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REVEALING A NEW NORTHERN ENGLAND
Crossing the rubicon with Daniel Defoe

Daniel Defoe’s A Tour Thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain, first published 1724 – 6, has been described as ‘the liveliest introduction ... to Britain in the early eighteenth century’ (Penguin edn, 1971, p. 10). In the section of the book discussed here, the industrial district of the West Riding, then emerging as the most dynamic in Europe despite its apparently desolate Pennine surroundings, is portrayed by Defoe in a particularly striking manner, and he argues that the region was much misunderstood. Though this section of the Tour is often quoted, few people have analyzed it in depth, or linked it to later developments, including the classic Industrial Revolution. This paper sets out to show that, while Defoe’s topography and factual description can only be used with care, as a study of a remarkable nascent business culture it is of vital importance. It can be checked against other historical sources, some of which are used here, and emerges on this level as full of insights that can be obtained nowhere else. It also provides a holistic account no other source can rival. In particular, Defoe brings graphically to life the way industry was embedded in rural life, rather than destroying it.

Keywords  history; Yorkshire; textiles; business

1

Daniel Defoe’s life matched the span of our Long Restoration remarkably closely, stretching between 1660 and 1731 as it did. Moreover, the most prolific published author in the English language, by general estimation, must potentially be a superb witness to those times, especially as he combined extensive proto-journalism with the role of being an important progenitor of the modern English novel. He is especially valued for his comments on economic affairs since he was born into a commercial family, which had originated across the Channel, and he initially earned his own living in business. His was no privileged view, moreover, since his domestic happiness was twice destroyed by bankruptcy, the financial and legal repercussions of which never ceased to affect his family thereafter (Moore). London, then becoming the largest and most economically dynamic city in the world, generally took first place in his output, but among his most successful books was a panoramic picture of the newly formed United Kingdom, the Tour thro’ the Whole Island of Great Britain, published in the 1720s (Schellenberg 300 – 03). This was the first example of travel writing where genuine information is combined with entertainment, and localities are...
criticized, or condemned, as well as described and praised. Its appeal is evident from its record: though for decades it remained almost alone, it was republished and adapted repeatedly, and modern historians who share Defoe’s interest in seeing society in the round have mined it extensively for illustrative quotations. Terence N. Bowers has also argued, credibly, that the whole concept of such a book was to promote a new type of citizenship by revealing the new united kingdom to its people (155 – 56).

Defoe’s business difficulties stemmed partly from the time he devoted to gathering undercover information from many sources for several governments, and also to writing their propaganda, for he evidently relished both discovering secret knowledge and revealing some of it, either overtly or obliquely, to a mass readership (Moore 271 – 72; Schellenberg 295 – 97). It seems appropriate, therefore, to bring into prominence a section of the Tour where he wrote that

"it is not easy to take a view of this populous and wealthy part, called the West Riding [of Yorkshire], at one, no, nor at two journeys, unless you should dwell upon it, and go cross the country backward and forward, on purpose to see this or that considerable place. This is perhaps the reason why... other writers of journeys and travels... [have not seen] how to go about it. But... I was resolved to have a perfect knowledge of the most remarkable things, and especially of the manufactures of England, which I take to be well worth a traveller’s notice (188)."

Crossing the Trent at Nottingham is compared to crossing the Rubicon, and across it:

"there may perhaps be more waste ground to go over; yet ’tis certain a traveller spends no waste hours... The wildest part of the country is full of variety, the most mountainous places have their rarities to oblige the curious, and give constant employ to the enquiries of a diligent observer, making the passing over them more pleasant than the traveller could expect, or than the reader perhaps at first sight will think possible. The people in these northern climes [have]... customs and genius differing so much from others (144, 135)."

Letter eight of the third volume thus seems to distil long, intermittent experience rather than limiting itself to a tourist’s superficial vision based on a brief sightseeing trip, and this condensation is enormously important for anyone seeking to use his account to get at the essence of this distinctive past culture that he was so taken with, as I intend to do here.

Though Defoe describes much of the north in the book, by far the most interesting section for the historian concerns an ostensible journey between Manchester and Leeds. In this, he describes a culturally united but very scattered population living along a thin trans-Pennine corridor that as yet lacked conventional towns, an unusual structure which may account for the ignorance generally displayed then and since of its real functional integration and economic potential. Interestingly, the latest government regeneration strategy for northern England is explicitly based upon a similar recognition of this corridor, now defined as linking Liverpool to Hull, not as a fortuitous alignment of several miniature Londons, or even of conventional regional centers and market towns, but as an entity that in one sense is dispersed, but is also so
interlinked economically that it functions in some respects as a single city. Defoe’s corridor also rested on quite different foundations from the commerce and high finance that underpinned metropolitan growth, and in many ways actually inverted the central concepts of metropolis, something few people imagine to be possible without relinquishing coherence and economic efficiency.

This ‘secret’ that he took so much trouble over roused little interest to match his own, however, despite the book’s success. Bowers has used it as a key passage in his citizenship analysis (158 – 61), but northern historians usually focus only on their own patch and ignore the wider message. Even Peter Earle, who has used Defoe’s work as the basis for a fascinating self-contained study of English society, concentrates almost entirely on London.1 In one sense this is understandable, given the dominance of the capital, but a little over a century after Defoe’s death, Engels could announce without fear of contradiction that Manchester was a new type of city, mysteriously mounting a challenge to conventional urban and social norms on a grand scale, and apparently threatening metropolitan dominance. The possibility of drawing on such subtle contemporary observation to increase our understanding of the emergence of this unusual and yet historically significant region therefore still exists. It is all the more important both because local culture focussed so strongly on immediate practicalities that public self-reflections were virtually unknown, and because most outsiders ever since have judged what they saw hereabouts only by their own standards, as in Defoe’s time.

Defoe was aware of how differently people could view the region, starting his account by anticipating, long before pollution set in, the later tension between a romantic, picturesque north and an efficient but unattractive one. Thus, when G. M. Trevelyan wanted a writer who could best typify early eighteenth-century England in his hugely influential English Social History, he chose Defoe, but in so far as the north appears, the ‘romantic’ territory of the Lake District completely overshadowed the industrial area that would transform England (ch. 10). By contrast, Defoe began his northern ‘journey’ by disparaging contemporary attempts to create a fanciful tourist wonderland, demolishing ‘the seven wonders’ of the Peak District so thoroughly that no acid-penned modern travel writer or cultural theorist could do better. One after another he belittled their size, their claim to be unusual, their intrinsic interest, and left the southern reader with an impression that, were these wonders the only attraction, going north would be pointless. Instead he, and his party (if it ever existed in the form implied in this narrative) were entranced by a mining settlement in the Peak. He tells us how they first encountered a miner’s wife bringing up a family, quite comfortably, in a cave, and then a miner emerged from a crack in the ground not far away, more or less beneath their feet. Enquiries about the work he and his colleagues did needed the services of an interpreter, but eventually led to the drinking of a good deal of beer in a local pub, and the bestowal of a collection of spare cash that constituted an enormous sum compared to the rewards the recipients normally earned from their very hard work. This is a contrast Defoe clearly means the reader to appreciate (161 – 65).
He then describes the metal-working and coal-mining district north of Sheffield, before turning to his crossing of the Pennine hills from Rochdale over Blackstone Edge towards Halifax. This is where he depicts and ruminates upon the heart of the developing wool textile manufacturing districts, including a detailed account of the huge cloth market then held in Leeds to serve it. The exotic detail about the nature of this strange countryside, as his readers would see it, of the settlement patterns, and of the ways in which people made their livings, might all be dismissed as the intrusion of the novelist into his reporting, but it can be checked against and combined with utterly different and independent sources, including surviving features of the physical environment, to create a very solid picture. However, it is in his capturing the spirit of the area that his contribution is most distinctive and difficult to replicate. The overriding impression he leaves is not just of business as locally important, but as a pervading obsession, of busyness in the deepest sense. Its immediate and rather perverse manifestation, on his first arrival in Yorkshire, was what seemed to be a complete and puzzling lack of people, followed by a discovery that this was because they were all working away within the many houses (192). He explains that he then realized that actually the countryside was ‘infinitely full of people; these people [were] all full of business; not a beggar, not an idle person to be seen’ (193). This was a stark contrast with most towns, and certainly with London. He summed up the impression as ‘a noble scene of industry and application... spread before you here’ (203 – 04).

Though Defoe notes that the focus was on making things for sale, he also points out that the land was still extensively used, even if not for conventional agricultural production: ‘being divided into small enclosures... from two acres to six or seven acres each, seldom more; every three or four pieces of land had a house belonging to it... They scarce sow corn enough for their cocks and hens’ (193 – 95). This perception confirms the wondering description included in the preamble to an act of parliament that came to be known as the Halifax Act in 1555, which said that these clothing settlements:

beysng planted in the grete waste and moores, where the Fertilitie of Grounde ys not apte to bring forthe any Corne nor good Grasse, but in rare Places, and by exceedinge and greate industrye of the inhabitants, and the same inhabitants altogether doo lyve by clothe making, for the greate parte of them neyther gette the Corne nor ys hable to keep a Horse to carry Woolles, nor yet to bye much woollle att once, but hathe ever used onelie to repyre to the Towne of Halyfaxe, and some others nigh thereunto, and ther to bye upon the Woolldryver, some a stone, some twoo, and some three or foure accordinge to theyre habilittee, and to carrye the same to theire houses, some iiij, iiiij, v, and vj myles of, upon their Headdes and Backes, and so to make and converte the same euyther into Yarne or Clothe, and to sell the same, and so to bye more Woolle of the Wooll-dryver, by means of whiche Industrye the barreyn Gronde in these partes be nowe muche inhabited, and above five hundrethe householdes there newly increased within theis fourtye yeares past (Bowden 120; Hargreaves, ch. 3).

We must not be misled by hyperbole: this text was consciously framed to win exemption for northern clothmakers from legislation that had prevented family operations like theirs from buying small quantities of wool, which were all they could
afford, in open markets. It therefore talked up both difficulties and achievements, but Defoe’s account unmistakably endorses its central core. Both show that it was cloth that allowed so many people to live in this apparently hostile terrain. However, Defoe’s special insight was to see that terrain not as something to be overcome or ignored, but to be incorporated instead into a symbiotic lifestyle. This prevented the lives of manufacturers becoming the kind of grind that scholars, especially Marxists, frequently assume to be inevitable once domestic manufacture becomes well-established anywhere (Mendels; Clarkson). His account of the Leeds market also vindicates the importance attached to maintaining open business systems, for it was the determination to preserve its character that most amazed him, as we shall see. In this, the northern cloth making region was very distinctive, and went against the metropolitan tendency towards big business that the Tudor ban on small sales of wool had been intended to reinforce.

Most clothiers grew garden produce and fruit, and by Defoe’s time he records that many could afford a horse to carry wool, cloth and other goods, as well as a cow for milk (195). This livestock, and the waste from the textile processes, enriched the fertility of the soil in a benign link between industry and the land contrary to most seen later. Moreover, though early nineteenth-century agricultural commentators simply wrote off farming in these industrial areas as slovenly and incompetent, Defoe appreciated that occupiers were really balancing their time and effort between loom and fields, aiming to get the maximum return overall for their families, and certainly not seeking excellence in managing their land according to irrelevant, purely agricultural norms (Rennie). This even set the clothing valleys apart from the near neighbors, the Yorkshire Dales that modern tourists are more familiar with (Crump, Little Hill Farm; Tupling; Jennings). He also perceived that land was vital to this sort of trade even regardless of farming, since places were needed to hang the woven pieces out to dry on immense tenter frames – hence the proverb ‘to be on tenterhooks’ (195). The only matter to regret in Defoe’s account is the emphasis on the rugged nature of the Pennines, echoing the earlier legislative preamble, especially as authors have since remained prone to indulging in similar exercises (especially when suffering from the highly infectious Wuthering Heights syndrome). This is something we will return to.

Not all local families by any means were independent manufacturers even in Defoe’s time, though the percentage was unusually high. He remarks that among the more substantial houses were

scattered an infinite number of cottages or small dwellings, in which dwell the workmen which are employed, the women and children of whom, are always busy carding, spinning, &c. so that... all can gain their bread, even from the youngest to the antient; hardly any thing above four years old, but its hands are sufficient to it self (195).

No sense of cleavage between the two groups is here evident, and indeed many of the younger workmen whom Defoe observed would be apprentices and journeymen with realistic hopes of becoming independent manufacturers themselves, since trade would expand steadily throughout the new century. Defoe continues by noting that
since the late Revolution, the trade [of Halifax has] been prodigiously encouraged and increased by the great demand of their kersies for clothing the army abroad. . . They have [also] entered upon a new manufacture which was never made in those parts before. . . the manufactures of shalloons, of which they now make, if fame does not bely them, a hundred thousand pieces a year in this parish only, and yet do not make much fewer kersies than they did before (198).

Halifax parish was actually about two-thirds the size of the county of Rutland, and ‘if not the largest, certainly the most populous in England; in short, it is a monster, I mean, for a country parish. . . so far out of the way of foreign trade, Courts, or sea ports’ (197). Even so, opportunities for new entrants to manufacturing were being steadily created on an unprecedented scale. This contrasts with the struggle to prevent a fixed demand being overwhelmed that motivated and justified the exclusive attitudes of traditional guilds which we generally meet in literary accounts. The rewards of preserving its open structures were thus clear to local people, especially as these rewards were shared out widely even if not equitably.

Of course, things did not always run smoothly, and an aside to Defoe’s description of Wakefield notes that, while trade there was generally good: ‘not but that sometimes, as foreign markets receive interruption either by wars, by a glut of the goods, or by any other incident, there are interruptions of the manufacture too, which, when it happen, the clothiers are sure to complain’ (186). However over time, such fluctuations, and the real personal problems and financial difficulties that they undoubtedly caused, did not change the long-term trend. The general availability of land, due to both its lack of appeal to peasants in earlier centuries and the lack of alternative agricultural uses now, provided a very effective safety net in an age before welfare states. Rural clothiers and workers could thus survive commercial blips better than in towns, despite a steadily growing population. The century that Defoe saw the start of was precisely that which early nineteenth-century clothworkers, threatened by factory production, looked back to as a golden age. That is a concept that always demands skepticism, but the widespread building of substantial but not grand houses during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, many of which survive, supports the view that the average family in this area then lived well by contemporary standards, and was not exploited by merchant princes.

The people of the manufacturing districts were therefore anything but displaced peasants, and apparently lacked any desire to try their hands at self-sufficiency. In the ‘rare places’ of the Halifax Act where decent pockets of soil existed, such as Elland or Sowerby, compact townfields still saw arable crops grown in Defoe’s time, but they were tended by the clothmakers and merchants, either in person or through hired hands, not by a separate group of agricultural families (Crump, *Ancient Highways*). The landlords recognized that they would get much richer by encouraging clothmaking than by defending agriculture, and few lived locally enough to care about the social consequences of replacing rural deference with entrepreneurial initiative. Indeed, while Defoe’s description of small children at work may seem obnoxious now, he clearly saw nothing controversial in it, or any sign of desperation. Children were working within their own families and under the direction of their own parents, not in factories.

Few historians have understood these features of this part of northern England, or the other close links between a highly unusual geology and the patterns of economic
growth seen there. The Pennines are by no means homogeneous between Derbyshire and Scotland, and the short section between Sheffield and Bradford that Defoe paid so much attention to is highly distinctive in several important respects. He acutely noted other consequences of the locality’s particular characteristics as well. Most notably, the Lancashire/Yorkshire coalfield straddles the hills here and nowhere else, and most people had access to it from thin but easily worked seams of which, he says:

I never saw the like of in any part of England; and, I believe, the like is not to be seen so contrived in any part of the world; I mean coals and running water upon the tops of the highest hills. This seems to have been directed by the wise hand of Providence for the very purpose which is now served by it, namely, the manufactures, which otherwise could not be carried on; neither indeed could one fifth part of the inhabitants be supported without them, for the land could not maintain them (194).

At this time, the capital depended totally on coal won from deep mines around Newcastle-upon-Tyne and brought directly to the Pool of London in a vast fleet of small ships. In this manufacturing district, however, overland journeys were inevitable, and a distance of three miles might double its price. Immediate availability was therefore an enormous, and long-lasting, advantage, especially as in many cases horses really did ‘go light up the hill, and come laden down’ (195). The contrast helps to explain why the strong urge to cluster round the river in the metropolis had no equivalent in the Pennines. Moreover, these seams often lay only a few feet below the surface, and so could be reached though a multitude of small, family-operated pits, without any need for the deep shafts or expensive hauling and ventilation gear needed around the Tyne, which many have seen as the first British example of industrial capitalism (Levine and Wrightson). Equally, the widespread natural availability of good water both for drinking and industrial use is striking, and again forms a huge contrast with the experience of the capital, or later large cities. Instead of having to build reservoirs and lay pipes, or cope with polluted supplies, nature had already provided a dispersed, reliable and mostly clean (as yet) supply. Around Halifax it occurs as a multitude of springs and streams, just as Defoe says, and the valleys are so formed that harnessing the streams to drive mill wheels was also cheap and simple. Nearer to Leeds water is less visible, and natural mill sites are fewer, because it soaks into huge natural sandstone sponges underground, but wells easily tapped into them give a never-failing supply for drinking and all the many other purposes of manufacturers. In many ways, then, Defoe’s account of the region’s social and economic characteristics is remarkably perceptive.

3

This is where we can link Defoe’s account directly to more conventional historical sources, such as those left behind by the Taylor family of Gomersal, eight miles west of Leeds (Ferrett). They had risen from yeoman clothiers at the Restoration to near-merchant status by 1720. Enterprises such as theirs were not run like modern firms, generating and preserving very few conventional business documents, so the linkage between the records they did leave and Defoe’s perceptions of the area is mutually beneficial in every way. William Taylor died in January 1688/9 and both his will and
the inventory made of his goods immediately after death (as required by law) survive, giving us an itemized glimpse of how the Taylors lived then. They were in possession of a new house, credibly dated to 1660 by family tradition, which can now be visited in much modified and repaired form as Red House Museum. William had been living in the family’s adjacent old house, however, which seems to have been an entirely typical vernacular design, centered on a main housebody where cooking, eating, and much else went on. Clothmaking gear of all sorts, such as two spinning wheels in the little parlour, was scattered round the house, while in one bedroom we find a working loom and stores of oats, wheat, barley, beans, and hay, besides a bed.

The feel of this old house is of a comfortable, adequately furnished dwelling, with many cushions to ameliorate the hardness of wooden furniture. The crops still stored away during the depths of winter were augmented by meal for making bread or oatcakes in two arks, or large wooden chests, in a parlour (a downstairs room). The lack of separation of farming and clothmaking is evident outside as well, with a tenter frame valued in the inventory alongside farm equipment, and the little horse suited to a clothier’s needs listed alongside four cattle, but no sheep. Four completed cloths were on the premises, two fine and two of middling quality, worth £20 collectively. His total assets, £78 1s 0d plus a £7 debt owing, show someone several steps up from the hand-to-mouth man of the Halifax Act, who had to sell one cloth to buy the materials to make another. He was branching out into handling the cloth made by others, but was very active in manufacturing, and yet firmly embedded in a community that combined tradition and modernity.

A second inventory made twenty-four years later in 1713, on the death of William Taylor’s son John, shows major changes, and yet preserves this basic pattern within an all-round expansion of activity and wealth. John lived in the new house, and the old one was gone. The new house was assertively built of brick in a stone area, but followed local conventions in other ways. All the equipment and stores were now located outside, distributed round various buildings erected in the vicinity of the house. However, though it was much more devoted to living, and though the style of life had moved on from that of William, this was still no gentleman’s residence. Rather it remained the hub of a workplace where a lot was accomplished every day except Sunday. The area around the house must then have been something of a cross between a farmyard and a millyard, with two barns, a pigsty, and an outkitchen and another new building. The ground floor of the outkitchen was used for brewing beer for the household, not for cooking, while on the first floor fourteen finished cloth pieces were stored with sundry equipment. There were old and new cloth finishing shops, both having facilities for shearing and pressing cloth. In all six pairs of good shears and six of bad are listed in the inventory, a sure sign of large-scale operations. Only one loom is listed, and that outside the house, but it could evidently be adapted to weave different types of cloth. With it were ‘other Tools and necessaries for a Clothiers Trade’ worth £4 10s, and a coarse cloth was actually being woven. The house supported quite a colony of people on the evidence of the ten beds scattered amongst the rooms in 1713, just as Defoe had noted in the area in more general terms. The vast majority were probably used by more than one person, so John’s wife and seven children were presumably complemented by several servants and apprentices.

On the day these goods were listed by a group of selected neighbors, they valued the estate at £181 10s 6d apart from real estate or debts due to him, which added a massive £170 16s to his wealth. The range of outstanding debts was not unusual given
the extensive use of credit on which trades like this were based, and about which Defoe wrote copiously, and approvingly, in several books (for instance Defoe, _Tradesman_ ch. 24). Altogether, from the type of cloth on the loom and in store, together with the lack of any dyeing equipment, we can be sure that the Taylors now traded unfinished white broadcloth at Leeds. There is therefore no mistaking here the activities of a nascent merchant rather than a manufacturing clothier, and we know that at that time a small but effective merchant community was forming in this hamlet of Great Gomersal.

The hamlet lay within the township of Gomersal, which with seven other townships constituted the ancient parish of Birstall, and though even that was nothing like so big as Halifax parish, it provided a social and cultural framework quite different from southern norms. One ancient church, which stood in a relatively isolated location about a mile from the Taylor’s house, served them all, though many people lived two or two and a half miles from it. Two chapels of ease saved some people making that journey for ordinary services. Great Gomersal had no manor house of its own, and no church or chapel, or indeed any public buildings of any description. The shifts in industrial geography that are so noteworthy hereabouts have preserved a surprising amount of the fabric of the hamlet from that time, and we can still see a wealth of houses like those of the Taylors, all built in a remarkably healthy setting, near the top of a low ridge, but sheltered by the crest (Cookson). All drew plentiful water from excellent wells.

Despite such evident success in the cloth trade, at John Taylor’s death two days’ ploughing had been done for oats, and another two for wheat, so the crops stored in the house two decades before had also probably been grown at home. The ability to do so is not surprising for a large part of the land the family farmed had originally almost certainly formed several strips in the common field of the township, separated out and bought by them when the lords of the ramshackle manor of Gomersal in the sixteenth century were trying to build their social status with increased revenues. The whole field disappeared by common consent shortly after, in fact, without protest. More distant Taylor-owned fields were kept under grass in 1713 and supported a solitary sheep, five cows, two oxen, three heifers, a bull and two mares. All the evidence is that this area was best suited to cattle (of which the Taylors had five), not sheep, which confirms that local wool production did not lie behind the growth of the trade – such wool was generally of very poor quality. With enough farming going on to warrant two barns, it is no surprise to find a list of agricultural implements, including two wains or large carts, another broken one, two or three pairs of harrows, and a plough with a sledge for carrying it, plus a collection of various items of harness included ‘barkhams’ or horse collars, as well as a midden of manure valued at £3. This family was not playing at farming, but genuinely operated a mixed economy that was fundamentally neither agrarian nor manufacturing. This basic holding only ceased to be farmed by the Taylors in the mid-nineteenth century, long after achieving near-gentry status.

Defoe notes that Yorkshire’s West Riding was now ‘by much the largest [riding],... so it is the wealthiest and the most populous, [and] has the greatest towns in it, and the greatest number of them’ (180), a complete reversal of medieval patterns when the wealth lay in the east and center of Yorkshire and the Pennines were almost
unpopulated (Faull and Moorhouse). Paradoxically, much of the wool came from there, but the business culture of the Pennines now dominated its working up into cloth. Moreover, these towns were as unusual as the countryside. Halifax, five miles west of Gomersal, had long provided the most important market center for the cloth trade within the Pennines, as the Halifax Act indicates, but its built-up core remained as small as the rural parish was large. Defoe, who probably stayed there for some time, noted that ‘there is nothing extraordinary except on a market-day, and then indeed it is a prodigious thing’ (200). The Taylors indubitably lived in an even smaller settlement, which hardly qualified as a village by normal standards, yet it also had merchants, and they later tried to establish their own cloth market determinedly enough to frighten the Leeds merchants into spending a great deal of money to thwart their efforts.

Throughout Europe at this time, towns at the heart of manufacturing districts were usually of ancient origin, and still had all the appurtenances associated with medieval urban foundations. Protected by walls, they were well provided with churches, governed by a corporation, regulated by guilds, and much given to ceremonial. All these features were expensive to create and run, but the dire fate of the few places that tried to do without, most notably Hondschoote in the Netherlands (Pounds 225 – 27), showed that a more warlike and lawless human environment had generally made such things essential, even though the Pennines were apparently so ill-suited to habitation. York was the only nearby town of that type, and it had been a classic textile center. It still had its civic paraphernalia, walls and churches, but no longer made cloth, whereas Defoe wrote that ‘Wakefield [is] a large, handsome, rich clothing town full of people, and full of trade... They tell us there are more people... than in the city of York, and yet it is no corporation town; and the highest magistrate, as I understand, was a constable’ (186). It was undefended, whereas Pontefract, with a castle and ancient charters, is described as a town where little seemed to happen.

Urbanization hereabouts is thus shown by Defoe as having followed its own rules, especially because towns survived only by pleasing customers, most of whom lived elsewhere. Leeds was even more impressive commercially than Halifax, having effectively taken over, and vastly increased York’s old role as co-ordinating center for cloth produced over a very wide area, but Defoe recalled that, even so:

The cloth market... is now kept in the High-street [Briggate].... a large, broad, fair and well-built street. Early in the morning, there are tressels placed in two rows in the street;... then there are boards laid cross these tressels, so that the boards lie like long counters on either side... At seven a clock in the morning, the clothiers being supposed to be all come by that time, even in the winter,... the market bell rings; it would surprize a stranger to see in how few minutes, without hurry or noise, and not the least disorder, the whole market is fill’d; all the boards upon the tressels are covered with cloth, close to one another as the pieces can lie long ways by one another, and behind every piece of cloth, the clothier standing to sell it.

The merchants and factors, and buyers of all sorts, come down, and coming along the spaces between the rows of boards, they walk up... and down... When they see any cloths to [match] their [desired] colours, or that suit their occasions, they reach over to the clothier and whisper, and in the fewest words imaginable the price is stated; one asks, the other bids; and ‘tis agree, or not agree, in a moment... By half an hour after eight a clock the market bell rings again;
immediately the buyers disappear, the cloth is all sold, or if here and there a piece happens not to be bought, ’tis carried back into the inn, and, in a quarter of an hour, there is not a piece of cloth to be seen in the market. Thus, you see, ten or twenty thousand pounds value in cloth, and sometimes much more, bought and sold in little more than an hour, and the laws of the market the most strictly observed as ever I saw done in any market in England (205 – 6).

The market had originally been confined to the bridge at the foot of Briggate, but at Defoe’s visit it filled the whole main street of this flourishing but very compact town. This clearly did not indicate inability to do things properly, but rather a conscious preference for simple and open methods. Such a spirit was consciously to be preserved even later, when further growth led to the building of many cloth halls round the clothing district. Such dynamic urban centers, however, left as few records as the manufacturers precisely because of this informality, so Defoe’s perceptive testimony is again invaluable in going to the heart of a subtle and unusual process. These towns certainly never developed the classical parasitic, even predatory relationship with the countryside which is associated with the term bourgeois. Households moved into such towns only to take up opportunities to prosper by their own efforts, not by charity or place-holding: opportunity generally lay elsewhere.

Also unusually, the urban network was still very fluid, for many lesser centers would cease to function a few decades later when canals took away the usefulness of those located high up the hillsides, like Sowerby and Gomersal. This process, like enclosure before it, created few actual losers since there had been so little investment in physical structures, and people could readily move a few miles, or use the new center for business, while living where they always had. Thus, the combination of apparent fragmentation with functional regional integration of this nascent urban system was present from its inception, and this fascinated Defoe. It did not depend on breaking down barriers between previously self-sufficient, and therefore antagonistic, places that were already classically urban, making the extreme case that Bowers identifies of a contrast with previous views that made trade nearly the equivalent of war (169 – 70). London, for instance, bestrode the south, and even in the north its influence could be felt, as in little towns like Bawtry, near Doncaster where Defoe noted that, ‘it stands upon the great post highway or road from London to Scotland; and this makes it be full of very good inns and houses of entertainment’ (181). However, this road ran well to the east of the manufacturing districts, and was irrelevant to the dynamic, cellular Pennine economic networks. Bawtry was exceptional in its location on the navigable river Idle, giving it connections to Hull that were useful to the merchants of Sheffield and Rotherham where ‘an innumerable number of people are employed [making] wrought iron and edge-tools, of all sorts’ (181). It is likely this was a much stronger stimulus to Bawtry’s economy than distant London.

Having delineated Defoe’s striking but convincing picture of the business culture of the manufacturing Pennines, both in terms of internal coherence and its congruence with other evidence, we now must be more critical. This text is not an official report, was
verified by no person or institution, and Defoe was clearly anything but averse to romancing. He certainly, at the time of his writing, was neither rich enough nor secure enough to ignore the need to make sales and earn money, so his account cannot be seen as intrinsically authoritative and reliable. The problem is compounded in the twenty-first century by post-modern attitudes to all texts, which apparently make their use as historical evidence for anything except themselves extremely problematical. Most historians, however, have always accepted that, while texts cannot be taken at face value, they remain understandable and meaningful when used cautiously within a general survey of all available evidence.

Defoe’s actual crossing of the Pennines demonstrates well the weaknesses of his account, and their nature. First, a wintry scene is ascribed to summer, exaggerating the harshness and scale of the Pennines as valiantly as those he mocked in his section on the Peak District. Snow might, just conceivably, fall in freak mid-August weather, but he must have known how unlikely this was, and snowdrifts seem beyond all belief (189). His description of the ascent of Blackstone Edge also, and even more worryingly, shows that, while the itinerary makes general sense, in detail it is incomprehensible. Travellers have been crossing here, where the Pennines are actually lowest and most rounded, at all seasons for millennia, and though a thousand feet is climbed over two linear miles, even the panoramic views from the crest hardly qualify it as a ‘frightful precipice’ (190).

The present road, the A58, accomplishes the ascent by a grand sweep but Defoe’s, still well-used as a minor road and footpath and visible as such on modern 1:25,000 maps, follows a much straighter line since it was intended for pack horses, not wheeled vehicles. It carried a lot of traffic, and it is no accident that both the major Roman road between York and Chester and the modern M62 motorway are very close at hand, following parallel routes which make the best use of the terrain. The dominance of the pack horse accounts for Defoe’s mention that the paved roadway was only wide enough for one horse at a time, and that it lay alongside a scooped-out hollow which could be several feet lower due to erosion (191). Similar ways still exist along many stretches of bridle paths locally, and this disconcerting combination made it hard to wander accidentally off the path. On this punishing but simple route, no intervening minor summits or valleys occur where confusion could set in, yet he describes the party as struggling to maintain its sense of direction.

Defoe and his companions apparently next travelled the seven linear miles to Sowerby, then still a flourishing textile center with its own nascent merchant community, comparable to Gomersal but older and much better established. The Pennines hereabouts are made up of long ridges which such routeways took full advantage of, whereas modern roads mainly use the valleys. Getting up onto them could be hard, most obviously at Blackstone Edge itself, but thereafter there are long stretches of fairly level going. Height would not be given up lightly, and yet Defoe describes a switchback journey. His party may have got hopelessly lost without realizing it, or more likely detoured off the direct route to explore a district that so fascinated him, but most probably this is a composite, distorted picture designed to impress the reader. This sense is reinforced by his mention of intermittent glimpses, apparently along small valleys whose heads they passed across, of the greater Calder valley that local streams all fed into. Again, this is impossible to reconcile with actual geography, for Sowerby lies on one edge of a small massif which is cut by few such side
**FIGURE 1** Map of Daniel Defoe's journeys in the central Pennines.
valleys, and only one of any size. Many people exaggerate the size and remoteness of this compact area precisely because such valleys are generally too narrow and sinuous to see far along them. Defoe’s account of the approach to Sowerby, therefore, cannot be based solely in fact.

Even the location of Sowerby, then a scatter of substantial houses and a chapel of ease, surrounded by cottages, is wrong. Defoe puts this ‘town’ near the bridge over the river Calder that gave access to it from Halifax, and so was named after it though over a mile of steep hill-climbing actually separated them. The arrival of a canal in the eighteenth century created a new town, Sowerby Bridge, which became a substantial inland port and drew all the life from the ancient settlement, because it was isolated. He states that the river was already navigable (196 – 97), but if boats did use it, it could only have been for local journeys at this time, as it was only connected to Leeds in the 1770s (Thornes). However, his spelling of the name according to local pronunciation as Sorby displays real knowledge.

These flaws have been dwelt upon to remove fears that an unjustified total veracity is being attributed to Defoe. However, the accuracy of the description of the unusual nature of the roadway shows that the distinctive social and economic detail seems independent of erroneous and exaggerated topographical description, the inaccuracy of which may stem from the stimulus it provided to his novelist persona (Bowers 148 – 50). It certainly fits precisely with Moore’s analysis of Defoe’s general attitude to facts: though a man of immense reading and experience, he was not a scholar by inclination and what mattered to him, like many literary people since, was honesty to the essence of a problem, which transcended precise specifics (Moore ch. 21). He would have had little opportunity, or reason, to make detailed notes about many matters on his actual travels since they were actuated by business or government demands, rather than being leisurely fact-finding tours, and memories would easily merge together.

Achieving his prodigious literary output back in London often meant that Defoe’s writing ran ahead of his memory, moreover, though very rarely beyond his analytical skills. What was so strikingly different from any generalized, stereotyped picture, and so close to his interest in business, would be more likely to stay with him. That is the basis on which his text has been used here, and where he contradicts more robust sources, they must be preferred. Even his graphic description of the Leeds cloth market is valuable only for describing how it worked in general terms, not for a particular market day or for actual levels or types of business done. It is hard to believe that detail which fits so well with other sources that he knew nothing about could be invented. If too much weight was once put on authors like Shakespeare and Dickens as defining an age, a more measured usage, recognizing what a literary source of information can and cannot be expected to do, can rehabilitate this approach to understanding people as part of a society, not atomistic individuals standing alone.

We can therefore contrast the valuable characteristics of Defoe’s account with the limitations of that by another, later, outsider who was apparently much more involved in local society, and who continues to be extensively used to understand the nineteenth-century north. Friedrich Engels, employed in his family’s cotton firm in Manchester, however, came with too many preconceptions to take the area on its own terms despite his assiduous research into life in the city. The historical speculations contained in his little-noticed preface to The Condition of the Working Class in England
purport to cover the period that Defoe recorded the start of, albeit west of the Pennines:

In short, the English industrial workers [including those with land] of those days lived and thought after the fashion still to be found here and there in Germany. In retirement and seclusion, without mental activity and without violent fluctuations in their position in life. They... went regularly to church, never talked politics, never conspired, never thought, delighted in physical exercises, listened with inherited reverence when the Bible was read, and were, in their unquestioning humility, exceedingly well-disposed towards the ‘superior’ classes. But intellectually, they were dead; lived only for their petty private interest, for their looms and gardens (Engels 39).

Engels here assumes that it was factories that had made nineteenth-century Lancashire into what he saw around him, transforming in one unlikely stroke an entire people. As a collective character study, it also cuts across all other sources, as well as the fierce and general support for Parliament seen in the civil war throughout the Pennine clothing districts. To accept Engels’s version is to privilege it simply on the strength of who the author is, whereas to listen to Defoe is to augment and supplement a generally convincing, and historically believable, picture of the build-up to industrialization. Moreover, as Defoe knew nothing about the future, there is no deterministic side to his account, and nor is there the acid sense of crisis that runs through other much-cited sources, such as almost all Cobbett’s *Rural Rides*.

In judging Engels inaccurate on the eighteenth century, we can cite another creative writer who also used the Taylor family to epitomize the Pennine experience of the brink of industrialization, and whose conclusions seem very close to Defoe’s. In the mid-nineteenth century, the focus of literary attention finally fell upon the north of England as the processes Defoe had observed bore fruit. It was now the most dynamic area of British manufacturing across a wide range of trades, and was perceived as a threat both to the metropolis and to the existing social system. Charlotte Brontë was commissioned to write a state-of-the-nation novel by her publishers, rather against her will, and it was highly unusual in coming from someone who, if not exactly embedded in northern culture, at least grew up and always lived surrounded by it. In establishing a realistic background for *Shirley*, a tale of the Luddite period intended to show the social strains produced by the threat of factories, she turned to the family of her best friend, one Mary Taylor. Brontë knew Red House very well from staying there regularly, and the whole family became an archetype for thrusting Yorkshire cloth-making society. Mary’s father Joshua was rechristened Hiram Yorke to stress his character’s function in the novel and he is explicitly portrayed as iconoclastic, politically radical, and scornful of everything established (ch. 3 and 4).

Combining the distinctive strengths of literary texts and historical evidence is therefore more difficult than used to be thought, but it can still be done. The effort is worth it because Defoe’s text indicates ways in which we can weave together many separate insights and strands which emerge from other, more specialist primary sources. In isolation, each separately leaves us with fragmentary views, but linked together they give a holistic sense of the north of his time (as far as anything can over such a time span), avoiding a reductionist working out of a political or economic
imperative, or reading back as Engels did from a known present. It is especially worthwhile here because this area wrote down so little and published even less, again a stark contrast with the metropolis. In this period both areas were extremely successful, but in utterly different ways, and neither should overshadow the other.

Notes

1. Thornes, West Yorkshire is a notable exception.
2. Documents relating to the Taylor family are held by the Yorkshire Archaeological Society, MD292 and MD311, and the West Yorkshire Archive Service, KC52 and KX100-149.
3. OS map reference, Landranger sheet 109, SD 166960.

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