

9. A Journey Through England

A miscellany of conversations

In 1934, J.B. Priestley set off on a tour of England. As a writer, dramatist and journalist he was an observer of people and places. He explored how and where they lived, what they did, in work or out, how they felt, their social life, how they fared, their local community and the similarities and contrasts elsewhere - and patterns if they existed.

What follows are extracts, enriched by vignettes, drawn from other sources. JBP set out from London, travelling first by coach and later by car. Passing Camberley, a passenger across the gangway leaned over, pointing to a tea-room. "I tried that once. Old Tudor style in Kent, on a good road to Canterbury. We called it Chaucer Pilgrim. Couldn't make it pay."

The lure was American tourists but there weren't any with the depression. The man gazed out of the window for inspiration. "That's a wonderful business, if you can get the right opening. Hairdressing, ladies not men; permanent waves, manicure and everything. It's a gold mine." He paused, "but I don't know the business." Mr Polly, or was it Mr Micawber, sighed. A shop selling electrical gadgets maybe, especially wirelesses and gramophones. "Ideas come quick as a flash - well mine do. Tried raincoats once - in Newcastle; trade dried up."

From winter coats to shoes, a problem was knowing all the ropes, "it's tricky, very tricky." He complained the little money around was in the hands of big concerns, "cut you out, clean you out, no mercy, no mercy at all." His face brightened. The answer was personal service. The germ of the next venture was already in his mind. The question was, how to make it work.

Staying in hotels, Priestley was bound to bump into many commercial travellers, "of the more prosperous sort." Drinking late into the evening, their comments echoed professionalism and pride. "Trust, must have trust. The same with my customers. No unloading anything on the unsuspecting." "That's not all," piped another. "You've got to have sentiment too." Rarely did you meet these sort of people in novels or plays, mused Priestley. The drama of business, personal lives, hopes, fears, and forever on the move, provided ample material. Discerning audiences would have to wait until 1949 for a serious international production with *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller.

Dining one night with an artist & craftsman, in a charming rural town, conversation turned to modern methods and use of machinery. His friend had no car and telephone. Troubling him was crushing a workmen's self respect and skills by mechanical labour. He would bring back craftsmanship and rekindle the Guilds. Whilst admiring craft skills, removing the "horrible dead weight of miserable toil" and using "elaborate tools" accomplished much more. "The machine was not at fault, merely our dumb slave, but the shoddy, greedy, profit-grabbing, joint-stock company industrial system we had allowed to dominate us. That was the real villain." Opinions differed. Priestley felt the case for tried and trusted ways and old skills, yet experimentation had its place but not "when everything and everybody is being rushed down and swept into one dusty arterial road of cheap mass production and standardised living."

The scene switches to slum dwellings close to Liverpool docks and a visit to a school. "Now that boy looks English enough doesn't he," said JBP's guide. "But as a matter of fact he is half Chinese. Yes, and he's all Chinese inside. He has dreams, that boy, and they're all Oriental dreams." He outlined a theory of mixed blood relationships, "always the opposite of their appearance. If they look European, then you can always depend upon it that inside they're

almost entirely Chinese or Negro, or whatever it is. It's very odd but is so. I've proved it over and over again."

Priestley was moved by what he saw as extremely attractive children, caught up in a web not of their own making and perhaps not welcomed back in their country of origin, or here. As it was, in that school, he witnessed only happiness. He feared prospects in life and "knowing gentlemen from the tropics, or the east, who tell us emphatically that the half-caste is no good, a poor specimen who combines the vices, and not the virtues, of both his parent races."

Does any evidence support this, wondered JBP. "We can only remind ourselves that while violent racial prejudices still exist, all the dice are loaded against children of mixed blood, the very circumstances of whose parentage have probably been unfortunate." His hope was of their defying the odds and making a real success of life.

JBP chatted to a chap who ran cafes and dance halls in London and provincial cities. He had a big café in Manchester and decided to open on Sunday evenings too. Some music, perhaps an orchestra and singer or two. The city fathers said, "No, we can't allow that sort of thing." Gramophone music was requested. The reply was swift and again negative. "Certainly not; no gramophone in public on Sunday." So how about a John Reith BBC radio programme but that too was refused. The chap was not too downhearted. The café was fairly full, even with no music as there were few options on Sunday for something to do.

From Bristol to the Cotswolds

Much impressing Priestley was Bristol being old, bold, vibrant and bustling, "not one of your museum pieces." Neither was it quaint. "The Merchant Venturers have vanished. The slave trade, on whose evil proceeds the city had flourished once, is now only a reminder of man's cruelty to man." The port was a shadow of its former self, but Bristol had a new prosperity now with Gold Flake, Fry's chocolate, soap, clothes and numerous other products. He strolled up the long incline of Park Street, with its impressive shops, to the University and onto Clifton. He thought the Downs delightful - with fine villas and views of Brunel's Suspension Bridge.

A West Indian flavour remained, whether banana boats docking at Avonmouth, or pubs with a Spanish Main richness. The weather was fine and author in fine spirits. So were the people of Bristol. Picturesque and dignified, the city had its own charm such as walking from Temple Meads past College Green and meandering down nooks and crannies, before coming upon the Corn Exchange with its four circular-topped metal pedestals urging Pay on The Nail.

"You could pick a splendid review chorus or a sound rugger side out of the nearest street. I feel that working people here enjoy life. There is not that terrible dreariness, probably the chief curse of our provincial towns. The shops open early, the pubs are doing a brisk trade; the wireless and gramophone establishments are grinding out tunes; food of the cheaper sort seems plentiful; and the crowded scene has a hearty eighteenth century quality, reminding you that this is Fielding country."

This was no place to pick a quarrel with sturdy, red-faced fellows. A publican's terrier chased a rat down Market Street to the amusement of onlookers. Cock-fighting might still take place in one of numerous alleys. "Britain was notoriously tough with a reputation not unlike that of Chicago in our time," but without machine guns, or guns of any sort. Step back a century to the riots of 1831 when a crowd burned down the Mansion House, customs house, gaol and for good measure the bishop's palace.

Priestley went to a fascist meeting, held at the docks. Two black-shirted men could not make themselves heard above the din of the crowd, most of whom were communists, singing the Internationale. The fascists were unlikely to get many converts that night, or indeed any night. More appealing was a meeting of unemployed men at the Labour Hall in Old Market Street. The room usually used for dancing was almost full.

The 'oldish' speaker, with a droll appearance, was an orator with a powerful voice. "The class to which I belong and you belong - our class - are nothing but damnable silly donkeys." The audience laughed, as they did when referring to schemes for breeding rabbits in an attempt to alleviate the effects of unemployment by at least some form of work - for rabbits too. "We can only work now for the boys and girls who'll make the next generation. And I hope to God they'll have more sense than their fathers who begot'em." With modest applause he sat down in a haze of tobacco smoke, a cue for half the audience to disappear.

The middle class seemed to model itself on the civic motto of Virtue and Industry, espoused by W.D & H.O. Wills who invested in the University too. The family still lived in Clifton though a family home, Coombe Lodge, was rebuilt at Blagdon in North Somerset between 1928 and 1932. The foundations went back to 1759. Wills, with John Player and Sons, formed Imperial Tobacco. Up to 1920, only women and girls were employed as cigar makers. A clause in their contract stipulated: "She shall not contract Matrimony within the said Term, nor play at Card or Dice Tables, or any other unlawful Games." Wills was one of the first companies to include advertisement cards in their packets of cigarettes from 1905. Cards included Famous Golfers (1930), Garden Flowers (1933) and Air Raid Precautions (1938).

On a visit to the largest factory, Priestley was amazed at how much work was done by hand, in spite of "ingenious machines in almost every department. The great factory is a warren of girls in green, pink, brown, blue overalls, every department having a different colour. Some of the tasks are desperately monotonous, requiring the ceaseless performance of one quick, little action." He was relieved to know that girls switched jobs every hour or half hour. They began at 7:30 am, working until 5:00 pm with twenty minutes for breakfast and one hour for lunch. A massive dining room provided cheap, decent meals. Wills had its own doctor and dentist and offered a superannuation scheme. On parting, JBP thought, "if we must have factories of this size (employing well over 2,000 people) - and it seems we must - let them be run in this fashion."

The Bristol merchant survived, for Bristol felt different and was. "They take a lot of knowing," Priestly was told of Bristolians but this was true of any provincial city. A few years before his visit, Bristol had four newspapers; two morning and two evening. The big syndicates moved in but Bristol citizens created a business venture with capital raised, a board appointed and a staggering daily circulation of 70,000 on launch. It was from inspiring initiatives such as this, staking the independence and future of Bristol, that the city seemed to radiate success. With confidence in provincial England restored, JBP was on his way.

Chipping Camden, with a population of 1,500, was not so much a village as town. In former times it was very prosperous as the centre of the wool trade in the Cotswolds, and later silk manufacture. No rich seams of coal here, just fuller's earth, vital in the finishing process, and mellow Cotswold sandstone in a long sweeping high street, where time stood still. Art was a focal point thanks to Slade School trained F.L. Griggs, R.A. A fine etcher and illustrator, he set up 'New Dover's House,' one of the last significant Arts & Craft Houses. Now, after a battle,

locals are prepared to protect their town from the ravages of tea-shops, tourists and, in due course, developers. "There is No Ye Olde Chipping Camden nonsense about it."

The secret of Cotswolds villages, towns and manor houses is tradition, built up over centuries. "If you told a Cotswolds man to build a house, this is how he did it; he knew no other way – thank God." There are still masons "who can see Cotswolds houses already stirring in the very quarries." There are not many of them now, sighed Priestley, "and they grow old and feeble."

"I was introduced to old George, a pious Cotswold mason, in his seventies but still at it." His trade was the almost lost art of dry-stone walling, "pulling down ramshackle old walls and converting their materials into smooth solid ramparts. There were bits of stone all over him. He handled the stones as easily and lovingly as women handle babies. He was like a being that had been created out of stone, a quarry gnome. All stones fitted squarely and smoothly, a delight to the eye" and to George too, a craftsman as was his father and grandfather.

On his last Cotswolds' Day, a friend suggested they visit a manor house "of Gothic craziness, plucked straight out of one of Hoffmann's tales." Some three miles from Broadway, it was owned by Charles Paget Wade, a notable collector, architect and illustrator, whose family wealth was amassed over eight decades from West Indian sugar and cotton plantations. This "charming and rather eccentric gentleman" spent many years and a fortune restoring derelict Snowhill Manor, in keeping with the family motto, "let nothing perish."

This applied also to an enormous collection of artefacts and craftsmanship, including spinning wheels, sedan chairs, clocks, costumes, kitchen utensils, weapons, musical instruments, toys, bicycles, masks, mouse-traps and model ships. Wade lived in an outhouse rather than in the manor house which was turned into a museum of relics. His attention had turned to creating a seaport in the garden, complete with houses two feet high and a harbour fashioned from one of the ponds. It was "boys' play on a smashing adult scale, defying all common sense but glorious in its absorption in the exquisitely useless."

Here was the epitome of "the eccentric English country gentry, odd and delightful fellows who lived just as they pleased, who have built follies and who held fantastic beliefs." Wade was well connected and well liked too. Queen Mary called him "the most remarkable object in his collection."

Birmingham, Leicester & Nottingham

In 1893 George Cadbury, a Quaker, bought 120 acres of land close his cocoa and chocolate factory at Bourneville, Birmingham. Acquiring in total 330 acres, he developed a model village of 313 cottages and houses, built between 1895 and 1900. He was inspired by teaching at 'Early Morning Adult Schools,' believing firmly that poor housing was the root of most social evils. A Trust Deed laid down that each house was not to occupy more than one quarter of its site, that factories comprised a maximum of one fifteenth of the entire area, and that one tenth, in addition to roads and gardens, should be allocated to parks and recreation.

Cadbury reached out to the community, leasing land to four Public Utility Housing Societies to provide housing for rent or sale, with bungalows and a residential club for business women. Death rate comparison per thousand between 1924 and 1931 showed Bourneville to be far less than the national average. The record also showed that, on average, Bourneville children were taller and weighed more. JBP felt that more courts, squares and rows would break up the monotony, uniformity and regimentation of housing. When asked, residents said they

much preferred their own detached or semi-detached properties to rows. For JBP, there were too many religious halls and not enough meeting facilities. Conversely, he was impressed with large recreation grounds, sports pavilions and a substantial concert hall in the factory where mid-day concerts were held, and with facilities for singing and dancing.

As at W.D. & H.O. Wills in Bristol, medical facilities were provided and pensions. There was a works council too. The factory seemed almost as busy in the evenings with "games, music, drama, lectures, classes, hobbies, conferences, all keeping the place in full swing. Once you have joined the staff of this firm you need never wander out of its shadow. I saw a club room fitted up with billiard tables and draughts boards and the like, where old employees who have been pensioned off come to spend their leisure," in the company of workers. Spread out here were all the facilities for a happy life, yet JBP was not quite so sure. Was this role-model the best way to lead your life, or was it better to foster independence and imagination? For all that, he conceded this paternal employer provided housing, job security, leisure and learning and good management with happy employees, not cast adrift on reaching retirement.

A Saturday evening whist drive in the city centre offered a complete contrast. Once this was the favourite game of upper classes, but no longer. Bridge had taken over for upper middle classes too. Whist devotees were shop-keepers, artisans and working classes across a raft of occupations. This was a public affair, a combination of entertainment and gambling, attended by several hundred people. Entrance was two bob. Prize money was £23 split into individual amounts of a few pounds, enticing enough for an evening's enjoyment.

"You were given a scoring card, either black or red. On this card were the rules, the number of your first table, and then spaces for the numbers of your succeeding tables, the tricks you made and your totals. Nearly all the men smoked and most of the women, but there were no ash-trays." A megaphone summoned all players to their tables. Suspended from the ceiling were four gigantic suits. The illuminated Clubs showed trumps.

"We started. There followed what seemed to me one of the most strenuous hours I have ever spent. To begin with the games were played at tremendous speed, aces being banged on kings without a moment's hesitation. Then there was shuffling old greasy cards, entering your score, having it initialled; "there wasn't a moment to lose." A whistle blew, the signal to change tables quickly, trying to dodge the mad rush. Don't dawdle finishing your game. All were synchronised and planned in a well-rehearsed routine.

Men divided into two types: "the solid, hearty chaps who sat bolt upright, puffing out clouds of smoke, banging each card down, as if sheer force might win the trick; and the little, thin cunning fellows who sank down and down and half-closed their eyes as they played." All JBPs partners were "good humoured large women or little witch-like ones with sharp noses and tucked-in mouths. Many wore iron spectacles and held their cards close to their brooches."

A whistle blew after game twelve. There followed a rush to the top end of the large hall. First come, first served in a race to devour fruit, tarts and slabs of cake before play resumed in a performance to be repeated. There was no excitement at the end, or applause for winners. Everyone cleared off as if leaving a factory at the end of a shift, which in a sense it was. No wonder JBP felt that life had taken its toll, observing dimmed bright eyes and gaunt features of players. Social contact was minimal with no time for chit-chat. "All seemed well mannered and good-humoured, unlike at bridge with its egos and at times tantrums."

For three hundred years, Leicester had been a hosiery town and more recently had gained a reputation for knitted goods too. The biggest manufacturer was Wolsey with factories "all

over the town." Priestley visited three. He was immediately struck by "enormous rooms filled with women and girls who worked with small machines at long tables.. I cannot describe the numerous processes I was shown. I was left with a dazed impression of miles and miles of stockings, underclothes, knitted dresses and the like. I remember a cutting machine that went through a thick pile of material for men's pants like a knife going through cheese."

"In these factories they are using some elaborate new system of organizing and tabulating their production in its various units, with the result that these enormous rooms, some with hundreds of girls at work in them, almost look after themselves. You see hardly a sign of active supervision. The foreman class has been nearly eliminated." The process resembled "an uncontrolled orderliness of a bee-hive or ant-hill."

JBP found it rather intimidating as behind the scenes was a master plan. "Two distinct types exist; those who create machinery, and cogs and wheels." He noted conditions were good and workers shared in the profits. He accepted, the system belonged to our time "with its large scale methods of production, its scientific systems and with its experiments in industrial psychology." Britain was now learning from American production methods.

He chatted after the factory tour, feeling the only thing now was to reduce working hours to help alleviate the monotony. This sparked a debate on the merits of organising leisure time, or simply leaving it to individual discretion. At issue was active, purposeful and creative use of free time to counteract mundane and repetitive work. Maybe, JBP thought, the passivity and boredom would be relieved by knowing there was the prospect of more leisure time and fresh air, or for some girls, "a dreamy interlude between childhood and marriage."

Goose Fair in Nottingham is an ancient institution, no longer in the market place but decanted to the edge of town. Children are given half a day off but not workers in factories. JBP was unimpressed. "The Goose Fair I saw was the usual agglomeration of roundabouts, shows and stalls. It was now simply an assembly of devices, chiefly mechanical, contrived to attract the largest number of pennies in the shortest possible time. The brazen voices of the showmen, made more hideous and gargantuan than ever by the amplifiers and loudspeakers, battered our hearing."

"The real patrons of fairs of this kind are youngsters in their teens, and there were thousands of them, pushing and cat-calling and screaming in the crowd: the boys, their faces grinning and vacant in the whirl of coloured light, sometimes looking like members of some sub-human race, surging up from the interior of the earth; the girls, whose thickly powdered faces were little white masks without lines but daubed with red and black, looked like dolls out of some infernal toyshop. I climbed into the tail of a ruby and emerald fish which, after I had paid it three pence, rushed up and down and round and round, mixing the whole fair into a spangled porridge."

JBP opted next for the boxing show, "starring a local middle-weight whose opponent, a negro, was most probably a fairground worker. Round after round they slugged away, the negro slumping against the ropes at times, a dogged and outclassed opponent. Remarkably, he revived at the end of the ten rounds contest, looking fierce and making threatening gestures. The referee, passed the hat round, announcing another fight of five rounds later that night."

"More inviting was Over the Falls, again three pence, only to be plunged into darkness as if adrift at night in an Atlantic gale, the 'vessel,' heaving violently with each twist and turn and peals of laughter echoing from the machine." On exiting, Priestley was confronted by yet more machines "hooting and bellowing with satanic mirth." The ghost train was predictable.

Green eyes flashed. As "I rushed to collide with skeletons, hangmen's nooses brushed my forehead in the dark; dreadful screams tore the thick air" The rest of the journey was in similar vein.

Saturday evening was special for fair connoisseurs of whom JBP was not one. Take your pick from divers, Texas sharpshooters, a young lady who seemed only to have her head, a man with dwarf arms, Al Capone's armoured car, snakes, an African pygmy, Parisian sisters who performed a guillotine act and freak animals. Appearing too was The Ugliest Woman in the World. "Grotesquely sculptured, her hands and feet were three times normal size. Her dull eyes were without expression and neither was there any movement." JBP felt ashamed. It was nearly midnight when the fair closed. Priestley had seen enough; more than enough, nonplussed at what passed for entertainment. The fair would return next October.

Coming back home

In 1830, Bradford's population was 13,000 and within a century this had grown to 280,000, encompassing neighbouring villages; a phenomenal rate of growth. Born in 1894, Priestley grew up in Bradford. It was well placed with staples of woollens and worsteds, proximity to coalfields and abundant soft water, for washing and dyeing. Add to this silks, alpaca and mohair. Raw materials came as far away as Argentina to Australia with European markets attractive for exports. Combing, spinning, weaving, dyeing and finishing processes were all carried out.

The meteoric growth in the Victorian era was thanks to German and German Jew merchants, backed by German banks. This was a city of travellers, buying and selling all over the world. "They would go away for months, keeping to the most complicated timetables. Intelligent, cosmopolitan and liberal in outlook, they were fundamentally business people, very much part of the Bradford scene." JBP noticed "outlandish names on office doors." He added that this small colony produced people of great distinction from various walks of life. A popular club was the Schillerverein. The Rhine, Oder, Frankfurt and Leipzig had almost local connections.

The war changed all this with little trace of the German-Jewish wave. JBP preferred Bradford as it was; many citizens agreed. "The city seemed smaller and duller now." The sinister rise of Nazism meant many fled, sensing darker times ahead. The welcoming hospitality afforded by locals was not shared by an antagonistic press, "yelping again about Keeping Foreigners Out." JBP was incensed. "History shows us that the countries that have opened their doors have gained, just as the countries that have driven out large numbers of its citizens, for racial, religious or political reasons, have always paid dearly for their intolerance."

Concerning him was nationalism, both economic and political, in an age of passports, visas and quotas. Immigration was tightened following the Aliens Act 1905 and even further by the British Nationality and Status Aliens Act 1914. The League of Nations standardised passports and the famous 'old blue' was issued in 1920. JBP contended all this made it "impossible for the wonderful leavening process to continue," attempting to raise aspiration and achievement, and a better life for all.

He reflected on the sad dwindling of the foreign community and associated activities, notably music. The old St George's, where JBP heard the orchestras of Richter and Nikisch, and the Theatre Royal, were now cinemas. The Civic Theatre survived with professional producers and amateur actors, producing plays with 'free' seats. A subscription system operated for the best seats in the house and a collection was held at the end of each performance. This type

of theatre was popular. Over 700 amateur dramatic licences were issued each year with most performances held in small theatres; "little camp-fires twinkling in a great darkness. Operas, musical comedies, farces, dramas – Bradford hums with them."

The richer merchants had moved out to Ilkley, Harrogate and Grassington, now being able to commute easily by car. There were fewer higher class shops and the emphasis was on mass markets. Clogs had disappeared. Shawls were seldom seen. For JBP much of his childhood had melted away. Such is nostalgia and happy years in a loving family at home in a modest town house, indulging theatre, music and art, encouraged by his father, a local headteacher.

A Lancashire hotpot

From a rather dismal tour of the Potteries, J.B.Priestley arrived in Liverpool. His first stop was former merchant houses. Gone were the days a century before, "thinking about their cargoes of cotton and tobacco from New Orleans, and of rum and sugar from Jamaica." The charming and dignified facades were looking forlorn. Once fine houses were now slum tenements with peeling paint, ragged curtains and broken and boarded windows, reminding JBP of Georgian Dublin. "The buildings were rotting away and some of the people were rotting with them."

"Port Said, Bombay, Zanzibar and Hong Kong had called here. The babies told the tale plainly enough. They were all shades, and Africa and Asia came peeping out of their eyes." A vicar was showing JBP round the area. "This little chap there," he said pointing with his stick. "He's one of four; all with different fathers. His mother's a nice woman, a very good sort." A visit to a local school was enlightening. "All the races of mankind were there; wonderfully mixed."

Appearances were deceptive. A handsome sturdy lad, with a fine head, proudly carried, and big flashing eyes, was the grandson of an African chieftan. Children with a Chinese strain interested the vicar most. "A boy could look pure Liverpoolian and prove to be three parts Chinese. Many would go to China in a few years." An uncle of one was now an important official in the Chinese Republican Government and resentful of British influence and slums.

On this murky late November afternoon, there were still a few signs of occupation around Pitt Street: a Chinese Republican Club, a Chinese Masonic Hall and a few Chinese shops selling ivories and tea; a handy stop for a cuppa upstairs. It was deserted, except for a couple of Chinese playing cards. Talking in whispers the Chinese waitress explained why the area was rapidly disappearing. The first reason was trade for the Chinese go where the money is; not here. The second was interference with customs. These included gambling, smoking opium and also secret societies thought JBP. Apart from returning East, Rotterdam was a favoured destination.

By the time JBP and his companion reached the docks it was nearly dark. Gloomy streets, footsteps echoing on the cobbles, emptiness and decay, epitomised a once vibrant Liverpool. Standing on a long mud-bank the mysterious, swirling grey of the River Mersey was relieved by twinkling lights in Birkenhead. On the way back a visit was made to the David Lewis Club and hostel. Resembling a late Victorian infirmary, it was a hive of activity with reading, chess and card rooms and residential accommodation. Attached was a 1,000 seater theatre, thanks to the enterprising David Lewis, a philanthropist at heart.

For 1/9p a day you could stay in the huge, bleak institution, and enjoy a decent meal of stew for 6p. The hostel was only half full with far fewer casual labourers now because of the trade depression. Two middle-aged men, dressed like bank clerks, busily wrote letters, possibly job

applications. Mostly it was only elderly men, largely forgotten, seeking peace and dignity in their twilight years.

Between Manchester and Preston, or fringes of any northern town, were 'hen runs.' "There were miles of them. The whole of Lancashire seemed to keep poultry." Instead of cotton or calico, trains might carry eggs and chickens. Idle speculation as "we were going through the country of the dole." JBP was on his way to Blackpool. Being November, "all the fiddlers, fortune-tellers, pierrots, cheapjacks and sellers of peppermint and pineapple rock had gone. The three piers had done with frivolity for this year."

Blackpool was unashamedly the pleasure resort, a magnet for hordes of cotton mill workers. Gigantic dance halls, variety shows, switch-backs, helter-skelters, wine bars, oyster saloons, restaurants, tea houses, shops, animal trainers, itinerant singers and more were all "piled high, glittering with trash." In the height of season, 70 special trains a day were run with hundreds of thousands of trippers. "Brighton and Margate and Yarmouth are merely playing at being popular seaside resorts. Blackpool had them all licked."

But Blackpool was changing. Spinners and weavers could take their pick of public dance halls in other resorts. Broadway hits were now played, largely replacing the pierrots and minstrels. Shows were more standardised and audiences more restrained. Blackpool had lost some of its frenetic energy and maybe sparkle. JBP recalled pre-war invasions descending on the town, "loaded with eatables, whole boiled hams and sides of bacon and round tin trunks filled with cake." On arrival, firstly pay your lodgings. The rest was spending money. Back home you might need to buy on tick until pay day, or even for a few weeks.

Travelling to Blackburn, JBP reflected on the cotton industry. "The whole district had been tied to prosperity, to its very existence with threads of cotton; you could hear them snapping all the time." A mill costing a hundred thousand pounds twenty or so years ago had been put up for sale. There was no reserve price and not a single bid. JBP heard countless tales of mills ceasing to exist. Loom manufacturers over the decades had done a roaring trade, selling to all parts of the world. Not only did this mean fewer workers with mechanisation but more competition for trade, and cheap imports that took away local trade.

At Blackburn Technical College, "industrious, smiling young men, mostly Japanese, arrived from the East, anxious to learn all that Lancashire could teach them about calico manufacture. They sat through their courses, missing nothing, smiled at their instructors for the last time, and disappeared into the blue." Soon, another chunk was "snipped off Lancashire's trade" as they now had both machinery and skills. No longer were millions of dhotis produced as India made their own. Heavy import duties were levied, followed by a ban on British goods.

JBP met the treasurer of Community House, and saw what unemployed Blackburn men were doing. The former elementary school was "a dismal hole in a back street." One or two soled and heeled boots, paying only for the leather. Under instruction, others made things out of donated wood: cupboards, bookcases, coal-boxes and child desks. Initial reluctance to accept advice wore off with the acquisition of modest skills. Nearby, a room for community activities had notices pinned up of sing-songs and socials. A game of table tennis was in progress.

Out into the sunlight

Whilst admirable, JBP felt this was tinkering at the edges given the demise of cotton. A grand plan was required to rejuvenate the depressed economy, to equip people with requisite skills and recreate pride. The same could be said for so many towns in the north, such as JBP's

next destinations of Gateshead, Jarrow and Hebburn and elsewhere on Tyneside. Bob, a communist to his boots, lived in Gateshead. His working day, plus travel, was nearly 12 hours. Somehow he found time to assist running the active Bensham Grove Settlement. Here, many classes were held and social events. In the theatre, a music rehearsal was in progress. The best number for JBP was the first chorus, *Happy Days Are Here Again*, belted out in time to a rhythmic stamping of feet.

Jarrow, population 36,000, "looked as if it had entered a perpetual bleak Sabbath" after the collapse of Palmer's shipyard the previous year. The Jarrow March to London was two years away. A beacon was the zeal shown by the Council of Social Service, determined to relieve gloom and despondency. There was plenty of choice with history, economics and literature classes, an orchestra, gym classes, camping and rambling club, two handicraft clubs, ladies and children's choirs and many other activities too.

Nearby was a social centre offering basic skills in carpentry and cobbling. It had a tattered library, held whist drives and dances and even had a boat. There was only one ship in the yards now when there used to be twenty. "Down the Tyne we could see the idle ships lying up; a melancholy and familiar sight."

Seaham Harbour, a colliery town on the coast, had a fine Settlement or Community House, run by the energetic Miss Jowitt. "In these unhappy districts there is a war on, and the allied enemies are idleness, ignorance, hopelessness and misery," echoing similar words of William Beveridge a decade later. A German lady organised music, much impressed by the talents of Durham folk. For those disinclined there was always the cinema and betting, at the expense of food and clothing as families made do. JBP chatted to a group of wives who had formed a sewing circle. Their husbands worked down the pit. "Frank talk about their men's wages was not pleasant to listen to, what they earned and how it was spent, or frittered. All vowed their sons would not go down the pit.

Past York, through Barmby Moor to Beverley, Priestley was in another England as "Northern desolation had been banished." So it was in Hull, Lincoln, Boston and Norwich, steeped in time, trades and ways; stable and solid, with strong Dutch, Flemish, Hanseatic League and market town influences. These plus cathedrals, colleges, Cambridge, Oxford and the Home Counties characterised what was good; only a few luxuries maybe but in a "luxury country."

The same could not be said for larger parts of the stark, raw industrial midlands and north, reliant on coal, iron, steel, wool, cotton and railways. They were characterised by impressive town halls, Mechanics Institutes, Lit & Phil societies, chapels, mills, foundries, warehouses, slums and pubs, cocooned into "sooty little towns and still sootier grim fortress-like cities."

Concerning JBP was "no new life being poured in." The 19th century especially "had done more harm than good to the real enduring England. It had found a green and pleasant land and left a wilderness of dirty bricks. It had also blackened fields, poisoned rivers, ravaged the earth, and sown filth and ugliness with a lavish hand. There are too many egg-shells and too few omelettes," whilst admitting some dirt and disorder was necessary. "What you see looks like a debauchery of cynical greed."

The post-war era was different and more aligned to America. "This is the England of arterial and by-pass roads, of filling stations and factories that look like exhibition buildings, of giant cinemas and dance halls and cafes, bungalows with tiny garages, cocktail bars, Woolworths, motor coaches, wireless, hiking, factory girls looking like actresses, greyhound racing and swimming pools."

All this had an effect on people and how they lived and thought. "You feel that too many of the people in this new England are doing not what they like but what they are told they like." This was due largely to what we might think of as the herd instinct, the persuasive power of advertising, with its American influence, and keeping up with the Jones. This applied also to work and leisure too with standardisation, rather than spontaneity, being the norm.

For JBP, such differences between the two Englands were illustrated "by the huge Victorian red-brick box and a modern factory, all glass and white tiles and chromium plate. I cannot get rid of a suspicion that that the old brick boxes had more solid lumps of character in them than the new places have." He felt a serious weakness exists as "the new England lacks zest, gusto, bite, drive and originality."

These two Englands depicted by JBP were inter-mingled in the various parts visited. Close to London and his Highgate home, he pondered. "What had the City done for its old ally, the industrial north? It seemed to have done what the black moustached glossy gentleman in the old melodrama always did to the innocent village maiden." Yet, there was much to admire in England. Priestley had heard many remarks how much better Russia was; if only they knew!

He had reservations about some suppression of the press in contrast to greater freedom in the USA but readily conceded we were not a fascist state; neither did we have secret police. "The England worth keeping is the England of the free and generous temper" and of social justice that applies to the poor and destitute and those fleeing persecution.

Pleasing and impressing J.B Priestley was the natural courtesy and kindness shown to him in this English Journey - and humility. "There is always someone worse off than us" was often stated by those who appeared to have so little. His final observation was an optimistic plea. "Ours is a country that has given the world something more than millions of yards of calico and thousands of steam engines. It is for us again to find our way out into the sunlight."