

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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This Other England I

13 Thurloe Place  
London, S.W.7

December 19, 1965

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366 Madison Avenue  
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte,

Not long ago Mr. Peart, the British Minister of Agriculture, passed through the Yorkshire market town of Knaresborough on his way to a nearby conference on farming problems. Although there is little evidence that the minister is an unduly sensitive man, he may have been a bit shaken by the nature of his reception. Even the trees lining his route were garlanded with signs offering him unsolicited advice; while there was a broad selection of messages, the usual placard bore the main theme: "Leave Us Alone!" A number of variations beg to be played on that theme.

First, however, it seems necessary to move this correspondent out of London and onto the scene. Apart from the standard reasons for tourism -- certainly at a discount in raw November weather -- the impetus for the journey mainly was reaction to implicit criticism. It is commonly charged that while everyone pays lip-service to the need to leave the capital and move around the country, very few foreigners actually do report impressions gained elsewhere than in London and the ancient university centers. This nation's life admittedly revolves about its capital city to a degree surpassed in only a handful of industrialized countries. Yet urban sprawl, increased mobility and the dispersion of affluence and thus political weight -- among other factors -- are at work promoting changes in this respect. It is granted also that hosts of foreign "trippers" over the years have swarmed through the land from the Cotswolds to Windermere, from Durham to Canterbury; so there would appear no dearth of potential commentators. But one who has been in those ranks himself would have little hesitation in stressing their concern with things rather than people, with the quaint rather than the norm.

Why the choice of Yorkshire for an effort to refute this charge leveled at overseas visitors? No one can reside here very long without meeting a Londoner of northern origins forcibly expressing the view that another, quite different England lies beyond the River Trent. More often than not this thesis will be advanced by a Yorkshireman. It is not

merely a question of the old division between north and south found in so many lands, in this case dating back at least to the days of the Danelaw. In time the impression grows that Yorkshire to a small degree is seen as the Texas of Britain, or at least as unique in many ways -- beyond furnishing the current prime minister, whose more publicized attributes (unfairly adding up to a sort of minor-league Machiavelli) sometimes seem to belie his origin. Perhaps it is only fancy, but one senses among some native Londoners an almost wistful attraction toward the north; a feeling that there may be found a plain-spoken honesty, a rustic virtue, contrasting with the cool point-scoring gamesmanship practiced so widely in this still highly structured and mannered urban society. It causes the mind irresponsibly to wander back to the piquant relationship between Queen Victoria and the Scottish Mr. Brown.

And so, like Mr. Micawber, I said "adieu to the modern Babylon" and went "to establish myself in one of the provincial towns of this favoured island". In his time scores of adventures might have been encountered on the laborious progress toward the north. In this age one makes do with the dispensable excitement of about 150 minutes on the M-1 Motorway. There is a sense of appropriateness as majestic Bentleys and sleek Jaguars whoosh by at 100 miles an hour. And it is quite understandable that sports car owners should be doing the same, presumably proving their virility or their neuroses -- depending on which psychologists are believed. But then mini-cars and Volkswagen "bugs" flit past at 85 mph and one's foot goes down on the accelerator in seemingly automatic protest at this assumed challenge to match frustrations, if not manhood -- as is sheepishly acknowledged to oneself moments later. It comes as no surprise to learn that a British company is continuing its development of a 200 mph car, or misguided missile, on the assumption that the upcoming 70 mph limit on the motorways will prove unenforceable and will soon be abandoned. The newly erected fog-warning lights already are being stolen about as fast as they are installed.

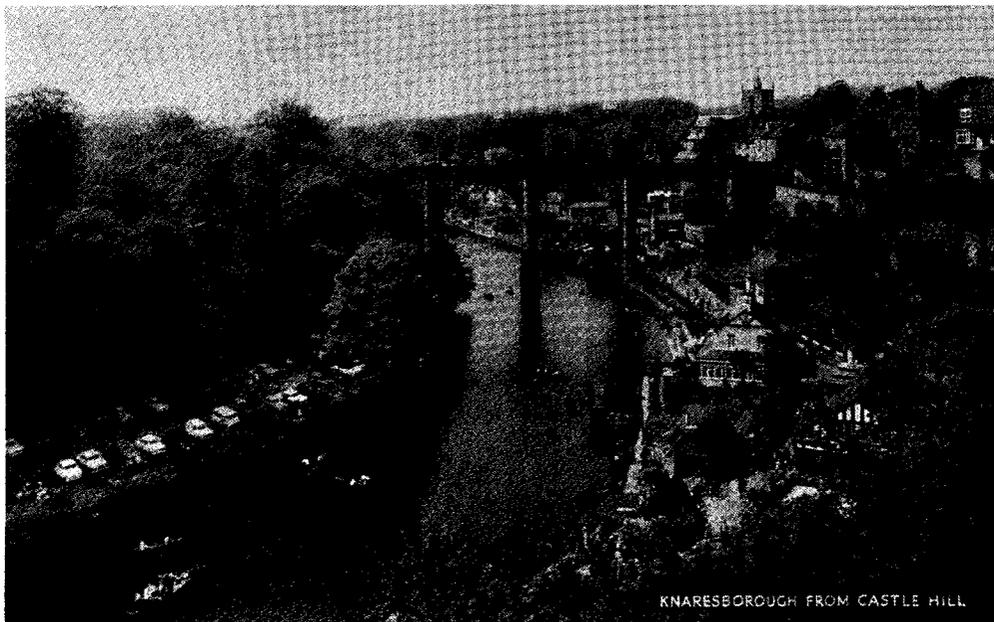
Then the M-1 abruptly ends in the middle of nowhere some miles northwest of Leicester, followed by a cross-country struggle on back roads for the better part of an hour to head in the right northward direction again. There is cause and time for reflection, not only about the inadequacies of the national road network, but about the limited scope for freedom from the crowds and restrictions of life in a modern industrialized world. Clearly, to the English the motorways are a kind of last frontier. This generation reacts to limitations on its driving as the last

one would in defense of the proposition that a man's home is his castle.

Appropriately enough, it was pitch-black with a cold driving rain when the industrial belt of Yorkshire's West Riding was reached at the outer limits of teatime, and there was a halt at a neon-lit café for what the Daily Mirror persists in calling "a cuppa". The dingy premises were packed with muscular coal miners who'd done a cursory job at the sink. Listening to their conversation one felt like a rather ineffectual and very pale Henry Higgins lurking behind a Covent Garden column. And it was not really profitable eavesdropping: the 50 percent that could be understood seemed entirely devoted to football pools and other forms of gambling; the other half of the conversation appeared to be transacted in what fondly might be imagined as a blend of Chaucerian and Swahili. More interesting was the fact that mention of this scene to townsmen a little further north invariably drew the immediate comment "Ah, but they're gude chaps in the main" -- when there was never any intention of implying they weren't.

Northward progress ended in Harrogate, where a call from a lowered car window for directions to the hotel brought rapid support for the plentiful tales about Yorkshire hospitality; in seconds three people on the sidewalk were cheerfully consulting in the rain about the best method of getting me under shelter. It seems quite possible to be silently hospitable, but no substantiation could be found for the equally prevalent stories about taciturn Yorkshiremen. Indeed, a week's sojourn failed to unearth one outside the cities. Perhaps loquaciousness gets repaid in kind in the north. More likely, an obvious foreigner receives very different treatment than an English tourist. Against this may be cited the slender fact that a farmer at an inn in the dales struck up a conversation before he heard my accent; it was hard to tell which of us was more taken aback. Possibly all the incipient Heathcliffes have descended from the moors to writhe and sulkily comb their hair in the Bradford and Keighley dance halls.

From Harrogate the first objective of the trip was only a little over three miles to the east. On a prior journey some years ago to visit John of Gaunt's castles the track had led to the town of Knaresborough. The once mighty stronghold lies in ruins as a result of the explosive activities of the "right [sic] but repulsive" Parliamentary armies during the English Civil War. But the charm of the town remains intact, as does the magnificence of its site, rising high above the River Nidd meandering down from the dale country toward the tranquility of the plain of York.



KNARESBOROUGH FROM CASTLE HILL

Knaresborough with its best summer foot forward.

History reverberates at every step in the environs: Marston Moor was fought not many miles to the east; one of the bloodiest battles of the Wars of the Roses took place at Towton to the southeast; Fountains and Bolton Abbeys lie close at hand to the northwest and west; at Broughbridge to the north Thomas of Lancaster lost a battle, which cost him his head and founded a legend. It is entirely fitting that Knaresborough should have been the birthplace of one of England's greatest historians, later known as the Bishop of Oxford; the hearts of countless undergraduate readers of Stubbs' Charters should gladden at the thought, though it ruefully may be doubted that they do.

But it was not historical associations which prompted a return to Knaresborough. Rather, it was the expectation that this market town with just under 10,000 people might prove typical of many other comparably sized places in Yorkshire. The hope perhaps was realized to a fair extent. On the other hand, it was the unusual, if not the unique, which kept cropping up at every turn. Despite the relatively small size of the town, for example, there attended grammar school together in Knaresborough both the current president of the National Chamber of Trade and the president of the

National Chamber of Commerce (contrary to U.S. and most European practice the two organizations are quite distinct in England). The former dignitary, an outstandingly kind and generous man who would laugh or squirm at the designation, still makes his home there.

Then, too, while probably little known among foreigners or even Londoners, Knaresborough is a tourist center for the Yorkshire area in the summertime. This status derives both from its own attractions, especially boating on the river, and from its location at the gateway to the dales. And yet there is not even a cinema nor really much in the way of lodgings to be found in the town. Apparently most of the traffic is in "day trippers" from the nearby but seemingly very distant industrial region.

Memory plays strange tricks: surely the market square was aligned differently in relation to the castle fifteen years ago. Otherwise, the first quick impression was the same, except for the thin mantle of frost replacing the remembered one of June sunlight. Then came what is known among Mack Sennett fans as a double-take. There was the old gabled chemist's shop -- purportedly the most ancient in all England -- but a few doors away appeared one of those iniquitous coffee bars (deceptively looking very much like a tea room) which has caused considerable head-shaking and sucking of air through teeth among the town fathers. The "Friendship and Leisure Centre" for the aged is still in place across the square, but down at the corner now may be seen a store front with the boldly inscribed words "Teen and Tween Shop". If this gives the impression that Knaresborough is hanging fire between, or under fire from, the old and the new, it may not be misleading at that.

One might well think that the citizens of Knaresborough would be paying no heed to the general subject of Britain's relations with the Continent -- and one largely would be wrong. True, a great deal of the interest is essentially negative, in terms of widespread and profound distrust of President de Gaulle; a feeling which derives far more from World War II experiences or apocrypha than from the rejection of January 1963. Many in Knaresborough incline to agree that de Gaulle was not too far off base in saying that the British were not ready to become whole-hearted Europeans at that juncture. There are also those who believe that few people have actually read the Rome Treaty, and equally believe there is suspect fine print on political integration which would tend to subvert British institutions. Mind you, there is not much enthusiasm for the latter at the moment, but the known devil generally wins out over the unknown one.

It would be easiest to maintain that Knaresborough is basically an agricultural community, that major opposition to joining the European Common Market has always come from the farmers, and therefore that nothing else could be expected. Many of the barbed messages for the transiting Minister of Agriculture sustained such a theme. As usual, however, matters are not quite so simple.

One knowledgeable and respected member of the local farming community stated positively that sentiment among his colleagues was now 70-30 against joining the EEC. Surprisingly enough, he was equally certain that in 1962 they had favored entry by the same odds. While the affront from de Gaulle doubtless played a part in this reversal of attitude, he explained it as a consequence of resentment over the heightened influx of farm produce from the Continent. Despite the inconsistency of argument, Danish bacon and Polish ham are the commodities which seem to stimulate the greatest protest, rather than items from the common-market countries. But here the farmers receive little sympathy from housewives and butchers in the region. The plain fact is that Danish bacon is overwhelmingly preferred, not because the local product is necessarily inferior, but because it is inconsistent in quality. Unlike the Danish, which is always as advertised, the English bacon cannot be relied upon to measure up to any set standard; the butchers would be delighted to give it preference if it did. As it is, they cannot even sell local bacon to the wives of farmers who bring it to market.

In a general way things foreign are becoming substantially more familiar to the people of Knaresborough than in the recent past. One town official is very gratified that his daughter, after spending several months in France improving her French, has achieved what he regards as bilingual status. Another such office-holder has welcomed a number of students from the Continent in his home, and currently has a West German youth staying with him -- and marveling at local young people's ignorance of and lack of interest in British democratic political institutions. The town council -- or, more accurately, the Knaresborough Urban District Council -- late in November was scheduled to consider a proposal for "twin-ing" with a town on the Continent, possibly one in France, and the signs indicated a favorable response. One local topic of conversation is the company which is beginning to produce trucks with the steering column in the center of the cab to facilitate driving in Britain and on the Continent; no one, of course, would be silly enough to suggest that driving on the right should be adopted, along with the metric and decimal systems for good measure.

The general opinion among informed people in the town is that steadily closer relations with the EEC countries are bound to develop in time. But time is a rather amorphous concept. Completion of the cross-Channel tunnel, for example, is seen as the most important contributor to such intimacy. There seems to be none of the feeling, found in some London circles, that the common-market countries increasingly may become less interested in British entry and that the boat may be missed. As far as Knaresborough is concerned the boat will remain tied up at the dock, and if it drifts away, well, the loss probably will be more the Continent's than England's.

Yet few wish to be considered antagonistic to any forward-looking proposal, or anachronistic in general outlook. Most people appear to want to be thought ready to move with the times. On the other hand, there is a constant refrain about "evolutionary movement" being the proper ticket: everything should be allowed to develop naturally through its own momentum, whether or not such a concept bears much examination. A little probing and it becomes clear that the people of Knaresborough feel strongly that they are being pushed, not only on the subject of relations with Europe but in virtually all spheres -- and they don't like it one bit.

In many cases this sentiment has to do with entirely local matters of restricted interest. If not questioned about relations with the United States, however, in time someone will volunteer the opinion that American foreign policies have not been the least of the contributions to the sense of being pressured. As in parts of the mid-United States, not to mention wholly dissimilar areas in California and Florida, one discovers the belief that the U.S. somehow manipulated the Belgians out of the Congo and thus bears much of the responsibility for the untoward nature of events in tropical Africa today. Very parenthetically, it might be noted that the U.S. air station some distance to the west of Knaresborough seems to maintain excellent relations with the people of the region; the only criticism was that the Yanks sometimes erred because of their anxious eagerness to do the right thing.

In the circumstances it was not surprising to find a great deal of sympathy in Knaresborough for Ian Smith's Rhodesian régime. This sentiment perhaps was strongest in a broadly defined middle-class stratum and owed quite a bit to the abiding resentment of pressure, wherever encountered. It might be thought that Knaresborough being "Tory" territory, like much of rural Yorkshire, would better explain the attitude toward Rhodesian affairs -- and it is true there was some local chortling over Harold Wilson supposedly having been outsmarted. Yet this reaction had much less to do with

party politics than with a general disaffection comprehending Whitehall, Westminster and politicians of all descriptions.

An American is usually accustomed to hearing his hometown friends and relatives describing government employees in Washington as incompetent time-servers, and portraying their political representatives in equally or more unflattering terms. But one finds it strangely difficult to shrug off such hyperbole abroad, and, for obscure reasons, especially in Britain. There seems an almost fierce determination in Knaresborough not to talk politics, and such conversation as may be forced always culminates in an attitude of "a plague on all parties." While many grains of salt may be taken with this impression -- apparently there is no lack of partisan spirit at election time -- the sense of alienation from affairs in the capital persists and certainly is not confined to this single town in Yorkshire.

At the same time, the warmth of one's welcome can only delay the discovery that Knaresborough possesses most of the virtues and flaws of any relatively small town, and it seems to magnify them. Those citizens who have lived there for some five to ten years -- usually officials whose jobs have taken them from home -- when questioned about their reception in the community, sometimes have difficulty in keeping a note of bitterness out of their responses. It was remarked to one relatively young lady who operated a sweet shop that she certainly qualified as a native, having spent all her years in Knaresborough. She laughed and said: "Oh no, my parents weren't born here, you see."

Down the slope and over the bridge and one is in the Harrogate outskirts, which have steadily moved eastward in a seeming attempt to convert Knaresborough into a suburb. Yet it is almost as if an invisible wall from one of Frank Baum's Oz books stood on the west bank of the river. Perhaps the imagery is overly fanciful, but there can be no doubt that such a wall exists in the minds of the people on the hill. In common with towns all over Britain, Knaresborough is being faced with centralizing plans to rationalize local government. And there is ample logic in such proposals, since the town belongs to a plethora of different groupings for political, police, clerical, judicial and other functions. The most depressing project contemplates amalgamation with Harrogate and possibly other well-populated parts of the West Riding; a more esthetically pleasing idea would link the town with Ripon in a move into the North Riding.

Knaresborough apparently wants nothing to do with any of these plots against its identity; it naturally contemplates changes in the more distant and unreal national scene with far less repugnance than it does threats to its

way of life. But there can be no illusions about the inexorable nature of the pressures. Once again the castle hill is under siege. High up in a pleasant, well-stocked establishment off the market place surrounded by good companions (the Priestley title is intentional) and good talk, feeling beleaguered is more seductive than alarming. Who could withhold complete sympathy from the mission of keeping Knaresborough as it is? Many less worthy causes and people -- including the four murderers of Thomas Becket -- have taken shelter in the premises. Surely only soulless bureaucrats, and teenagers who could pursue their emotional development anywhere, are pounding at the gates.

Suddenly there comes the realization that each day will make departure more difficult. So hasty farewells were said, promises to return delivered, and a start sorrowfully made on the second leg of what Tudor functionaries would term this visitation of the north.

Sincerely yours,



Donald G. Henderson

Received in New York January 14, 1966.