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London and the English Desert. The grain of truth in a stereotype

KEY WORDS

Britain, England, London,
North-South Divide

MOTS CLÉS

Grande-Bretagne,
Angleterre, Londres,
disparités nord-sud

ABSTRACT

There is a grain of truth in the stereotype that by the start of the twenty first century, England had become economically divided to the extent that it was being seen as a Greater London core, surrounded by what was becoming seen as an economic desert. By the start of this century the functional boundary of London extended far out across the south East of England, and on the main train line to the west to Bristol, and north as far as York. In this short paper a series of examples are employed to show how "Paris and the French Desert" we were taught can now be transferred to London and England in much the same way. To illustrate how such thinking is becoming part of the wider discourse, these examples are drawn from the recently published semi-autobiographical book by the ex- Conservative Member of Parliament: George Walden. In what follows his words and claims are interspersed with some evidence of how England's human geography is now actually shaped. England has become far more divided than at any time in its post-war history, but all is not well in the supposed financial oasis in the heart of that desert.

RÉSUMÉ

En ce début de XXI^e siècle, affirmer que l'Angleterre est si divisée économiquement que Londres s'opposerait à un désert anglais comporte une part significative de vérité. La région fonctionnelle de Londres s'est étalée dans tout le Sud-Est de l'Angleterre pour atteindre, via les principales lignes ferroviaires, Bristol au sud-ouest et York, dans le Nord-Est. Ce court article entend illustrer comment le célèbre « *Paris et le désert français* » peut être transposable aux cas de Londres et du reste de l'Angleterre. Les exemples utilisés font référence à l'ouvrage semi-autobiographique publié par l'ancien député conservateur George Walden dont la pensée révèle l'étendue de la thématique de l'opposition Londres/reste du pays dans le discours général. En soumettant ses propos au test des preuves statistiques, l'article permet de faire le point sur la géographie humaine contemporaine du pays. Il apparaît que l'Angleterre est devenue bien plus divisée qu'à n'importe qu'elle période de son histoire depuis la seconde guerre mondiale. Cependant, l'oasis financière du Sud-Est, au cœur du désert anglais, ne se révèle pas sans faille.

NORTH, SOUTH, BITTER AND TWISTED

In the year Tony Blair resigned as Prime Minister, a former British Government Minister for an earlier era published a book on England with the title: "Time to Emigrate?" (Walden, 2007). The ex-Government Minister's first name was George¹, he had long since retired, but he had been in charge of Higher Education in this country at the time when I first went to university. "Time to emigrate" is a bitter and twisted tale of all that someone from a particular history and geographical location might lament about the state of England today. George was born poor but became posh. He was born and lived in the South, dislikes the North and now spends a lot of time in France. He was a member of the government which presided over the greatest growth in social inequalities in Britain every recorded. But despite this his views are worth considering because he articulates what many of his contemporaries say more quietly in private: That England has become split between London and a Northern Desert, a view that readers of this journal may have heard of some decades ago and much nearer to home. In this paper I assess the validity of some of these comments on the current extent of the North/South divide in England and on recent trends in the divided human geography of this country.

There are echoes in England today to those old tales of *Paris and the French Desert*. Gavier's "Paris et le désert français" (1958) was published six decades ago, almost a lifetime. It had a grossly disproportionate effect on English understanding of French human geography. Which, by the time I was taught it three decades later in an English

secondary school, consisted of a brief description of a few interesting features of physical geography being highlighted away from the Capital, and an explanation that culturally, and increasingly also economically and socially, all that mattered took place in Paris. The rest of France was becoming a human desert, abandoned by the young and being inadequately repopulated by a few expatriate British seeking cheap properties for holidays and retirement abroad. People like George.

The trick of the success of "*Paris et le désert français*", if you wish to influence the minds of the billions of illiterates (like me) is to pick a title that can be translated by someone with even the most appalling knowledge of the language. That gets a long way towards creating a good stereotype although it is usually not quite enough. For a caricature to last there must usually be a grain of truth in what you are arguing even if it necessarily must be backed up by prejudice and hearsay. That is also the trick of the title of "Time of Emigrate?".

So what do the English know and read today of their nearest sovereign neighbour? At school children are now taught very little. Most children stop studying geography before they are old enough to receive the standard two hours French geography (out of their ten or more years of compulsory education). Fewer children in England now learn foreign languages than when I was a child. Few now learn even crude French.

But far more of the English travel to France, especially in their dotage, settle there or take long holidays and hence come back with rosy descriptions of a way things could be. No longer

Acknowledgements

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1 - A name we think of as archetypically English, and which is also the name of the national Saint. George is of course a Greek name and the patron saint of Greece, but then our Queen's husband is also Greek. "Its all Greek to me" is a term used by English when they find things hard to understand.

do we receive a story of a stuffy Paris and its deserted surrounds, but instead we are told of an oasis of civilization and good weather, good beaches, good food, pleasant enough people! And, increasingly, the life of these English abroad, and what they now think of France, is permeating back to create a new image of France for the majority who do not travel. An image used to cast England in a poor light.

In this short paper a series of examples are employed to try to make the case over how many in Britain who were themselves taught of *"Paris and the French Desert"* now view London and England in much the same way. To illustrate how such thinking is becoming part of the wider discourse, these examples are drawn from the recently published semi-autobiographical book by the embittered ex-Conservative Member of Parliament: George Walden. In what is partly presented as fiction Walden has now said in public what many of his kind in England frequently say, and even more frequently apparently think he claims, in private. In what follows his words and claims are interspersed with some evidence of how England's human geography is now actually shaped. But first this is how he begins developing his argument over how the geography of his country has changed, by using a comparison with his view of contemporary France, before moving on to discuss the subtleties of how the English talk up the half of the country, the North, where those with most apparent choice choose not to live. What follows is a common view of the English elite:

"If you lived in Paris you might well choose to spend a weekend in Lyon, Bordeaux or Marseilles ... 'We're off to Birmingham for a weekend break' doesn't ring true ... Not that Southerners have a down on these places. On the contrary, they affect to have an up, forever telling us how completely out-of-date our perception of them is. The North has changed utterly, they say, with an upsurge of creativity everywhere from Gateshead to Bradford and new galleries and bridges and theatres and orchestras by the dozen, and isn't it all wonderful? Most commendable. Just one thing: how come that, except to write the article, like everyone else the people who make these claims never go?" (Walden, 2007, p. 81).

When George Walden talks of "everyone" he means everyone like him. The less open minded subset of those who made it in life to become a member of parliament, a bishop, a judge, a well paid professional, the financial director of a medium sized company – someone viewed as successful – most of whom live in the south, almost all of whom came from the south and many of whom spend quite a lot of time in France! In talking of himself and his wife, and before pronouncing on the virtues of weekend-break opportunities for the Parisian elite, he asks his semi-fictional son (and the reader of his book), both assumed to be living in the south of England, a question:

"When was the last time you saw Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Nottingham or Leicester? Sarah and I have been trying to think of anyone who goes to these places, unless family connections or business oblige them, and have come up with a blank." (Walden, 2007, p. 80).

He forgot to mention Sheffield or a plethora of more minor places in the North of England, which are located off the motorway interchanges and not blessed by an airport (which is telling, better to be insulted than ignored). The North of England, rather like the French desert of my school days – has all the interesting physical features, most of the national parks, small mountains and little forests – but that is where its assets are often now seen to end. And, other than in the gentrified centres of the twin northern capitals, the rest (in Walden's eyes and writing at least) is becoming an English desert:

"aside from some parts of Manchester, Leeds and a couple of other places, too much of the North and Midlands is a Sahara freshly made, or in the making." (Walden, 2007, p. 100).

George Walden is not a typical Englishman and his book is simply a single point of data, but it is telling to read what someone once so steeped in patriotism now has to say about the country he came from. As becomes evident the more you read George's book (and from exerts which follow) he is a man who is angry with his life and his lot and who has turned that anger outwards. But this caricature could be painted too of much of England as a country. A place (like the person of George) which feels that it should be so much more, should have made more of itself. England is a country which is split in two and increasingly at unease with itself and what it is becoming.

For the George Walden's of England all is not well in the centre of the South as well as the North of his country. Their Capital is changing too as a desert grows around its outer edges. And these are edges which extend a hundred or more miles from the centre of London. George is most upset with those who have recently arrived in his home town of London. London has always only survived due to immigration. Today that migration is simply and on average from a little further away than before, but George sees a problem with the majority of English born babies in London. The problem is their mothers:

"57% of births in the capital are now to mothers who were born abroad..." (Walden, 2007, p. 49).

And more widely:

"if not a single illegal immigrant or counterfeit asylum seeker enters the UK in the future the millions of migrants already here and their descendents will swell the population to extraordinary levels." (ibid., p. 55).

Immigration has been made the dominant issue in English politics in recent years. George's assertions thus chime with issues now dominating the winning of general elections in England (the place where UK elections are

2 - The life expectancy data is given in the following spreadsheet which are freely available:

http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/socr/data/SOCD17_life_expectancy_males.xls

http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/socr/data/SOCD18_life_expectancy_females.xls

The underlying source was the Office of National Statistics series for Local Authority Districts which has been aggregated to the functional regions of each city on a best fit basis, with male and female rates being combined to a single life expectancy for the entire population of each city. This series covers the period 191-1993 to 2001-2003 as used here with the latest data being the revision of 15/10/2004.

3 - The poverty estimates are the estimates made as part of the initial work to update the Breadline Britain series and the latest statistics can be accessed from the following website:

<http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/research/transformation.htm>

The underlying methods are data are all described in the publication Dorling *et al.*, 2007.

4 - The educational data used here to compare changes over time is the proportion of the population with a university degree. This data is currently available from the following website:

http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/socr/data/SOCD37B_NVQ4.xls

The data in turn was derived from the local area labour force surveys of 2001 and 2003 provided at local authority level and aggregated here to the functional areas of the cities used.

5 - The employment data used here was that on people relying on Income Support and similar benefits aggregated so as to be comparable over time. The data is available here:

http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/socr/data/SOCD8_IS_JSA.xls

The underlying sources are the Income Support Data - DWP Information Centre (Information and Analysis Directorate), and the

decided). He articulates what others say in more coded language, coded because it sounds very bitter when heard in the raw.

But by migrant George does not mean migrant – he means non-white. His supposedly fictional narrator is an English man who spends much of his time living in France, but he does not see himself as a migrant there. At times his semi-fictional account lapses into more actual reminiscences: As he reports on what his constituents used to tell their ex-MP he forgets to distance himself from his own account: “*At this rate they’ll be getting into the villages soon, Mr Walden*” (*ibid.*, p. 114-115). They meaning those not as white as the good folk traditionally found in Buckinghamshire villages. The Southern villages he represented around the town of Buckingham when a member of parliament in the fifteen years from the 1983 Falklands war and 1984 miners’ strike to New Labour’s victory of 1997. So all is not well in the most mythical of English places – the rural village.

George concludes a section on white-flight earlier in the book by suggesting that “Silently, squeamishly, the natives are disengaging, and the lines of ethnic mini-states are forming around us. That is how the English behave on matters of class, and that is how in their majority, they’ll behave about race.” (*ibid.*, p. 63). The implication is that people are too polite in England to say much about what they think, no one in their right mind would want to move north any more, in the cities of the south the English are no longer at home, and even the villages are under some kind of threat. He, and many others in England, then often looks approvingly to France for lessons on multiculturalism! How things have changed!

In the remainder of this paper I will argue that there is some truth in the implication that the north south divide has grown in importance. There is a little more desertification of the north. However, no part of England is seeing the lines of ethnic mini-states forming as George implies. True the first non-white faces – often ever - can now be seen in southern villages. And true also that England is and will rely upon immigration to function and prosper for years to come. And young people (of all groups) will continue to have babies, though fewer than their parents did. But how is the human geography of Britain now best summarised?

FROM ANECDOTE TO DATA

With colleagues I recently completed a research project sponsored by the government department responsible for English cities to create a database of many aspects of their human geography and how they were changing. This ‘State of the Cities Database’ (SOCD) comprised 75 indicators at 7 different spatial levels and at different points in time for some of the variables. Quarters of cities were distinguished, their built up areas, their wider hinterlands and so on. Here I’ll just try to give a

flavour of the information held in the database, to see what grain of truth might lie within George’s ranting. I do this by focusing on five themes (the end-note referenced by each theme gives the data source for those who are interested): life expectancy², poverty³, education and skills⁴, employment⁵, wealth⁶.

It can be argued that these themes pertain to traditional measures of quality of life as seen through lack of disease, ignorance, idleness, want and squalor, all reflected through their modern day equivalents of high life expectancy, good qualifications, low work-related benefit claims, low rates of poverty and reasonable house prices.

It should be noted that four aspects of the database are unique. Firstly, amongst other geographies, it collates data for major cities in England as defined by their built up urban boundaries. This allows cities to be compared in a way which is not influenced by whether their official administrative boundaries happen to incorporate a great deal of their hinterland or not. Second, the database collects very up-to-date information as well as data from the past to allow comparison using comparable boundaries. This allows changes over time for these consistently defined areas to be calculated and shown. Thirdly, the database spans a very wide range of indicators. This allows many aspects of life in cities to be compared. Fourthly the database, where possible, presents data for over 1 000 ‘census tracts’ within and outside of these cities, which can also be compared over time. So using this, how can a picture be painted of the state of England’s cities as reflected through their populations and the changes to the fortunes of those populations over time? Something based on a little more than the anger of a former member of parliament (and for a couple of years government) of the party that, as I write, has now been in opposition for over eleven years.

Maps, although out of fashion in much contemporary English geography, are useful here. In this paper both conventional maps and a ‘Tetris’ map (population cartogram) of cities are presented. On the conventional map the urban boundary of each city is shown, but many cities of course, appear just as specks on the national map. On the ‘Tetris’ map each city is presented as the collection of tracts which constitute it on a rough population cartogram of the country. The Tetris map is far more useful for visualisation, but it requires a little patience in learning which shapes are which cities (see Figure 1).

LIFE EXPECTANCY – GRIM UP NORTH?

“*Stoke-in-Trent ... our earliest environmental catastrophe ... Desolation ... everywhere the obese, ill-looking inhabitants, victims of the hereditary effects of pollution it seems, as well as of their eating habits. It’s not just the building’s it’s the people who look as though they need reconstructing from scratch*” (Walden, 2007, p. 84)

'Desolation', meaning to be abandoned and forsaken, is how many northern cities in England felt as deindustrialisation took hold in the late 1970s, 1980s and much of the 1990s. Manufacturing industry in Britain continues to decline as fast as it ever did and so, on driving into Stoke in recent years, George's impressions (only summarised above) were not favourable. However, life, health and death on the ground is not quite as bad as George might think from looking at peoples' bodies. England is not a country of svelte lithe young southern bodies and obese, older, hereditarily disfigured northerners.

The people of Stoke live, on average, almost 77 years each (see table 1). This does, however, put the city in the second worse of the five groups shaded in Figure 2 below. Figure 2 shows the spatial distribution of life expectancy by city from birth by the years 2001 to 2003. Driving from the south through Birmingham to Stoke means driving past folk on average destined to live two or three years less than the highest averages of almost 80, four years down by the time you hit the cities of the North West. This is an old pattern of inequality, but one which has strengthened in recent decades. Figure 2 shows very recent estimates, where Local Authority figures for men and women have been aggregated on the basis of the Local Authority populations which best fit the built up urban areas of each city to produce average life expectancies for all the inhabitants of those cities (both men and women combined). The map shades cities so that those with life expectancies of similar year of age are shaded the same colour. Thus cities are shaded dark blue where residents, on average, currently live for three score years and nineteen (79). The precise calculations used to estimate life expectancy are provided by the country's Office for National Statistics (ONS) and the figures presented on the map above are population-weighted averages of those figures. For these cities, life expectancy in England is highest in Norwich at 79,8 years and lowest in Liverpool at 75,7 years. There is a clear North-West/South-East gradient to life expectancy, one that results in caricatures of ill health of the kind quoted above.

The only significant anomalies to this gradient in the North are York, with an average life expectancy of 79,4 and Leeds with 78,2. York sits in a vale of relative affluence in the North of England and so its exception is perhaps of little surprise. The figure for Leeds is partly the result of the Leeds conurbation not being as extensive as, for instance, that of Manchester in population. Were Leeds to include its neighbour of Bradford with a life expectancy of 76,9 then the map would look quite different. Nevertheless life expectancy tends to rise to the east of the Pennines. The two Southern anomalies are Hastings (77,4) and Chatham (77,7), areas also with high rates of poverty for Southern England.

Hastings and Chatham suffer from particularly bad transport routes to London given their



Figure 1: The 'Tetris' map of cities in England - a key to their location in population space
 Note: grey areas are those not included in the cities data. They are mostly small towns and villages.

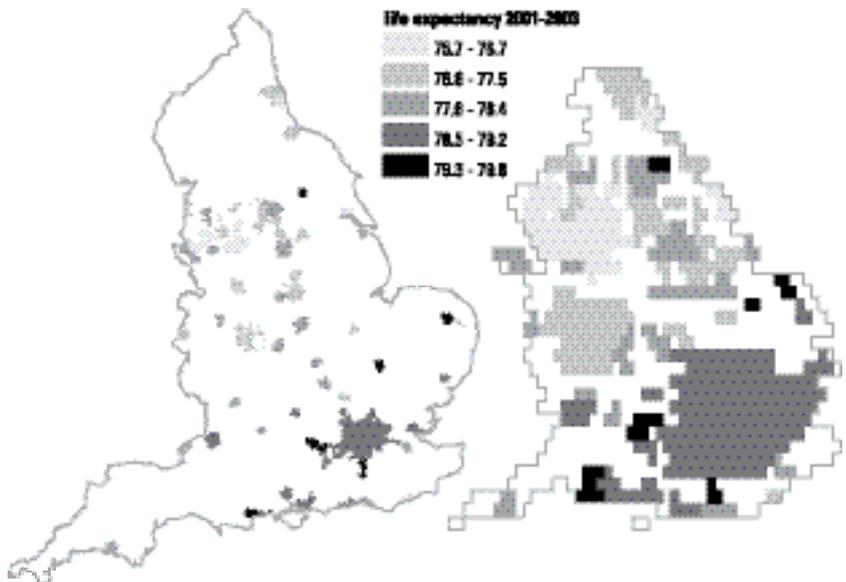


Figure 2: Indicators 17 and 18 combined: Life expectancy from birth 2001/2003

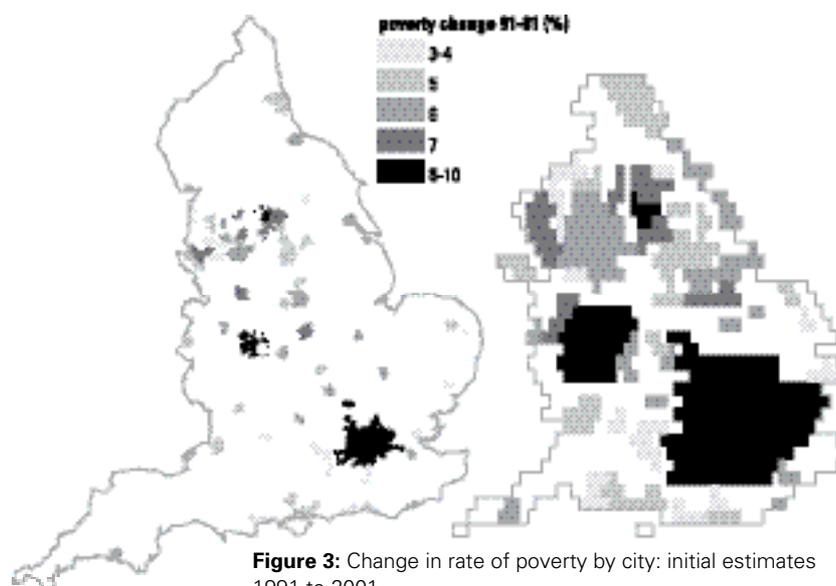


Figure 3: Change in rate of poverty by city: initial estimates 1991 to 2001

geographical proximity. Them aside, a circle of towns and cities with relatively high life expectancy can be seen to surround London on the population cartogram in figure 2 – broken only to the North West of the capital where places – too much associated with their more northern neighbours – are not so well incorporated into the centre, and are in danger of being classed as part of the ‘desert’.

But how are these patterns changing?

POVERTY – WHERE’S GETTING WORSE?

“Of all the countries in Europe the underclass the British have spawned is the largest, the least literate, the most drunk and drugged, the most anti-social, the most violent and the most stubbornly unresponsive to treatment. That’s why our jails are bigger and fuller than theirs.” (Walden, 2007, p. 64).

It is interesting that George chooses to include a few of the other countries of the United Kingdom when he turns to consider drunkenness and spawning. In this paper, on maps and in words there is only enough space to consider England. In England we have chosen to imprison a higher proportion of our population than anywhere else in Europe for the same kind of reason that America imprisons more than anywhere else in the world (bar Rwanda), and because more unequal states tend to imprison more often in general (although not India). There is a self-loathing in England of the English, the indigenous as well as those with parents, grandparents or even just the odd great grandparent born abroad (or overseas as we, and few others, can say). The upper-classes in England have a tendency to look down on people from the North of England, those who are poorer in the South, the Royal Family, and privately we often recognise our subservience to the United States of America, and lament these positions we find ourselves in. This paper is concerned with the North/South aspect to our woes, and an appendix is provided over where that divide lies.

That self-loathing has strengthened as our position in international league tables has fallen, from imprisonment rates to child poverty comparisons. The changes show a more subtle geography than a simple north-south divide of the more static

images. The following figure shows one particular change, that of the spatial distribution of rises in the rate of poverty by city between 1991 and 2001. Nowhere over this time-period was the rate of poverty recorded as falling when consistently measured.

Because incomes have only been calculated at one point in time by ONS (1998) it is not possible to compare changes over time, especially in income that has been equalised for household composition, net of taxes and calculated after taking into accounting housing costs. Furthermore the ONS estimates do not include estimates of the distribution of income in each area, particularly that proportion of the population living below 60% of the medium national income. To allow for an estimate of the changing rates of poverty in each city in the absence of such income data the above figure shows the changing proportion of households estimated to be living in poverty according to calculations made following the 1990 Breadline Britain survey and the 1999 Poverty and Social Exclusion Survey (by researchers working with the Joseph Rowntree Foundation). For details of how these figures were calculated for small areas see Dorling and Thomas (2004).

Rates of poverty have increased in all cities since the early 1990s by this measure. That is: a higher proportion of households over time do not have access to the resources that most people think are necessary to live a decent life. Such rates of poverty can and do grow as rates of affluence also rise in cities. The highest increase, of an additional 10% of the population living in poverty over the course of the 1990s, is found in London, followed by a 9% rise in Luton, Birmingham and Bradford. The lowest increases, of an extra 3% of the population living in poverty are found in Aldershot, Swindon, Warrington and York. Estimates of poverty made using techniques similar to these are soon to be incorporated in official government statistics and so this figure gives an impression of how these new statistics should show high and rising rates of poverty even in generally affluent large cities, and especially in the Capital, as socio-economic polarisation has risen. One result of both the numbers living in poverty rising and the riches of the wealthy in Britain increasing dramatically is that those in the middle begin to feel quite badly off and increasingly threatened.

EDUCATION – WHERE DO THE SKILLED TRAVEL TO?

Even those well above the middle of the English wealth distribution can feel threatened when they look at the prospects for their wider family. In advising his semi-fictional son, working in a well paid job as a university lecturer, George Walden suggests that *“...on present form you are never going to be well-off, or even what they call comfortable.”* (Walden, 2007, p. 33). He goes on to say of young people of today that *“for all their degrees and our much-trumpeted prosperity*

Neighbourhood Statistics website of the Office of National Statistics.

6 - The housing price data is a mix adjusted estimate of the average market value of housing for sale in each city available each year from 1995 to 2003 from the following address:

http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/socr/data/SOCD53_ave_perty_price_all_properties.xls

The underlying source of data was Her Majesty’s Land Register (HMLR) of housing sale. Recent falls in housing prices in England as I write (2008) are expected to have the effect of returning current housing prices back to the 2003 levels reported here (although, with markets like this, almost anything is possible!)

they're probably going to end up poorer than their parents" (*ibid*). This ex-MP attended a grammar school (a state financed selective school that is of a kind now very rare in England). He thinks that compared to him, "The equivalent person today would have no choice but to attend a comprehensive of the kind where cowed and demoralised staff are reduced to pleading with pupils to leave their weapons at the door..." (*ibid*). His view is that "everyone who can afford it uses private medicine and independent schools" (*ibid*, p. 173).

England still suffers from a generation of men – now often about to retire and angry like George – who were schooled in selective establishments and think that many of the ills of their worlds are due to the end of that type of schooling. Although more pleasant than their privately educated forebears who used to dominate exclusively, there is still an elitism in English culture where those in power think that they were somehow selected for greatness by passing a school exam at the age of 10 or 11, rather than just being the lucky few who happened to be at the top of their classes in those years. A third of children now attend university at ages 18 or 19 in England, most from non-selective (on ability at least) state schools.

Educational divides in Britain did not end with the demise of the 11 plus exam. Although children today are thankfully not given their supposed IQ results and told that they are destined for greatness (or for the vast majority obscurity) just as they begin puberty – they are now divided on exiting that state, at ages 17 and 18. It is now according to exam results at these ages that a third now are drawn to go to university. What is most telling is where they then move onto. For a large number of the kind of southerners who George is writing for, if they have lived in the North it will be for three years spent in places like Durham, or York, Manchester or Leeds, before heading south again upon graduation. Just to make the point clear, Figure 4 shows the spatial distribution of the individuals in cities holding a university degree in the year 2003, as a proportion of the total economically active population.

The highest concentrations of the economically active population qualified to degree level are observed in Cambridge, Oxford and London, but also, York, Warrington, Bristol, Crawley, Norwich and Brighton, where the proportion of the economically active population with a degree is over 40%. In contrast, the smallest proportions (ranging from 14% to 19%) are observed in Sunderland, Hull, Grimsby, Doncaster, Stoke, Peterborough, Southend, and Chatham.

Look at Figure 4 again. Now the impression of London and the English desert is complicated by a series of colonial outposts. Centred from London they appear at twelve o'clock to the north where York is found; then Norwich at 2 o'clock; Brighton at 6 o'clock; Bristol at 9 o'clock; and Warrington at around 10.30. The country cannot be governed

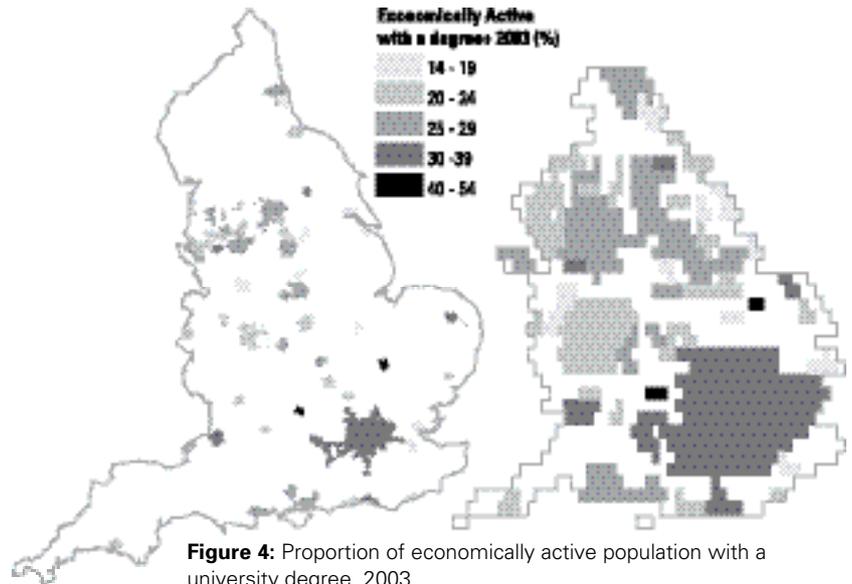


Figure 4: Proportion of economically active population with a university degree, 2003

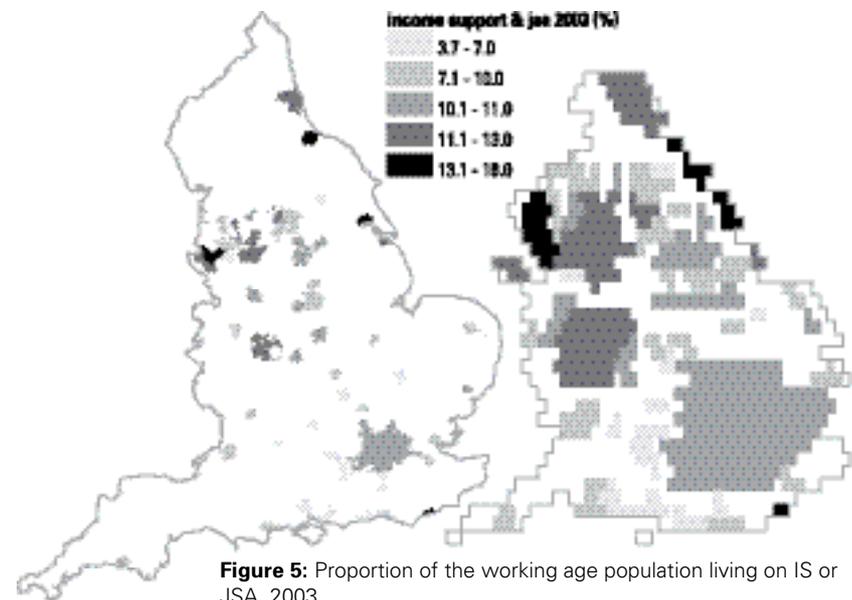


Figure 5: Proportion of the working age population living on IS or JSA, 2003

from London alone. Around the periphery outposts are required where those educated to the higher levels can cluster together in safety and mutual understanding up the spokes of their various motorways from the centre. Closer to home, Oxford and Cambridge are both just an hour's drive down newly built 6 or 8 lane roads to the centre of power. All very efficient, Walter Christaller would be proud. However, with a declining manufacturing base in the provinces and increasing reliance on one industry in the capital (finance) it becomes harder to see what all this organisation is for. And at times this apparent futility drives the traditional Englishman to new heights of cynicism. For that we need turn to issues of what the English now do: employment.

EMPLOYMENT – AND THOSE SEEKING IT

"...it becomes more and more difficult to see why, except as a kind of giant floating souk, and a source of marketable produce such as tours of Buckingham Palace, mementos of Diana or of ready-made sets for inane films, there's any reason for the United Kingdom (in the old sense) to continue to exist." (Walden, 2007, p. 138)

Again, in wanting to share the abuse more evenly George switches from referring to England, to

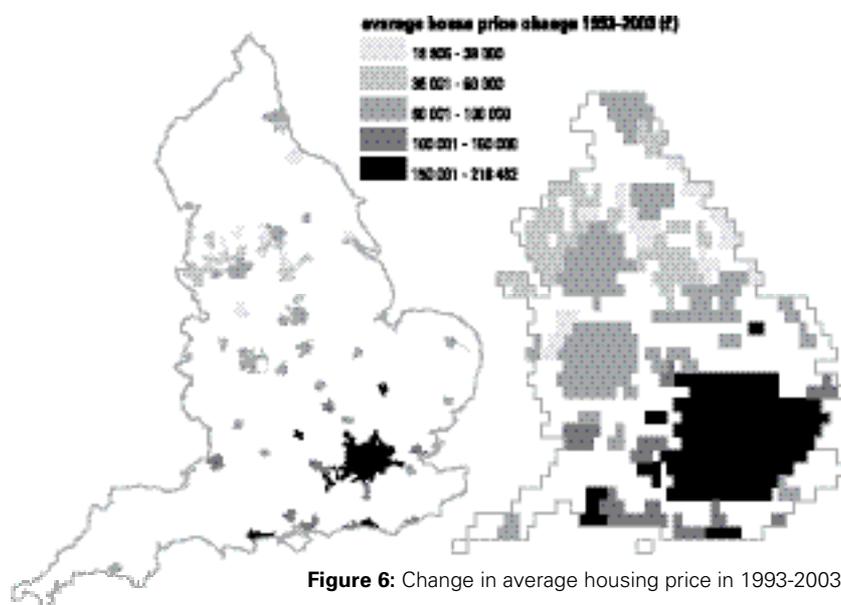


Figure 6: Change in average housing price in 1993-2003

giving reference to a wider entity when chastising our record on industry and employment. Even in the recent economic boom-times a remarkable number of people of working age in England are unemployed. Their geographical distribution is shown below. A much higher number cannot work because they are now ill, often suffering from depression. In contrast the geographical distribution of the population living on unemployment benefits is of a constantly changing population. Very few people now live on these benefits for long periods of time, but many come on and off them again, repeatedly, through their lives. Figure 5 shows the proportions of adults of working age (as estimated by another statistics quango: NOMIS) who were claiming Income Support or Job Seekers' Allowance by August 2003.

There are many ways in which lack of work can be measured and many of these are included in the database that this paper draws on. However, given problems of changing definitions of unemployment over time and of the welfare benefits associated with unemployment and low-paid part-time employment, the combination of the two benefits shown in Figure 5 provides one of the longest reliable time series available for small areas.

By the middle of 2003 (the latest date for which my colleagues and I had numerator and denominator data when creating this picture for the British government) some 18% of the working age population of Liverpool and 17% of that population of Hull were claiming these benefits. The next four cities with the highest claimant rates, all of 13% of their adult populations, were Birmingham, Hastings, Newcastle and Middlesbrough. This partly explains Hastings featuring as an anomaly in the South (above). Other cities with more than 11% their working age populations living on these benefits include: Blackburn, Sunderland, Birkenhead, Rochdale, Manchester, Bradford and Grimsby. The figure for London is 10,3%. Rates below 6,5% of this population are found only in Aldershot, Reading, Cambridge, Crawley, Oxford, Worthing and our anomalous friend in the North: York.

A high proportion of working age people in English cities have to rely on benefits to support

themselves, mainly because they cannot find suitable work. It should be noted here again that people on disability and other health-related benefits are not included in these maps (nor men aged 60-64 in the numerator), which would both further inflate these numbers and reinforce the patterns shown above. The parliamentary constituency with the highest poverty rates in Britain in recent years recorded up to 41.3% of the population living there aged between ages 25 and 44 relying on benefits, and up to 60,3% of the population aged 45-59 doing so (Thomas and Dorling, 2007, p. 143 and 178) There have been significant falls in unemployment as formally measured in the years immediately prior to 2003. There have been some rises in some places since. The picture shown here is about as good as it got over the last thirty years.

Many cannot find work, but more people than ever are also now working in Britain. Both these trends are true because each year there are fewer people in the country who are neither working nor unemployed. Women are coerced back to the labour market after having children faster each year than the year before. People are encouraged to work longer before retiring, students to work though their studies: work longer, longer hours, work harder, and – in practise – work for less. More people in Britain can afford to try to buy a house now with far more difficulty than they could in recent decades; this despite more of us now working and us having more houses per household! We work harder, in greater numbers and for longer, to get by. We are rewarded increasingly unevenly for that work. One result is a huge rise in private renting for those whose parents would have taken out a mortgage. This is how George sees the future for housing and by implication wealth:

WEALTH – AND THE CHANGING COST OF SHELTER

"Landlords will emerge who will make Rachman seem benign. As services are overwhelmed and councils infiltrated by crooks, every kind of corruption associated with housing will increase..." (Walden, 2007, p. 111).

Figure 6 shows the average absolute change in equivalised (for type of home) housing price from 1993 to 2003 using Building Society records as the source of data for the earlier data, coupled with the 1991 and 2001 census figures on dwelling type. Because the sums of money involved are so large and because cities start off from different bases it makes more sense to show absolute rather than relative change.

Average housing prices in the ten years 1993-2003 rose by over £200 000 only in London. They rose by more than £150 000 in Oxford, Cambridge, Aldershot, Brighton and Bournemouth; and by more than £100 000 in: Reading, Crawley, Worthing, Southend, Milton Keynes, Southampton, Hastings, Bristol and Portsmouth.

They rose between only £40 000 and £50 000 in: Preston, Sheffield, Birkenhead, Sunderland, Huddersfield, Rochdale, Wigan, Liverpool and Bolton; by between £30 000 and £40 000 in Doncaster, Grimsby, Middlesbrough and Stoke; by between £20 000 and £30 000 in Bradford, Barnsley, Hull and Blackburn; and by just less than £20 000 in Burnley.

Changes in housing prices over time bear very close correspondence to changes in housing wealth. Although the use of the dates 1993 to 2003 above show a period of particularly rapid polarisation in housing prices, that polarisation has been continuing fairly constantly since digital reports of prices were first made (in the early 1980s). Short term falls in house prices, as occurred in the early 1990s, do little to dent the long term trend in polarising prices between English cities along, and exacerbating, a North-West to South-East divide (see appendix for a map of the line).

Those now living in London are fearful of leaving it as they will not be able to afford to return. Those living in "the English desert" cannot move to London until they have no children and so need little space, or have a relative rich enough to finance their move. London, increasingly, only has space for the best and worse-off in Britain (and from abroad). Other than asylum-seekers, the very worse-off are housed still by the state. The very best off are building huge swimming pools under their Westminster and Kensington mansions, palatial home cinemas, underground garages for their multiple cars, and remodelling their interior decorations regularly in those parts of the Capital home to the world's super-rich.

A NATION AT EASE WITH ITSELF?

"Economically we live on borrowed money, and environmentally on borrowed time." (Walden, 2007, p. 122).

Not everything George Walden says about Britain is a reflection of twisted and bitter anger. In everything there is a grain of some kind of truth and occasionally his descriptions, like the one line above, are quite apposite. Although interested readers would do better to read Elliot and Atkinson, 2007, for a more apposite longer version of the above line of observation. A detailed analysis of how England has become a country so divided that even former members of Margaret Thatcher's administration despair of what they have created is needed, but would require more space than that allowed for a journal paper. One day I hope I will get to thank George Walden (MP for Buckingham from 1983 to 1997, and briefly Minister for Higher Education) for not cutting the university place that allowed me later, to study and, eventually, to report in him.

Much that Walden says is easily refuted with or without a university education. People in England are not so polite that they do not express their

most bigoted of views both often and loudly, most prominently as offensive newspaper headlines. No part of England is seeing the lines of ethnic mini-states forming. Rural villages are no more threatened in (or about to be relieved from) their ethnic homogeneity now than they have ever been. If not a single illegal immigrant or counterfeit *asylum* seeker enters the UK in the future then the population will rapidly fall rather than swell to extraordinary size as George suggests above. And if you lived in Paris, might you not be put off choosing to spend a weekend in Lyon, Bordeaux or Marseilles by all the English tourists and ex-pats coming into town with a grievance complaining over whatever became of the home country?

A fairer summary of our English human geography is given with the use of a little more data than can be collected by one man's eyes and ears. For instance what do we find if we aggregate the five key variables described so far to create a very simple overall index of the state of the English cities combining the five traditional measures of quality of life as seen through lack of disease, ignorance, idleness, want and squalor as reflected through their modern day equivalents of high life expectancy, good qualifications, low work-related benefit claims, low rates of poverty and high house prices? These key state-of-the-city indicators are summarised in Table 1 (below). As can be seen, the indicators are sorted by an overall score (and a change over time measure is given). This overall index confirms the general impression given by the more than one hundred maps and cartograms contained in the full report I have been relying on (and in much else published with many colleagues – see acknowledgements). The impression is that, in general, English cities are clearly divided between those in the South-East of the country and those situated towards the North-West. And the South East is increasingly dominated by London.

There is little sign of that divide narrowing and many indications that, again in general, it is widening. The same few exceptions to this generalisation are repeatedly mentioned in the full report; most notably York ranks within Southern cities (7th overall and the only Northern city in the top dozen). All 23 cities at the bottom of table 1 are in the North as defined in the research project this data arose from (by Government Office Region with the West Midlands in the North). The next four are all Southern, but those four are socially and/or spatially at the greatest distance from the capital: Hastings, Plymouth, Luton and Peterborough. There is no Southern city which, overall on all five indicators, compares badly or even equally to any of the worst-off twenty Northern cities. In general, the better off a city was on these scores in the recent past, the more it has improved in the period to 2003 (see Figure 7).

A simpler way to put this is to state what it would take for Liverpool, at the bottom of the table, to

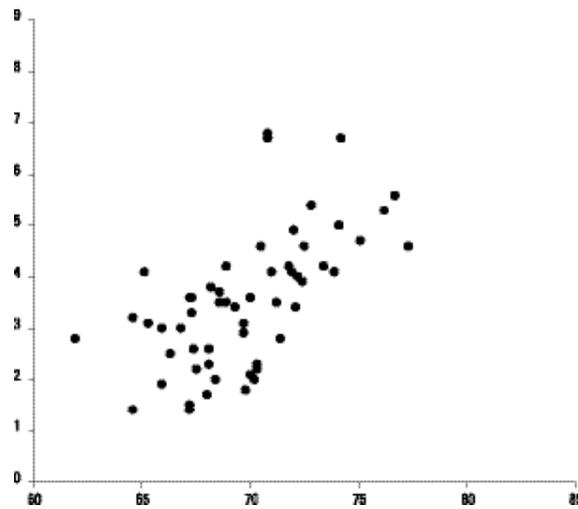


Figure 7: Change in Score to 2003 versus Average Score prior to that change
 Note: Each point is an English city located by change in score in recent years (x axis) and overall score prior to that change (y axis), correlation coefficient 0,61 (and 0,79 with score in 2003).

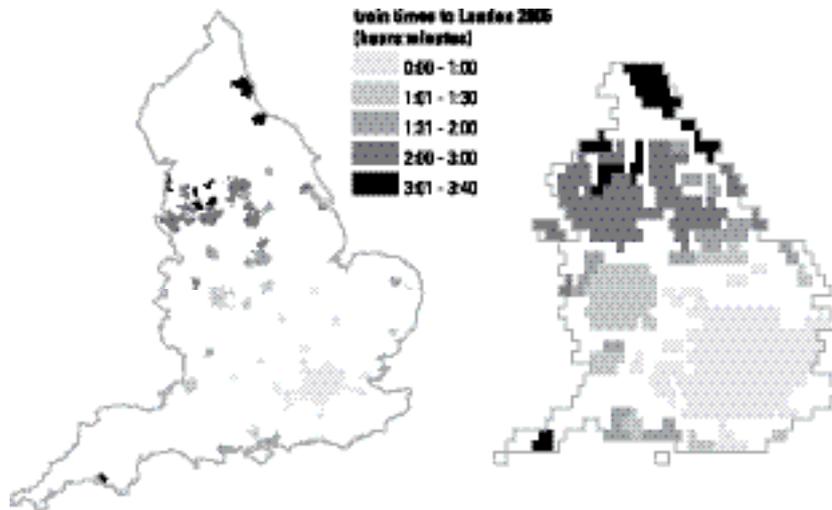


Figure 8: Train times to London

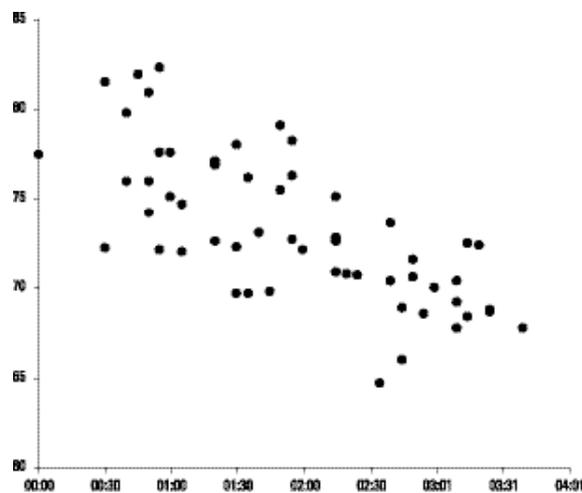


Figure 9: Train times to London versus Average Score 2003
 Note: Each point is a city located by ravel time to London (x axis) and overall score (y axis), correlation coefficient -0,71.

become like Leeds, midway, and for Leeds to become like Cambridge (at the top). For Liverpool to be like Leeds, its peoples' life expectancy would have to rise by 2,5 years more than that of Leeds in the future, 5% more of its adult population would need to gain a degree, 9% of the working age population would have to come off IS or JSA benefits (and none off such benefits in Leeds), overall poverty would have to fall by 4% and average housing prices rise by £31 650.

For Leeds to be like Cambridge life expectancy in Leeds would have to increase by 1,3 years more than in Cambridge in the near future, an extra 22% of the population would need to gain a degree, 4% fewer people would need to be on work-related benefits, poverty rates would need to fall by 3% and house prices would have to rise by an average of £125 600 per home.

English cities can appear in a series of leagues when the data in table 1 is considered in the round. A "premier league" of four cities with high average scores from 80,9 to 82,3 is clear (including Oxford and Cambridge), followed by 18 "first division cities" with scores from 74,2 to 79,8 (from Crawley to Chatham, including London and Bristol). There is a gap and then a "second division" of 14 cities scoring between 71,6 and 73,6 (from Preston to Huddersfield, including Leeds and Nottingham), followed by a "third division" from 70,9 to 70,4 (headed by Manchester and down to Bolton), and a "fourth division" from Grimsby to Middlesbrough, including Birmingham, and Newcastle); with Blackburn, Sunderland; and then Hull as a fifth; and then Liverpool following below in division six, an English city in a group of its own⁷.

Almost all Southern cities are in the premier league or first division of table 1. Less than a half dozen are found in the second division and none below that. Division two downwards is dominated by cities of the North of England.

To borrow from the subtitle of a recent atlas of poverty produced for the United States (Glasmeier 2005) England, as viewed through the lens of its cities is "one nation, pulling apart". Not to state this clearly in conclusion would be unfair to the readers as the patterns are so clear. This is the grain of truth within George Walden's lament. Given how obvious such a conclusion is from the maps reproduced here, it is imperative that this simple truth is not lost in the study of the nuances of more subtle changes occurring in urban England as revealed by this data.

There is a final simple map and graph which is worth showing here, for how well it reflects the most basic of understandings that this database should aid. Most of what the data can tell you can be read from a train timetable. What matters above all else for the cities of England is how far each is away from London (see Figures 8 and 9)⁸.

THE ENGLISH AND THEIR GEOGRAPHY

So what's to become of the English and their geography?

Mr Walden has some interesting things to say – despite his strange belief that the brains of different humans are somehow differently wired in different continents (see below). It is often said that the historic reason for much of the population of the North of England to exist has long gone. Next time you hear that, remember the coffee houses that transformed over the course of centuries to become financial trading markets. They are no more reliant on London clay for their location than they ever were on the destination of imported coffee. Thus for the English:

"In many ways their future isn't in their hands . It's in those of China, India and the rest, who'll soon be making many of the things they make here to the same standard at a quarter the price. Nor will the Asian business brain [sic] be content to rely on British financial services for ever, whether it's in Leeds or London. And the idea that the second coming of the North will be based on garden centres in Liverpool (Heseltine), art galleries in Gateshead or casinos everywhere (Tessa Jowell) is risible, as well as cynical.

There are pleasant enough places, which a bit of global warming could brighten up, but with the best multicultural will in the world I find it impossible to envisage a genuine rebirth of Northern towns, their culture, their supremacy. Maybe I'm wrong, though I doubt it, and in any case it scarcely matters. One of the charms of the North is that, like China in the time of Marco Polo, you can say what you like about it and no one can contradict you, because apart from a trip to Durham and a holiday in the lake District they haven't been there for years, if ever, and have absolutely no intention of going." (Walden, 2007, p. 99)

Reading his thoughts it becomes evident that the Englishman, George Walden, does not have a multicultural bone in his body, and so mustering his best multicultural will does not get him very far, but he does have a point about the relationship of those in power to the North of England and the precarious situation that they find themselves in relying on a few (almost entirely American owned or run) banks to finance London. I think I did mention our English subservience to America a little early? Its so well accepted now that we often forget to!

What the English desert lacks above all else is money. Money in England has spiralled into the South East in recent decades – sent like food, water and tribute to a centre that in reality makes nothing of much value, but which extracts a high charge from the rest of the world for the "services" it provides. And, given where it is, often those in the centre feel powerless to alter course. A course that, it is becoming clearer day by day, is

especially dependent on the will of a few powerful people and banks based in America.

If you ever wondered why the English kow-tow so much to the Americans, simply look at which nation of birth is most overrepresented in the heart of the Capital. The largest group of immigrants in the wealthy heart of London were born in America.

And, briefly before we end, what of Wales, Scotland and Ireland? Well there is more than one story to tell, just as the story of America is needed to understand why we now have an English desert. All that I have tried to do here is to combine the very recently revealed angst of a former Government Minister with a few numbers produced for the appendices of the reports given to current Government Ministers. The result, again as I said in introduction is, I think, is a story of England reminiscent of one told of France some sixty years ago. This was the last time many of us in England learnt what there was to French geography other than through holiday and retirement destinations.

However, before you think you are immune from this English desertification disease and its precursors, ask an average English school child now of what they know of the geography of France and they will probably be able to tell you the rough location of something their parents could not: that thing is Euro Disney...now – whose idea was that?

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7 - If other cities in the United Kingdom were included outside of England, Liverpool might potentially be joined in a group by Swansea, Glasgow, Belfast and other similar Western ports and old industrial centres.

8 -The Train time data is available at the following web address: http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/socr/data/SOCD52_train_times_to_london.xls
On line booking systems were used to create this dataset. Journey searches were set to 0800 to London on 10 Feb 2005. From the 5 journeys returned, the fastest journey time was chosen, rounded to nearest five minutes. Note that all these datasets and many more are available from <http://www.sasi.group.shef.ac.uk/socr/>

Table 1: Key state of the city indicators, sorted by an overall score (and change measure provided in final column) divided into a six leagues Division City

Division	City	Life Exp. 2001-2003	2001 % of adults with a degree	% working age claiming JSA/IS 2003	% of poverty by PSE 1999-2001	Average housing price '03	Average score 2003	Change in score over time
Premier ship	Cambridge	79.5	41	5.1	29	244862	82.3	5.6
	Aldershot	79.0	22	3.7	17	238991	81.9	4.6
	Reading	79.6	26	4.7	20	211794	81.5	5.3
	Oxford	79.2	37	5.1	30	255181	80.9	6.7
1st	Crawley	78.0	19	4.8	22	205500	78.8	4.7
	Bournemouth	79.7	17	7.1	21	214296	79.1	5.0
	York	79.4	23	6.4	26	147513	78.2	5.4
	Worthing	78.8	16	6.4	20	186992	78.0	4.1
	Brighton	78.4	29	9.3	27	212261	77.6	6.6
	Southend	79.0	13	7.5	19	188481	77.8	4.2
	London	78.8	30	10.3	33	283387	77.5	6.7
	Bristol	78.9	23	7.7	25	180708	77.1	4.8
	Southampton	78.8	19	6.9	25	172585	76.9	4.9
	Norwich	79.8	18	7.5	27	198187	76.3	3.9
	Portsmouth	78.8	16	6.6	25	167145	76.2	4.0
	Milton Keynes	78.2	18	6.8	25	181825	76.0	4.2
	Swindon	78.2	15	6.6	22	150689	76.0	4.1
	Gloucester	78.4	18	6.5	22	141890	75.5	3.4
	Warrington	77.9	17	6.8	23	119668	75.1	4.6
	Northampton	78.2	17	7.8	24	193871	75.1	4.1
Ipswich	79.0	16	10.1	26	134514	74.7	3.5	
Chatham	77.7	12	7.7	23	142374	74.2	2.8	
2nd	Preston	77.7	17	7.2	26	97038	73.8	3.6
	Derby	78.1	18	10.5	27	114280	73.1	4.2
	Leeds	78.2	19	8.9	32	118282	72.8	3.1
	Nottingham	77.5	18	8.8	28	123663	72.7	3.4
	Telford	77.9	13	9	27	115722	72.6	2.9
	Leicester	78.0	17	11	28	124812	72.6	2.3
	Blackpool	77.2	13	6.9	24	103656	72.5	2.2
	Plymouth	78.1	13	9.8	28	118978	72.4	3.5
	Hastings	77.4	15	13.4	25	103128	72.3	3.7
	Luton	77.2	14	8.7	28	143698	72.2	2.0
	Wolverhampton	77.5	14	9	28	110407	72.1	3.5
	Peterborough	77.5	14	9.5	28	123089	72.1	2.1
	Coventry	77.8	18	10.9	28	111185	72.0	3.8
	Huddersfield	77.2	15	8.7	29	97815	71.6	1.8
3rd	Manchester	78.7	19	11.8	30	119589	70.9	3.6
	Sheffield	77.9	18	10.4	33	96328	70.8	3.8
	Wigan	76.5	12	6.6	27	88946	70.7	2.6
	Birkenhead	77.9	13	12.2	29	96632	70.6	3.3
	Bolton	76.8	15	10.4	29	89261	70.4	2.3
	Mansfield	77.1	9	9.4	28	94749	70.4	2.0
4th	Grimsby	77.8	10	11.5	28	77898	70.0	2.8
	Doncaster	77.3	11	10.6	30	82267	69.8	3.0
	Birmingham	77.4	14	12.8	33	122794	69.7	2.2
	Stoke	76.9	11	10.3	29	78834	69.7	1.7
	Newcastle	77.1	16	12.8	34	111220	69.2	4.1
	Barnsley	77.2	10	10.8	32	79492	68.9	3.0
	Rochdale	78.4	14	12.2	31	92523	68.8	2.5
	Burnley	76.8	12	10.7	31	55879	68.7	1.5
	Bradford	76.8	13	11.5	33	75819	68.6	1.4
Middlesbrough	77.1	12	13.1	32	81760	68.4	3.1	
5th	Sunderland	76.6	12	12.4	34	91322	67.8	3.2
	Blackburn	75.8	14	12.7	30	70969	67.8	1.9
	Hull	76.6	12	17.1	33	72374	66.0	1.4
6th	Liverpool	75.7	14	18	36	87607	64.7	2.8

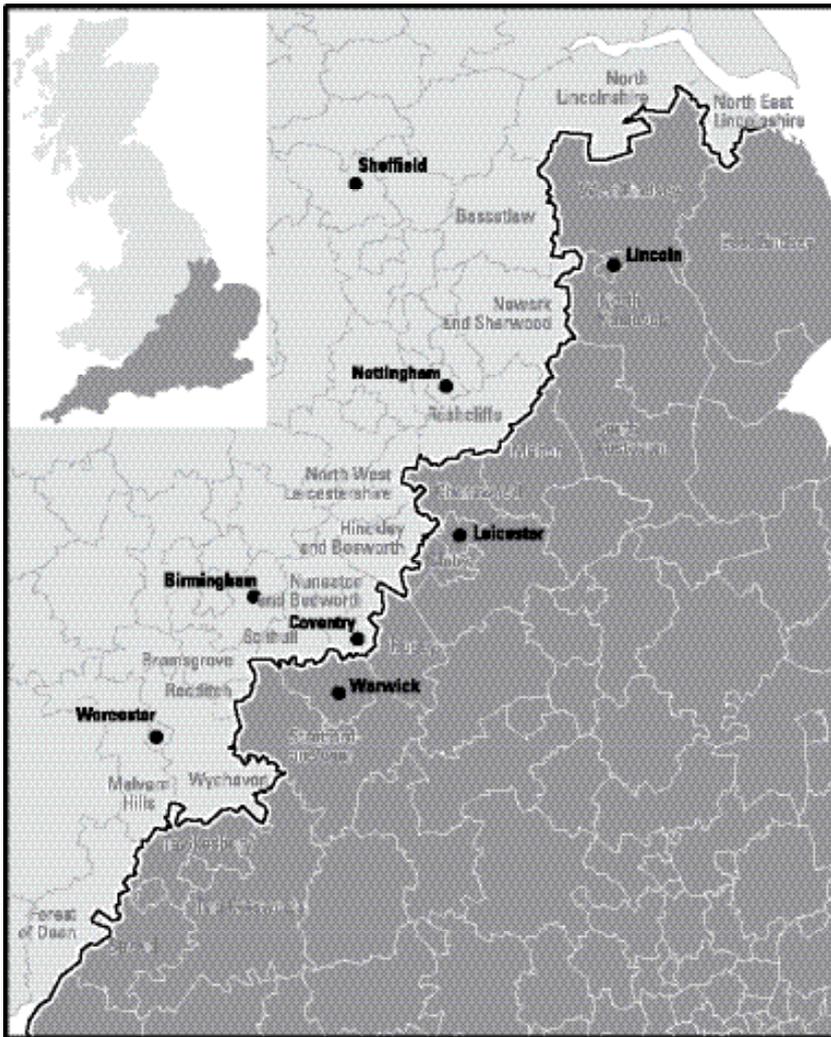


Figure 10: The North/South dividing line

Appendix: the North/South dividing line

When asked where the north/south divide is geographers in Britain have a tendency to give vague answers. Although this is understandable, I think we now have enough detailed information on life chances, political views, health and wealth in Britain to be able to say with a little more certainty where the line lies. Below is shown

This is the line that separates upland from lowland Britain, the hills from the most fertile farmland, areas invaded by Vikings from those first colonised by Saxons. Numerous facts of life divide the North from the South – there is a missing year of life expectancy north of this line. Children south of the line are much more likely to attend Russell group universities for those that do go to University (and they often go to the North to study!), a house price cliff now runs along much of the line, and, on the voting map, the line still often separates red from blue.

In terms of life chances the only line within another European country that is comparable to the North-South divide is that which used to separate East and West Germany. This is found not just in terms of relative differences in wealth either side of the line, but most importantly in terms of health where some of the extremes of Europe are now found within this one divided island of Britain.

By county the North lies above the old counties of Gloucestershire, Warwickshire, Leicestershire and Lincolnshire and 'nips' only into parts of some of

those counties. Most of each of those counties, and all the areas of England below them, are in the South.

By constituency the North includes and lies above the new parliamentary constituencies of the Forest of Dean on the north bank of the Severn; includes West and Mid Worcestershire, Redditch, Bromsgrove (and hence all of Birmingham), Meriden, Coventry South and North East, Warwickshire North, Nuneaton, Bosworth, Loughborough, Rushcliffe, Newark, Bassetlaw, Brigg and Goole, Scunthorpe, Cleethorpes, ending at Great Grimsby and the south bank of the Humber.

It would be possible to go further and split some of these constituencies in half. It would be possible to identify enclaves and exclaves along the border, but this would suggest too much of a rigid line, and the border does move, especially when a new motorway is built or train line to London improved.

Within the North are places that look and sometimes act (e.g. vote) like the south. Areas around the vale of York and Cheshire are contenders here – but they are still northern. Similarly there are parts of the south, especially within London that are very unlike much of the rest of the south, but they are still southern. Scotland and Wales are part of the North, despite having managed to eschew the Victorian attempts to label them North and West Britain respectively.

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