



Eaton Hall, Cheshire. This magnificent country estate on the banks of the River Dee has been home to the Grosvenor family since the 15th century

Reflections on the essence of England's North West



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WAY back during the tumultuous social change of the Industrial Revolution – an era that was largely fired up in the towns and cities of England's North West – not many of the mill-workers, factory hands and agricultural legions would have readily shed their tribal affinities or abandoned fierce rivalries held for generations, to engage in casual pleasantries with neighbours over the boundary wall, so to speak, if even a mere pasture apart.

One only needs to ponder the huge conflicts of culture and dialect that still exist along stretches of the East Lancashire Road, where a St Helens or Warrington twang butts up against a Mancunian drawl and clashes with the guttural Scouse – often in the same street. Or just follow the A6 as it meanders up through Ormskirk and Preston and into the very heart of Lancaster and out again towards Penrith. In parts this grand old dame of roads runs parallel to the M6 motorway, at others weaves and skirts around the concrete ribbon that discourages most travellers from sampling the eclectic delights and differences that abound from village to village and town to town.

History will relate how for decades convoys of lorry drivers – helping to distribute the nation's wealth from south to north and vice versa – would warble the Manchester-born Ewan McColl's wonderful folk song *Champion at Keeping 'Em Rolling* as they thundered and clanked in low gear up the A6's relatively narrow, and often traffic choked, strip of Tarmacadam towards the now fabled Shap summit, which in winter was frequently a snow-clad nightmare.

In the border territories of Carlisle – where once ruthless Reivers on both sides pilfered and cattle rustled, terrifying folk from Langholm to Sedburgh – and further along the English side of the mighty Solway towards the quaintly 'frozen in time' Edwardian resort of Silloth, and down that ribbon of countryside that is flanked by the Irish Sea into Maryport and Sellafield, only a handful of daredevils would comfortably rub shoulders with the 'richer' folk inhabiting the glorious swathes of the Lake District national park.

The notion of a homogenous North West region is largely a vague abstract concept of our modern take on life, as it is essentially an amalgamation of opposing loyalties that would otherwise collide. Amongst those who tremble with the furies of pulsating passions at Old Trafford, Anfield and Preston North End's Deepdale, or those sporting the blue togs of Everton, few would confide an affinity with the Holker Street stadium in Barrow-in-Furness, whose booted heroes also wear blue.

But holidays were a different matter and it was to resorts like Blackpool, Southport and Morecambe that families flocked in droves to relish each other's strange tongues and habits. Those short 'wakes weeks' were carefree days away from the burdens of toil in forbidding factories, gloomy offices and shops in locations around what was then regarded as the economic engine of the UK – the North West.

However, even with today's modern communications and easy access to all parts of the region, people don't normally – or easily – identify themselves as 'North Westerners'; alliances are much closer to home and hearth. And yet the region is – as a *Times* survey in spring 2007 declared – a country within a country, with the overall economic clout of something close on £110 billion, putting other UK regions, apart from the South East – with its close



ICI Runcorn, Cheshire

links to the capital and its Home Counties swagger – into the shade.

The North West's peoples also close ranks rather swiftly when crossing into 'foreign' terrain like Yorkshire, Northumberland, the Midlands and – heaven forefend – London, which, according to the *Times* survey, always

distorts the picture: 'If you step back and look at Europe overall, the North West is the next biggest cluster of businesses in Europe, not just the second in the UK.' When faced with this metropolitan behemoth hogging the headlines, suddenly it is arms linked and we are all those proud

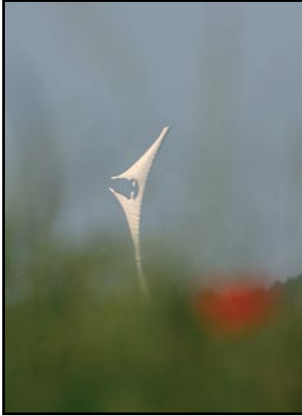


Aintree Racecourse, Merseyside

northerners who face west and gaze towards the Atlantic. Scotland for some reason is considered an ally – presumably because so many in the North West can trace their ancestry back to ancient Alba. And remember that when that reckless libertine Bonnie Prince Charlie was on the march south to re-establish the rightful Stuart crown of Scotland and England in 1745, his recruitment sergeants found enthusiastic volunteers in Manchester, where many lads of Lancashire and Cumberland – keen Jacobites all – happily accepted the Prince as sovereign and joined him on the doomed escapade.

Indeed, the North West is a veritable *mélange* of nationalities traditionally culled from Scotland, Ireland, and Wales – the wild, anarchic Celtic blood that defines its personality in many ways – as well, of course, from vibrant Viking stock: themselves enterprising and adventurous, if a tad unruly. And today this wonderfully rebellious and rich cultural melting pot includes so many more

varied communities that are a part of the very fabric; adding a terrific fusion of characteristics and splendid customs and rituals that are now an integral part of the region. Yet they were originally forged in faraway places like India and Pakistan, the West Indies, Africa, China and other parts of Asia,



Encounter on the M53, Merseyside

Eastern Europe or the Middle East. Often, they came seeking a new life – for whatever reasons – and a chance to enjoy a safe, comfortable existence and maybe to sparkle in commerce and academia. Many have – although the path of integration, tolerance and acceptance is not yet that well trodden.

Regularly published statistics on regeneration and economic blueprints all indicate that the North West is on a roll, and it is an acknowledged fact that the region has spawned more than its fair share of successful entrepreneurs: people who have either stayed put to become affluent or found fame and fortune elsewhere in Britain and across the globe.

What the few profiles of such spirited individuals in this book represent is a mere ‘snapshot’ of the guts, the guile and the gumption that the North West seems to foster and embrace – some who hail from the region and have stamped their mark on their chosen field and some from outside the area who have realised that this is the very spot where they too can cut a dash – either in enterprise and commerce, sport, education or in the hugely innovative arts and creative industries.

Jude Kelly, the Liverpool-born, highly acclaimed director of London’s South Bank centre

comments: “In my view the creative industries will be increasingly perceived in the 21st century as the major force driving the economy, and never more so than in the North West. What’s more, I have never believed in a divide between cities like Manchester and Liverpool.”

Perhaps Steven Broomhead, the chief executive of the Northwest Regional Development Agency – considered by many to display an entrepreneurial flair when flying the flag for the region, sums it up best: “We are never complacent and, fortunately, we have a very good public-private sector relationship. When it matters, we are all seen pulling together.”

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