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# David Hey, 1938–2016: a tribute

*Charles Phythian-Adams*

An address given at Dronfield Parish Church on the occasion of David Hey's funeral, 25 February 2016

Speaking of David as a friend of 50 years – five of them as colleagues – I think I can imagine how all of us here will have been similarly devastated by the ending of a life of such marvellous vitality, enormous good cheer and extraordinary productivity. Surely we thought: this man is unstoppable. He is always sunnily optimistic, purposefully and efficiently driven in his life's aims and energetic not only in constantly wielding a figurative pen but also when tramping at disconcerting speed across the rougher landscapes of Yorkshire or Derbyshire in pursuit of ancient ways or vernacular buildings, or conquering the fells and mountains of the Lake District each summer with his friends Barrie Blanksby, Tony Midgley and Tony Broadhead.

There was a quiet but indefatigable purpose about David and a strong sense of ongoing work to be added to the great store of his 30-plus books or contributions to books, including those commissioned by the National Archives. Yet another book by him – this time on local *England* no less – is in the press.<sup>1</sup> How many broadcasts he made I don't know. And the man was not far short of 80! Along the way, moreover, there were the many important positions he undertook at various times – as dean of the Faculty of Education at Sheffield University, or as president or chairman of the British Association for Local History, the British Agricultural History Society, the Sheffield and District Family History Society, the British Record Association and the Local Population Studies Society, let alone the South Yorkshire and North-East Derbyshire Ramblers Association (doubtless I've missed a few). He even served briefly as an elected member of the North-East Derbyshire District Council, until its processes disillusioned him.

Family and place were at the very heart of David's south-Yorkshire identity, as his highly personal *History of Penistone and district* (2002) so evocatively illustrates. His ancestral Yorkshire roots were traceable to medieval times, but about 1803 his great-great-grandfather, the ancestor of all the subsequent local branches of the Hey family, established himself in Thurlstone, towards the south-western corner of Yorkshire, within what David understood to have been an early medieval district known as Penisale. It was there that David's father – who led a hard, dangerous and ever unpredictable working life as a coal-miner – settled the family at the tiny hamlet of Catshaw in a cottage adapted from an eighteenth-century stone farmhouse. That,

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1 *The grass roots of English history. Local societies in England before the industrial revolution* (London, 2016).

of course, was without modern facilities of any kind (although, thanks to his obviously highly capable mother, early photographs show our hero as well-scrubbed and warmly clothed). The family, in fact, included 'Grandma Hey' for a time, with David's Uncle Percy next door and David's mother's parents across the road, with his father's mother and his sister with *her* son eventually only a field or two away, and with all his 'numerous' cousins to boot within walking distance. From the age of two David attended Sunday School every week at the Independent Chapel in nearby Bullhouse. When he was nearly 11, however, the family moved to a council house in the small neighbouring market town of Penistone, and it was there between 1949 and 1956 that he was educated at its very enlightened grammar school, which, pursuant to the 1944 Education Act, made it possible for working-class children to be soundly taught and even to go on to university.

On leaving school David was young enough to be able to escape National Service, while obviously well enough qualified to take up the place he was now offered at what was soon to become the University of Keele, but which in his time was still the University College of North Staffordshire, otherwise envisioned as a 'people's university'. Here, between 1956 and 1960, he was to enjoy a four-year course, History with political institutions, which included a diploma in Education (and which released him from subsequently taking a PGCE). Those years must thus have represented David's first extended termly experiences of life away from his accustomed, but closely circumscribed, world in south Yorkshire. We don't know, indeed, whether by the age of 18 either he or his family was yet accustomed to venture regularly as far afield as Barnsley, some miles to the east of Penistone, let alone to Sheffield. It is certainly significant that on graduating he was drawn back immediately to his home country to work as a school teacher – to Ecclesfield Secondary Modern on the northern perimeter of Sheffield, then to Holmfirth Secondary Modern, a mere seven or so miles north-west of Penistone. During this time, too, having studied part-time for it, he was awarded an MA for a dissertation on the parish of Ecclesfield between 1672 and 1851 – with a rarely awarded Distinction – from the Department of English Local History at Leicester in 1967. Only then did he move out of Yorkshire and into Derbyshire to become a successful history lecturer at Matlock College of Education, but only until 1969. For it was then that he was appointed to a research fellowship in Agrarian History in the same Leicester department, his Leicester doctoral thesis on a uniquely documented Shropshire parish being approved in 1971.<sup>2</sup> He always took particular pride in working as a representative of the Leicester 'School' of English Local History, and kept close contact with the department.

Meanwhile, at Matlock, however, he had met a certain young lady with an impish sense of humour from Essex, called Pat, whom he married in 1971, and the two of them set up their first home on the outskirts of Leicester. Only when his fellowship expired in 1974, therefore, did David move to become lecturer in Local History, 'with special reference to south Yorkshire' in the Department of Extramural Studies at Sheffield University. From 1974 onwards the couple would live in Derbyshire, at Dronfield

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2 David's doctoral thesis appeared as *An English rural community. Myddle under the Tudors and Stuarts* (Leicester, 1974).

Woodhouse. It is fair to say, of course, that none of David's many, many achievements over 46 years would have been even remotely possible without the constant loving support and efficiency of Pat, who, on top of her teaching, made such a warm home background for, domestically speaking, a somewhat traditionalist Yorkshire husband! Since the births of Emma in 1972 and of Jonny two years later, David's life was also immeasurably enhanced by huge pride in the children, the comfortable atmosphere of strong family life, and – especially – the prospect of succeeding generations of Heys.

David was pure Yorkshire. In his general and beautifully illustrated history of the county of 2005 he could justifiably claim 'I have ancestors from all three ridings, and know every part of Yorkshire on the ground'.<sup>3</sup> Above all, of course, David's broad and cheerful South Yorkshire accent proclaimed his regional identity throughout his life. He delighted in the subtle variations of local dialect, especially when a member of one of his audiences actually deduced that his accent stemmed from Penistone simply through comparison with someone else she knew from the same place. David recalled how his headmaster, when penning a supportive reference for his application to Keele, even 'urged the interviewing committee to make allowance for the fact that I was "rather a roughly spoken lad"'. If so, that certainly never stopped David's progress: in fact it lent authenticity and a conversational informality to his presentations on traditional local matters. He therefore fell on his feet when appointed to Sheffield, because there he found John Widdowson, a leading expert on dialect and eventually head of the Centre for English Tradition and Language; and, a few miles away, another dialect expert, Stanley Ellis of the University of Leeds.

David's doctoral supervisor had originally been the great W.G. Hoskins and, subsequently, Alan Everitt. Like the former, David naturally felt still connected through his background to an earlier regional cultural tradition and the surviving signs of it on the tongue and in a landscape with its own local building types. Joan Thirsk and Everitt, moreover, had elaborated the contexts of agriculture, rural industries and even religious tendencies as these might vary according to contrasted types of sub-region in ways on which David too would build. Also at Leicester he was fortunate to find two colleagues expert in the study of regional vernacular architecture – Peter Eden and Michael Laithwaite – who advised him in the field. From Sheffield, in turn, he profited likewise from the more locally focused expertise of Peter Ryder and others, as he did from David Crossley with regard to the Industrial Archaeology that was so relevant to his own detailed documentary studies of the local metal industries of Hallamshire. David was always punctiliously generous in acknowledging the help of others.

For David other things too spelled Yorkshire from his own experience or observation. Crucial to his thinking were the families – such as his own – which persisted in a locality for generation after generation, and transmitted customary ways across the centuries. Their mark was the persistence of their surnames. In the study of these he had benefited from the work of the English Surnames Survey, long pioneered systematically at Leicester by the deeply learned medievalist Richard McKinley. David himself would take forward the implications of such studies in his own work, most recently in *Surnames, DNA, and Family History*, which he co-authored with

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3 *A history of Yorkshire, 'County of the Broad acres'* (Lancaster, 2005), p. viii.