways laid and canals dug and the noise level rose and the money rolled in; for a county that's got more than its fair share of collectivism, much of Yorkshire has been constructed by individuals wanting to make things and money. However, most Newcomen engines were eventually dismantled and chucked away or left to rust or reused for their metal while their stories were ignored, but the one in Elsecar is unique because it's still proudly in the same place it's always been. It could be the start of yet another reinvention of this area.

John hands me a hard hat and hi-vis vest. We climb the ladders and negotiate the scaffolding that encases the

engine and I know that for John this is like scaling the walls of the tower they keep the Crown Jewels in.

‘Are you sure you’re all right with heights?’ he asks as, mesmerised by the vista, I almost step back into the small, local abyss I’ve just ascended from.

The view from the top is a kind of artist’s impression, a map of possibilities. John guides me through them.

‘So, you’ve almost got the perfect set-up,’ he says. ‘The canal basin, the ironworks, the railway, the pit; one man’s vision of what a place can become.’

This is what Yorkshire is, I guess: a series of overlapping visions, a bouquet of ideas of exactly what a place can be, from those secretive Romano-British people to here and now.

We climb down again and hand in the safety equipment. Thanks to the hard hat my grey hair is more of a surprise than a shock.

I want to believe in this place; I want the coachloads to come and marvel at Earl Fitzwilliam’s vision and the sweat of the people who built this place and their green drainpipes. I feel like I’ve won this morning in a competition. First prize. Time to move on. Time to move away from The Mothership.

GOING TO EXTREMES

IT'S A CHILLY autumn morning on platform 2 at Barnsley Interchange and you can see my breath. A tabarded cleaner moves deftly around me sweeping crisps up, and a young woman on platform 1 lights a cigarette and blows a shivering ring of warm smoke into the chilled air. I'm surrounded by familiarity, by the blanket of the place that nurtured me and made me who I am. And salt'n'vinegar detritus. If I really want to home in on the idea of what Yorkshire is, then I've decided that I should abandon my original plan of moving outwards from Our Darfield or perhaps just vary it a little.

I now think that I really need to start by working out what Yorkshire isn't, where it begins and ends, where it shades into somewhere else. Maybe in the borderlands I can begin to sense the county's essence.

I'm going to go on what, in my opinion, is one of the world's great railway journeys. You can keep the Orient Express and the Trans-Siberian, with their endless, numbing forest views and the murder suspects gathered shiftily in the buffet car as the music swells. Give me the 0801 from Barnsley to Huddersfield every time. This line cuts through South and West Yorkshire, from brick-built terraces to stone-built cottages, sliding, as a man said to me once as we bought our tickets, between anthracite and shoddy. The line managed to survive Beeching's axe but was then almost closed in the 1980s and only remained open thanks to dogged campaigners and official pragmatism. Now it's a busy route taking students to Huddersfield, shoppers to Meadowhall, and a poet part of

the way to the edgy place where Lancashire and Yorkshire spark against each other.

The ancient Northern Rail pacer train rattles in, like a home-made lean-to on wheels. It's a good job I've got my ticket because the guard, in his broad Sheffield accent, keeps telling everybody that his ticket machine isn't functioning.

'Might be working by Stocksmoor,' he says, always naming a place several stations along.

I like the guards on this line: if you were a visitor to Yorkshire, they'd be the first ones you encountered, the doormen beckoning you into t'club, and they'd make you smile and want to stay. I remember the one who used to play a kazoo when you went into a tunnel to scare the toddlers and who would shout, as we approached Castleford, 'Welcome to Cas Vegas, gateway to Ponty Carlo!', and who would mutter as he passed me in the aisle, 'I don't have to do this job, you know, I'm a trained golf course designer.'

He won an award once for customer service but then the story was that this went to his head and he was verbally disciplined for over-enthusiastic use of the kazoo. Apparently there were times, as the train rumbled into Sheffield late on winter nights, that the sound of it almost approached 1960s New York free jazz.

He once said to me, 'Tony Hancock got on at Dodworth. I got his autograph.'

He meant Nick Hancock and I think he really knew that.

The Cannon to his Ball was the big-necked conductor who never spoke but had the words GIZ YER BRASS AND SHURRUP written on his change bag.

The train rolls through Dodworth and the older people (headscarves and trilbies) nod their approval when the guard announces Doduth and Silkstun Common. God help the RP automated station tannoy person who still, to this day, calls Elsecar Elsie Carr, conjuring up a sepia image of

a perfumed lady who sews the buttons on the dresses of the dancing-school girls in her spare time.

Language is vitally important in Yorkshire's Tower of Babel, as anybody who's asked for a teacake and got a breadcake will testify. The guard on this train is a DeeDar, which is what Barnsley people call Sheffielders because of their habit of hardening the 'th' in 'thee' or 'tha' to a 'd' so it becomes Dee and Da. It's a tiny linguistic point, where language changes in a small geographical space; it's known as an isogloss and it's one of the building blocks of identity in these parts. The guard would call me a Dingle because that's what Sheffielders call people from Barnsley because they see themselves as big-city sophisticates and they believe that we're slack-jawed cartoon primitives like the Dingle family on *Emmerdale*.

The sun breaks out across the grassed-over pit-stack of Dodworth Main and we begin to move into gentler country. Barnsley Metropolitan District was built on coal and the getting of coal, but more or less all that's left of that industry are the artificially green hills where woolly sheep graze and trail bikes etch lines. Unless you count Glasshoughton Pit, near Castleford, which, in an irony-failure of epic proportions, is now a dry ski-slope.

By Penistone, that fiercely independent town that won't admit it's part of Barnsley or Sheffield, the fields are widening, the stone farmhouses are the colour of roast parsnips, and the huge mast at Emley Moor dominates the windows of the train. I'm never really sure why Penistone sees itself as a separate self-contained kingdom. Maybe, in an area dominated by heavy industry, it's because it's a market town full, on market days, of farmers wearing tweed jackets that seem so heavy that they almost need a hoist to lift them round their shoulders. It's returned Tory councillors, too, and they're as rare round these parts as the mating song of the angel fish.

Emley Moor mast is still the UK's tallest man-made feature, beating the Shard in London by several feet, much to the satisfaction of Yorkshire folk; it's the conduit for broadcasting television signals across the region and it's been doing so since 1966, beaming pictures of the World Cup to front rooms all over Yorkshire and beyond. In 1969 it fell down, spectacularly, like a drunk uncle at a wedding, because of a build-up of ice rather than a buildup of best bitter. It was rebuilt later that year and was broadcasting again the following spring, a tribute to Yorkshire grit and engineering knowhow and people's visceral need for *Coronation Street*. When you're flying south from Leeds-Bradford airport it often pokes up through low clouds, reminding you exactly where you are.

A lot of people say that Yorkshire is a British version of Texas, a Lone Star State where everything is bigger, higher, longer, deeper, and Emley Moor mast proves that point, pointedly.

It's a strange thing, this Yorkshire one-upmanship, but it certainly continues to flourish; at a cricket match at Headingley between Yorkshire and Leicestershire I once saw a balloon-like man stagger to his feet and shout, 'Come on, Yorkshire! They only make shoes!'

You can buy T-Shirts that say 'CHEER UP THA'S FROM YORKSHIRE' and car stickers that simply show Billy Casper from *Kes*'s raised two-finger salute to the world.

My brother got me a mug for Christmas that said 'YOU CAN TAKE THE LAD OUT OF YORKSHIRE BUT YOU CAN'T TAKE YORKSHIRE OUT OF THE LAD' and I glugged tea from it without irony as we sat and laughed about the fact that Lancashire people would say they were taking cattle to'th abbatoir to get slaughtered, rather than the much more sensible 'to't abbatoir', which to the trained Yorkshire ear sounds very different.

'To' th'abbatoir!' we kept repeating, laughing until we couldn't talk any more.