

Chapter 6: Perceptions of the Leeds Landscape

Introduction

- 6.1 Much of this assessment is concerned with the relatively objective process of describing and classifying the landscape in the Leeds area. This leads on to professional judgements about the ways in which the landscape can be conserved and enhanced, so helping to maintain the particular character of the city in its landscape setting. However it is also important to complement this technical assessment with information about how the landscape is perceived by those who live in or visit the area.
- 6.2 Studies of the way in which landscapes are perceived often draw heavily on the way that artists and writers have described an area over time. Such material is especially useful in showing how particular landscapes have been perceived historically, and what particular features or areas have attracted special comment. We briefly summarise some of these historical perceptions below. However modern perceptions are most important and though some information can be gleaned from recent descriptive writings, this assessment has been unusual in including a special survey to find out how ordinary people perceive the countryside around Leeds. Full details of this survey are included in Appendix B but the main conclusions are summarised below.

Past perceptions

- 6.3 A great variety of people, ranging from historians to journalists and poets have, in the past, written about and recorded their impressions of Leeds and its surroundings. Artists have also captured their impressions of the area in paintings and sketches. Both local people and travellers coming to Leeds from other parts of the country have considered the Leeds area to be a place of diversity and individual character.

Artists

- 6.4 Many early artists such as Francis Place illustrated scenes from Leeds, some of which were included in the first published history of Leeds, the *Ducatus Leodienis* by Ralph Thoresby (1715). Today of course their illustrations of the town of Leeds and its surrounding countryside bear little resemblance to the urban area which has now grown up around the original small settlement.
- 6.5 Perhaps the most famous artist to capture Leeds and its environs in paintings was Turner. He made his first tour of northern England in 1797, which took him through Rotherham and Sheffield, to Pontefract, Wakefield, Kirkstall Abbey, Knaresborough and on further north to Berwick-upon-Tweed, before returning to Yorkshire, and particularly to Harewood House. He made a comprehensive study of Harewood House and castle from all angles, but was equally interested in the landscape that surrounded it. His finished watercolour, 'Harewood House from the north-east', for example, takes a view of the entrance front but sets it within the wider landscape. Turner was also a regular visitor to Farnley Hall, which lies just outside the Leeds district, across the River Wharfe about two miles north of Otley. One of his paintings, *Farnley Hall from Otley Chevin*, painted in 1818, depicts the scene at Caley Crag. According to David Hill, in his book *'In Turner's Footsteps'* (1984), it was at "*Caley Crag, where one hundred and seventy years ago, goats and deer wandered free along the spruce and bracken-topped hill, and Turner sat with his sketchbook, tracing every field and rock, path, road, riverbank, tree, hill, moor, barn, church, farm or manor house in the surrounding countryside*".

Descriptive writing

- 6.6 Early written descriptions tended to concentrate on the built-up area of Leeds. Daniel Defoe, for example, the famous novelist and journalist, wrote in the 1720s about Leeds in his well known account of a 'Tour thro' the whole Island of Great Britain, divided into circuits or journeys', noting that "*Leeds is a large, wealthy and populous Town, it stands on the North Bank of the River Aire, or rather on both sides of the River, and the whole is joined by a stately and prodigiously strong Stone Bridge*". Thomas Gent (1733) in his book 'A Journey into Some Parts of Yorkshire', also described the built up area of Leeds favourably, noting that "*The Town of Leeds is really so beautiful, that if ever I have an Opportunity, and can procure proper Materials, I shall set forth other Matters concerning it...*".
- 6.7 Other writers were more interested in aspects of the wider landscape such as its geology, and agriculture. Arthur Young, a farmer and writer on agricultural improvements, made a tour of 21 northern and midland counties in 1768, noting the current state of agriculture, houses, gardens and other relevant objects of interest. In his book about a 'Six months Tour Through the North of England' he noted that "*the country between Wakefield and Leeds continues very beautiful, but the roads are stony and very ill made*". Another agricultural writer, Dr John Aiken wrote in 1795, of the parish of Leeds "*Its northern border is sandy, extending nearly to the ridge which separates Airedale from Wharfedale, and is a process from the great line of hills that form a backbone of the north of England. The higher part of it is incapable of cultivation. That part of the parish which lies south of the Aire abounds in coal; and to the cheapness of this indispensable mineral, the flourishing state of the manufactory is to be attributed*". William Cobbett, in his 'Rural Rides' in Yorkshire of 1830, commented on the lack of corn in the district noting that "*I have not seen, except at Harewood and Ripley, a stack of wheat since I came into Yorkshire*" and comparing this with the situation in Wiltshire.
- 6.8 John Bigland was a Yorkshire village schoolmaster who became a successful professional author in his fifties. In his book 'The Beauties of England and Wales' (1819), he described the environs of Leeds as "*pleasant and beautiful the vale of the Aire, extending both eastward and westward to a great distance, is one of the finest features of the country, and the soil is extremely fertile..... some of the higher parts of the parish of Leeds are rocky and barren, but in the valleys and declivities, the land is extremely rich, and, by reason of the great plenty of manure, and the populousness of the country, is in a state of high cultivation*".
- 6.9 As Leeds developed from a small village to a flourishing centre of textile manufacturing and industrial importance, the contrast between the rapidly growing urban area and the countryside beyond became more apparent, a contrast which is reflected in some of the impressions from the 18th and 19th centuries. Horace Walpole for example in 1756 was one of the first of the fashionable visitors who came to Leeds to see the impressive ruins of Kirkstall Abbey. In his book 'Horace Walpole's correspondence, vo1.35' he noted the contrast between urban and rural areas as he described the journey between the centre of Leeds and Kirkstall Abbey; "*we lay at Leeds, a dingy large town; and through very black roads for the whole country is a colliery, or a quarry, we went to Kirkstall Abbey, where are vast Saxon ruins, in a most picturesque situation, on the banks of a river that falls in a cascade among rich meadows, hills and woods ..*". Friedrich Engels also noted this contrast, when he wrote in 1845, "*The valleys of the Aire, along which stretches Leeds, and of the Calder, through which the Manchester-Leeds railway runs, are among the most attractive in England, and are strewn in all directions, with factories, villages and towns but on coming into the towns themselves, one finds little to rejoice over*"
- 6.10 In the 19th century, many writers and artists concentrated on writing about and illustrating the poor environmental conditions which existed in Leeds at the time. Pollution, both in the air and along rivers such as the Aire, as well as the accumulation of grime and insanitary waste as a result of the growth in industrial development and the multitude of manufacturing activities in the area, were common impressions of this time. Whereas in the 17th and early 18th centuries writers had been describing Leeds as a place of beauty and prosperity, they later wrote about

the "dirty, smoky and disagreeable town" and the "filthiness, glaring apathy and neglect" which existed. It was not only the urban area which suffered, as Ralph Emerson observed in 1848, by noting that "near Leeds and Bradford, the sheep were black and [fancied they were black sheep; no, they were begrimed by the smoke so all the trees are begrimed".

- 6.11 The wider landscape around Leeds has inspired many writers during the 20th century . W.H Scan, for example, a writer at the turn of the century, outlined the great diversity of the landscape to be found around Leeds in his book 'First of the Century': "*Go westward from Leeds and you traverse for the most part, a series of treeless valleys overrun by blackened stone walls and gaunt mill chimneys. Go to the south west and there are pit shafts marring the would-be charms of the landscape. Go in a north west direction and you are again confronted by factory buildings. Only as the River Aire narrows to a tiny stream does the prospect improve. But, make your exit on the northern or on the eastern side and you need not travel five miles to enjoy rural delights*".
- 6.12 One of the better known local writers in the early 20th century was Edmund Bogg, who wrote several books on the countryside around Leeds. One of these, 'Round about Leeds and the Old Villages in Elmete' (1904), is a particularly descriptive work, accompanied by numerous paintings and sketches of the countryside around Leeds at this time. His descriptions relate to a wide range of individual landscapes around Leeds, many of which still bear some resemblance to the landscape which Bogg describes, while others have clearly changed dramatically.

Present day perceptions

- 6.13 The survey of local perceptions of the landscape (Appendix B) included both quantitative information drawn from a questionnaire survey of 195 residents of the Leeds area, and qualitative information drawn from longer, informal discussions with two small groups of local people. The summary below draws on both of these sources.

Character of the landscape

- 6.14 Some local people are surprised by the extent of the Leeds City Council area and, perhaps not surprisingly, identify most closely with the countryside immediately around the City and especially the publicly owned parks on the fringes. If they are thinking of visiting the 'real' countryside they might most readily contemplate travelling beyond the immediate area to special places like the North York Moors or the Yorkshire Dales. Areas such as Harewood, Lotherton and the Chevin are perceived as "*belonging elsewhere*", rather than being part of the Leeds landscape.
- 6.15 On the other hand, some people do have a good awareness of the extent of the countryside around the city and of variations in the character of the landscape. These people are aware of the many opportunities to enjoy pleasant landscapes quite near to the city without travelling further afield: "*there is no point having to drive further afield as nice quiet places where one can wander around in woods can be found all around Leeds*".
- 6.16 Questions about the location of landscapes considered to have their own particular character led to the identification of a total of 57 different areas. Eleven of these were identified by more than six people in each case and these appear to be the best known and, arguably, most well loved landscapes around the city. They include the publicly owned parks that ring the city, notably Temple Newsam, Roundhay, Golden Acre, Lotherton and Middleton. The most mentioned area of all is the Chevin, with its public access allowing fine walks and views over Wharfedale, which itself, in whole or in part, is another well known landscape.

Other areas mentioned by a number of people were the river valleys in the city, notably the Meanwood Valley and the Kirkstall Valley.

6.17 The words which people select to describe these landscapes give a good idea of what it is that makes them distinctive. The most frequently mentioned landscapes were generally described as follows:

- The Chevin: interesting, scenic, natural, unspoilt, hilly, beautiful, peaceful, with woods and distant views, described in discussion as *"wonderful...allowing you to look beyond at the countryside opening up with a feeling that things go on and on"*.
- Temple Newsam: interesting, scenic, popular, beautiful, peaceful, with distant views, grass/pasture, cattle grazing, woods, farms and people, noted for *"the glorious colours a/the rhododendrons in spring"*.
- Roundhay: interesting, scenic, wooded, popular, and beautiful, with sports fields being notable features. The park was described in one discussion as *"absolutely wonderful"*.
- Lotherton: interesting, scenic, wooded, peaceful, popular, with people, grass/pasture, Cattle grazing, large fields, woods and distant views.
- Middleton: various descriptions, but most frequently described as wooded, peaceful and natural, with golf courses. This park is considered to be good for dog walking with *"lovely walks through the woods and glorious autumn colours"*. The varied character of the park is reflected by contrasting descriptions, on the one hand as "unspoilt and well maintained" and on the other as having a *"derelict feel to it"*, being *"rubbish-tip rough, rather than wild rough"*.
- Meanwood Valley, the Hollies: peaceful, interesting, natural and beautiful, with streams and woods, and also referred to as having *"lovely trees, birds and wildlife"*.
- Wharfedale: scenic, beautiful, rolling, wooded, peaceful and interesting with hedges, rivers, grass, pasture, woods, valleys, distant views, small fields, walls, farms and tree clumps.
- Harewood: interesting, scenic, cultivated, gentle, popular and beautiful with grass/pasture, woods, farms, stone walls, streams, parks, large fields, hedgerow trees, sheep grazing and distant views; often described as a designed or 'man-made' landscape, with the house also often mentioned.

6.18 All of these landscapes were generally described as being quite or very attractive, with the Chevin being the most consistently described as very attractive. However, some of the other area mentioned provoked more varied comments. For example, the Kirkstall Valley, one of the areas of 'encapsulated countryside' which extends into the city. was described as peaceful and interesting, with the river and pylons being notable features, but is considered to be neither particularly attractive or unattractive. Some other areas were thought by some people to be a bit unattractive, including some of the countryside around Boston Spa and Wetherby.

Landscape change

6.19 Local people have varied views about change in the landscape around Leeds. Referring to specific landscape areas which they had identified, and considering the most frequently mentioned landscapes as listed above, notably the Chevin and Roundhay, just under a half of those with a view, thought that there hadn't been much change, while about the same proportion thought that there had. Opinion was also divided about whether these changes had made the area more or less attractive.

6.20 For the Chevin and Roundhay, 44% and 41% respectively, said that the areas hadn't changed in the time they had known them. However, people's opinion differed significantly, with 40% saying that the Chevin had changed a little or a lot and 50% answering likewise for Roundhay. The changes at Roundhay, were felt by 60% of respondents to have made the area more attractive and at the Chevin, this figure was similar, at 56%. At Middleton and Golden Acre Park, a high percentage of respondents (78% and 72% respectively), felt that the areas had changed

either a little or a lot. Again, in both cases, the majority felt that these changes had made the areas more attractive. Turning to landscapes other than the parks, majority of respondents (62%), felt that the Meanwood Valley area had not changed, but for the 23% that did, all of them felt that the changes they had noticed had made the area more attractive. In contrast, although most respondents felt that Wharfedale hadn't changed, the majority of those that had noticed changes, felt that they had made the area less attractive. Areas such as Harewood were generally not felt to have changed at all.

- 6.21 The group discussions shed more light on the nature of change in individual areas and reactions to it. In general, there was a view that there had been improvements in the landscape, both in the wider countryside and in the publicly owned parks. However, there are still thought to be some pressures for adverse change. including litter and fly tipping. unofficial car access and vandalism.
- 6.22 In the wider countryside as a whole. over a half of those involved in the survey expressed the view that there had been many, or quite a few changes, while less than half thought there had been only a few changes. The most frequently mentioned causes of change were new housing. new industrial development and new roads. all mentioned by more than a quarter of people. Other forces for change, notably increased traffic, tourism and leisure development. mineral extraction. intensification of farming and hedgerow removal, were also mentioned, but by few people.
- 6.23 In the discussion groups, new development, such as housing was noted as a major change, particularly over the last few years, in areas such as Beeston and Morley. There was also, for example, a worry that Morley would soon be swallowed up by the rest of Leeds if development continued as it had done in the past. There were mixed views over the design of new housing, with some being described as looking "false", and a general opinion that houses were built without adequate green spaces in between. *Numerous "little green spaces or nooks and crannies between buildings"* were also noted as having been lost through infill development contributing to a general loss of green belt land. Office space was felt by the participants to be excessive around Leeds, with many new buildings being built but not occupied. In addition, there were also felt to be too many supermarkets and new roads were also felt to have changed the countryside in the past.
- 6.24 Most of these pressures were believed to have made the countryside less attractive, though opinion was divided about the effects of tourism and leisure developments, such as golf courses. with some people considering them to have had an adverse effect. while an equal number considered that they had made the countryside more attractive.
- 6.25 Changes such as a perceived increase in deciduous trees, greater access and improved cleanliness were generally considered to have enhanced the countryside. Some people in the discussion groups had noticed some hedge planting and repair of stone walls, as well as a slight increase in coniferous planting, particularly at the Chevin. Some people also commented on barn conversions and farm diversification into activities including wildflower meadows and lawn turf sales.
- 6.26 When asked about changes they would like to see, the most commonly mentioned were better control of development, better protection of the greenbelt, improved accessibility, greater tidiness or cleanliness, more interpretation and signs, more or better visitor facilities, more wildlife, more hedgerow management and planting and improved public transport.
- 6.27 In the more detailed discussions, those who took part expressed a desire for more green spaces in the built up areas and conversion of derelict sites to nature reserves and open spaces, rather than being built on, a return to less intensive farming, more hedges and drystone walls and

more deciduous planting to *"provide a greater fit into the landscape"*. Both groups felt that new planting around Leeds would be a good idea, although it was thought that this would be dependent on the type of trees used and how the planting was designed. One person stated that, *"the land should be planted up with trees... for new forests, woodlands and nature reserves"*. The area around Middleton and to the south of Leeds was felt to be the best place for such new planting, with further opportunities identified in the Aire Valley to the south of Temple Newsam. One advantage noted for having new planting in the south, was that it would also be *"a forest for others and not just Leeds"*, whereas in the north it would be *"a forest for Leeds only"*. No landscapes were identified as being unsuitable for planting although some felt that a mix of wooded and open spaces was felt to be preferable in certain areas.

Conclusions

- 6.28 The historical perceptions show firstly that the landscape around Leeds has, in the last 150 years, been considered to be very varied in its character. At the broad scale, the differences between the open countryside to the north and east, and the more industrialised landscapes to the south and west, were as apparent in the past as they are today. At the more local level, writers like Edmund Bogg have revelled in the delights of the many and varied landscapes that surround the city.
- 6.29 The great parks and designed landscapes have been the subject of much comment, often being the main ports of call for artists and writers on their tours of the picturesque parts of the country. Changes brought about by the industrial growth of the city have also been a feature of historical descriptions and suggest that the landscape around Leeds is much greener than perhaps it was in the 18th and 19th centuries.
- 6.30 Today, local people appear to be equally aware of the differences in character of the countryside, recognising the particularly distinctive features. As one former miner commented in one of the discussion groups, when talking about the relative attractiveness of different landscapes, *"its not that one place is better than another, more that they're just different"*.
- 6.31 The parks around the fringes of the city and the river valleys that bring the countryside into the city, are the most familiar and commented on landscapes. The Chevin, however, is top of the list of the most well known landscapes, and is also consistently regarded as the most attractive. Beyond these well known areas, there are many local landscapes which fewer people are aware of, but which tend to be known to those who live nearby and make use of them, especially for country walks.
- 6.32 Many people are aware of change that is affecting the landscape, both positive change, in terms of a cleaner, tidier, better cared for countryside, as well as negative change from development pressures and some intensification of farming practices. There appears to be support for measures to limit the adverse effects of change, both through continuing control of development and positive management for conservation and enhancement.
- 6.33 The scope and scale of this survey of attitudes and perceptions was necessarily limited. Nevertheless, it does suggest that the approach adopted in the landscape assessment, of emphasising variation in the character of the landscape around Leeds, and identifying measures which will help to maintain distinctiveness, is in line with the way that local people think about their countryside. It also supports efforts to conserve and enhance the character and diversity of the countryside through appropriate mechanisms.