

My Place: Scunthorpe

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The new geography A level includes the topic 'Place'. What do we understand by place, a sense of place and changing places? I'm a product of the quantitative revolution in geography – if I can't get my ruler out and measure it, it's not geography! How will old-school geographers like myself approach this challenge? I don't teach any more, so I don't know why I'm worrying about it: but it got me thinking about my understanding of place. I hope to show, through a study of my place, Scunthorpe, how quantitative and qualitative information can be combined to produce a more complete picture of how people live and interact with their places.

My place is Scunthorpe, and it was my home for the first 12 years of my life. We lived on Grange Lane North, on a council estate on the outskirts of the town. My place owes its existence to an accident of geology. During Jurassic times, approximately 200 million years ago, limy ironstones were laid down in a shallow sea where Scunthorpe now sits. In the mid 19th century ironstone deposits were discovered at or near the surface, and the five villages in the area – Scunthorpe, Frodingham, Crosby, Brumby and Ashby – grew into the town that became Scunthorpe.

The iron ores found in the area, the Frodingham ironstone, were poor, with an iron content of only 20% or so. It has been called the worst iron ore field in the world! But Scunthorpe's growth depended on its poor-quality ore. Any richer, and the ore would have stood the cost of transport to existing iron and steel works in Rotherham and Sheffield. Any deeper, and it probably wouldn't have been worth mining at all. This ore had to be smelted on site, and blast furnace capacity grew as the thin overburden was stripped away and the area was scarred by extensive open cast mining.

As blast furnaces followed the open cast mining, so steel making followed the blast furnaces, then rolling mills and plate mills, and finally all the associated subsidiary industries. Oh the beauty of agglomeration and cumulative causation! The growth of Scunthorpe itself mirrored the growth of the steel industry: in 1850 the population of the five villages was approximately 1500; by 1920 the town was home to 25,000 people; and by 1950 Scunthorpe boasted a total population of over 55,000. Scunthorpe's steelworks drew people from all over the country and even further afield. At school I remember Scots, Ukrainians, Poles; even my father's family originated from the north east of England; the town was a perfect illustration of the multiplier effect!

The steelworks have retained some of their importance both to the nation and to the town. Industrial inertia! As the local iron ore ran out and the steel industry in Scunthorpe became dependent

on imported high grade iron ore as well as cheap imported coal, the industry remained on this now 'outdated site' due to the presence of the existing plant, a skilled labour force and the need to be near traditional industrial centres, as the use of scrap metal in the steelmaking process increased. A short distance from the deep water coal and ore terminals of Immingham, these resources were now moved quickly and cheaply by merry-go-round trains the 20 odd miles from the coast.

Scunthorpe is 'my place' and on a local scale, Grange Lane North is 'my home place'. The post-war boom in council house building meant that by 1960 over a quarter of the population of Britain lived in local authority accommodation. My estate was built in the early 1950s by an enlightened council who, after a little encouragement from 'squatters' on nearby abandoned army and air force barracks, laid down well-planned, well-built and well-loved council homes.

Each house had an attached shed and wash-house with toilet, an inside bathroom with toilet, a decent-sized back garden and a front garden with its own tree. Imagine the post-war delight of having two toilets! In front of the house was a large grassed area and over to the right an open common leading to Brigg Road and the steelworks, 'AppFrod' (short for Appleby-Frodingham), that towered over the town both physically and metaphorically.

We, the children of Grange Lane North and others of the estate, played out our childhood against this backdrop. We ranged across the common, discovering newts in small ponds and pools, trying to catch sticklebacks in a small stream fed by springs near Clarke's Wood, and chasing coveys of partridge with our home-made bows and arrows.

The common itself bore the scars of earlier iron ore mining and was covered with sands that I later discovered were the result of wind-blown deposition in the late Ice Age. This sandy soil made the common a perfect home for rabbits, and in past centuries the warrens around Scunthorpe were famous for rabbits, valued for their skins and providing a welcome tasty meal. And not just in the past – soon after my family moved into Grange Lane North, my dad was encouraging my mum to help him net rabbits at the end of the street! It may seem a little cruel now, but those were different times, not long after the war, and it was still generally acceptable to exploit the local area for food.

Scunthorpe has always been an 'industrial island', in touch with the countryside surrounding it, and as a lad my dad showed me the secret places on the common where he set his snares. Every night he took his trusty lurcher Bess for a walk over the common in the hope of catching us another meal.

John explains how quantitative and qualitative information can be combined to produce a more complex picture of a place.

Figure 1: Industry continues to dominate Scunthorpe.
Photo: © Ben Sutherland.



Figure 2: Cooling towers and blast furnaces of the steelworks beyond the newer, light industries build on the old common. **Photo:** © John Payne.



One night Bess was coming back with a rabbit every few minutes, and it was only when my dad got them home and saw their swollen, diseased state that he realised myxomatosis had arrived in Scunthorpe. It has been estimated that 99% of the rabbit population of Britain was killed by this disease and it is probably only this century that rabbit populations have begun to recover. Controversy still remains over the source of the outbreak in Britain; was it introduced by landowners and farmers who wanted to increase the yields of crops so often devastated by rabbits, or were mosquitoes blown over the English Channel from infected areas in France?

A sense of place, then, extends beyond your immediate surroundings to include links with the region, the nation and the wider world. A sense of place also goes beyond the physical. It is more than the area's rocks and soils and built environment; it incorporates the communities and individuals that made their lives on those rocks and soils and within those homes and factories.

The people taking up residence in the new houses at the top of Grange Lane North were young married couples, all with children, making a life on the edge of the common land beneath a skyline

dominated by the steelworks. They were probably fairly similar to all the young couples making their lives on new estates across the town and all over the country in those early post-war years.

All were special in their own way: Jean's dad kept budgies; my dad grew vegetables; Susan's dad, the owner of the only vehicle in the street, kept racing pigeons in the back garden. And David's dad taught us all to play cricket on the grass in front of the houses. It seems that to develop a true sense of place we need to be aware of people's interaction with their environment; how they made their lives, lived their lives and wrote the stories that became part of their shared heritage. The council houses, perhaps now owner-occupied, remain in Grange Lane North. The works, first British Steel, then Corus, later Tata and now back to a privately-owned British Steel, still dominate the skyline. The common has disappeared now, covered with roads and industrial estates full of businesses tempted there by government and local authority grants and incentives. Scunthorpe is no longer a one-horse steel town: new families occupy the houses, making their own relationship with the environment, developing their own narrative, defining their own sense of place. | **TG**

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