

To Maggie, my wife and fellow explorer



INTRODUCTION

DOES IT MATTER WHERE WE LIVE? Today, with the nearest supermarket often within an easy car drive, with more and more people having access to the internet, with television and radio beaming the world in to our living rooms, everything we seem to need comes to us irrespective of where we are. Life is in danger of turning into one of those futuristic films where the cities and landscape in which people live are a dystopian nightmare of crumbling buildings and barren wastelands, yet people go on happily existing within a domestic cocoon of scientific wonders and electronic marvels. From Hemel Hempstead to Cumbernauld, as the same massive chain stores and monopolistic financial institutions dominate our lives, our towns and regions are blighted by the same box-like houses and windy parking lots which pass for what architects call modern retail parks. What we eat and wear, our leisure activities and favourite holiday destinations, have all become standardised. Even what we think and feel is pretty much the same thanks to the influence of the mass media. We may raise our hands in horror at the prospect of human cloning, but modern life is doing its best to reduce us all to human clones. Real individualism is as rare as fish with feathers. So I repeat the question. Does it matter where we live?

When I step out of my house in the Cliviger Valley near Burnley and climb up the nearest hillside I can look out across the valley and witness the tidemark of time and the imprint of the men and women who have lived here down the ages. The escarpments have been sculpted by the ice of glaciers, leaving raw buttresses of rock that still manage to look prehistoric. But lower down, etched into relief by the shadows of the winter sun are earthworks where in the past men have grubbed coal, iron, even lead from the hillside. Plough-lines show up where crops have been planted and fields harvested. All these activities seem a world away from today where the valley hums with

The drawings at chapter openings are by Lucy Day and Ivan Frontani.



Sculpted escarpments.
PHOTOGRAPH: AUTHOR

the roar of articulated lorries speeding towards the motorway network and the sky is laced with vapour trails from jets taking people abroad on package holidays. And if I look towards the town I can see a handful of black mill chimneys pointing skywards, the mills they once served, their stain of soot sandblasted away, now housing furniture warehouses or keep-fit gyms. There's a handsome railway viaduct that was once busy with goods and passenger trains, carrying wakes weeks holidaymakers in their thousands to Blackpool or bringing daily fish from Fleetwood. Now you'll be lucky if you see a rickety railcar rattling along a single weed-strewn track to a station made of bus shelters. The very configuration of the housing speaks of a different age and different priorities: regimented terraces built for the cheap convenience of mill-owners who wanted a workforce close at hand to weave their wealth, while they themselves lived in a fine mansion up on the hillside well above the smog line. Churches and chapels with splendid neo-classical frontages can suddenly surprise amongst rows of dingy terraces, lasting monuments to a fine spirit of non-conformist thinking and a poignant belief that, whatever the miseries of this world, the bliss of an afterlife was assured by a lifetime

of honest decency and toil. Everywhere, despite the efforts of our planners to knock it all down and bury it away like a dirty secret, is evidence of a distinctive past that made us different, that made Lancashire unique.

I was born and brought up further down the Calder Valley and both my father and mother spent years of their working lives in the mills. In fact, in my childhood it was difficult to find people I knew who were *not* touched by the mills: awakened every morning to the clatter of clogs on cobbles, deafened by the roar of the looms when the weaving shed doors were thrown open to let in a bit of welcome fresh air and sunlight, delighted by the surrounding countryside as an escape from the narrow, smoky little valleys, embraced by the warm sense of community and revived by the dark and anarchic sense of humour that was an insurance against us all being ground down by the mills. Historically speaking we were all united by the fact that we were mostly relative newcomers to Lancashire. My great-grandparents came from Westmorland and Norfolk, driven by rural poverty into the new industrial towns by the promise of better wages. (When people these days moan about economic migrants, they need to remember that many of our ancestors right here in Lancashire were just that themselves.) So we are a fairly mongrel lot, which, as any Darwinist will tell you, is no bad thing if you're looking for health and vitality, to say nothing of a good survival instinct in your offspring. But it also makes us a bit tricky to define, to pin down by saying exactly what a Lancastrian is and what makes us different from all the others tribes of Britain. But I think a good point at which to start to find out is by exploring these common experiences which make up our past. In a word, our roots. And if you're a gardener like me, and you've ever tried to dig up a dandelion root, you'll know what a difficult job that is; how they fork and twist this way and that, and can run to extraordinary depths. In fact, just like history.

A sense of history – of who we are in terms of where we came from – is vital to our wellbeing. Without it we are vagrants, mere wanderers, ships without anchors. Rootless. Each day, I believe, we need things about us that remind us of our history, our roots. It helps us to make sense of the sometimes apparently random, meaningless nature of life by placing us within a process we share with the rest of humanity, those who have gone before and those who will follow us. And that helps to put our life and times into some sort of perspective and remind us of the debt we owe to history. When people today scoff at the idea of 'the old days', and dismiss our industrial past as irrelevant to the sophisticated world of today, writing off those who harp on about them as sentimental nostalgists, they are ignoring an important truth. We would not be where we are today, enjoying the lives we enjoy, without the men and women who went before. The humble Lancashire weaver threaded her shuttle and helped to build the nation that we have today. Her efforts created the wealth that built the civic buildings which still stand and the public amenities we still enjoy, whether they be public parks, or reservoirs for our drinking water. Her militancy helped the suffragists obtain the vote. The

blood of our forebears shed in wars, as well as their sweat in our factories, helped create the stability of peace and prosperity which is the foundation of our lives today.

Today, we stand upon their shoulders. And we need reminding of this, and what better reminders than the physical fabric of our towns and countryside that still survive. As a Lancastrian I probably deserve banishment for it, but I freely admit that one of my favourite places is York. For the people who live their lives in York, their past is laid out before them. From Romans through Vikings to the Middle Ages, even the wonderful railway heritage of the Victorians. It's all there. You bump into your own history at every turn, and it's exhilarating. Here in my part of Lancashire we are not so lucky. I live next to a building which dates from the early 1600s which has been systematically destroyed, pillaged and vandalised, not least by official vacillation and indifference. Our mills have been too readily knocked down and tarmacked

'We stand on their shoulders.'

PHOTOGRAPH: HARRIS MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY



Sunset over Burnley.

PHOTOGRAPH: AUTHOR

over as car parks. Our town centres have lost their traditional, distinctive appeal and been replaced by shoddily built modernisation schemes which pay lip-service to the past by including a few bogus cobblestones and lamp standards. In that self-deprecating way which is one of the endearing qualities of the Lancastrian, we have often underplayed our past achievements and allowed our heritage to be steam-rollered away, the genuine article often being replaced by the tacky merchandising of the modern heritage and tourism business. Our past too often lies discarded, concealed or neglected amongst the concrete and plate glass of the modern world.

This is a journey in an increasingly homogenised nation to discover what differences we in Lancashire have managed to retain. I shall travel from the remote moorlands of the Pennine hills to the crowded seashores of our coast. It will be a journey in time, too, from the mysterious hilltop settlements of our early ancestors to the busy modern developments of our cities. I shall stop off at churches and abbeys, stately mansions, derelict mills, Victorian terraces and modern office developments ... and whatever else takes my fancy. And in the process I hope to uncover some of the history behind the places and the people who make up the rich fabric of our county. Now whether or not I emerge with a portrait of a Lancashire which is as unique as the reader might like it to be will depend upon how well we have resisted the modern forces of conformity. The outcome will be a measure of the spirit of the people of