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978-1-107-62244-9 - Cambridge County Geographies: The North Riding of Yorkshire

W. J. Weston

Excerpt

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## **I. County and Shire. The names *Riding* and *Yorkshire*; their Origin and Meaning.**

Yorkshire is of so great extent that it is not surprising to find that it has from very early times been treated as three separate counties. Each Riding has its own Lord-Lieutenant and its own county offices; and, though the City of York is, for some purposes, the capital of the whole, each has its own county town. That for the North Riding is Northallerton.

The English kingdoms that were founded in our island after the departure of the Romans could not, in those days of difficult travelling, be properly governed from one point. They were therefore divided into *shares* or *shires*, roughly according to the number of men able to fight; and the men of these shires were themselves answerable for most duties of government. Yorkshire was a portion *shorn* off (the derivation of the word is the same as that of shire) by the wedge of "Bishop's land," the county of Durham, from the great kingdom of Northumbria.

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The shire was ruled for the king by an officer, usually called an Ealdorman; the Lord-Lieutenant of to-day is his representative. When the Normans came they called him *Comte* or Count; and the district over which he had control was a *Comitatus*, a *Comté*, or County. But a good many of the shires did not become counties; the Norman Count would often rule over several shires. Thus, even as late as the reign of Elizabeth, the traveller Camden speaks of the North Riding as made up of four shires. These were Richmondshire, Swaledale and the adjoining plain given by the Conqueror to his cousin; Clevelandshire, the land of cliffs; Allertonshire; and Blackamore, the black moorlands, the old name for the bleak moors between Cleveland and Pickering Vale. The name Richmondshire is still used to denote one of the four divisions of the county having a member in parliament.

A shire usually took its name from its chief town. This is the case with Yorkshire, of which the Anglian name was *Eofervice-scyre*, the shire of York. The Anglian city was called *Eofervice*, the “over-city.” When the Danes ruled in York they gave the Anglian name a Danish sound, *Jorvik* (the *j* being pronounced as *y*), and in course of time this word of two syllables becomes the modern York. Or, as some think, *Jorvik* may mean “the settlement (*vik*) on the Ure” and have no relation to the Anglian name.

The name “Riding” also is due to the Danes, who, as we shall see, had much to do with Yorkshire. The word has lost its first sound *th* because it was so often

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## COUNTY AND SHIRE

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preceded by the words North, East, or West. North-riding is really North-thriding. The *th* would be the more easily lost as the two words were mostly written as one. For instance, we have in the Rolls of Parliament for 1474, "The Shire of York in the Estrithing, North-rithyng, and Westrithyng of the same." *Thri* is kin to the



Across the Yorkshire Moors

Danish for *three*, and *ding* or *thing* is the part or shire that has an assembly of its own. We meet with this syllable *ding* or *thing* or *thring* wherever the Danes have settled: thus in the North Riding, far up among the mountains of the west, is the little village of Thringarth, the garth or meadow in which men gathered to talk

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things over. A Riding, therefore, is a third part of a larger whole, which part nevertheless has an assembly—a shire-moot—of its own.

York was known in Roman times as Eboracum, and the first two syllables of this name are still in use. The Archbishops of York employ them as the official signature, preceded by the Christian name, as Cosmo Ebor.

### 2. General Characteristics.

The North Riding, though one only of the three parts into which Yorkshire has long been divided, is yet fourth in size of English counties, and its wide area contains much of the very greatest interest and importance. On the west, from beneath the New Red Sandstone and the gravel of the plain, rises the region of mountain limestone. There, the huddled masses of mountains, with their secluded valleys, their rapids, and their waterfalls, afford rugged and grand scenery not easily equalled. In the Tees Valley also there is striking scenery. For there the hard igneous rock of the Whin Sill crosses the valley, and, yielding less easily to erosion than the softer Carboniferous beds over which it passes, forms ridges. Across these ridges the river dashes in imposing falls. Wensleydale, where Aysgarth Force is one among numberless fine scenes, is with justice called the Piedmont of England. From Richmond Castle is a view eastward over a wide stretch of level farmed land; and Pickering Castle, too, looks over a productive

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Bainbridge, the Roman Virosidum

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## 6 YORKSHIRE, NORTH RIDING

saucer-like vale scooped out long ago by moving ice-fields. The fringe of cliffs that faces the North Sea is broken by many beautiful bays in which nestle a number of towns well placed for fishing and pleasant as holiday resorts. Along the south bank of the Tees, as we approach the sea, we find a crowded district of modern industry, of blast furnaces that turn the ironstone of the Cleveland Hills into material for the iron-worker, of steel-mills, of ship-yards, and of busy docks and quays.

Nine-tenths of the riding is still occupied by farms. The broad valley between the Pennine fells and the North Yorkshire moors on the east is covered by excellent soil. The green fertile plain, spread over the soft sandstones and marls of the New Red series of rocks, stretches to the sterile moorlands east and west where the limestone emerges from its deep foundation. The Yorkshire farmer has long been famed for his skill and energy; York has one of the largest cattle-markets in the country; the Yorkshire breed of horses attracts buyers to the Northallerton fairs from all parts of the Continent; and Yorkshire hams and bacons are well known. But, as in most parts of Britain, the farm-worker is vanishing. At the last numbering of the people, though the population of the whole riding showed during ten years an increase of over eleven in a hundred, every division or wapentake, except two, showed a decrease. The two exceptions were those we may call urban; the rural wapentakes all showed a decrease in the number of inhabitants.

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## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

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Middlesbrough and Scarborough with their attendant towns had grown rapidly; many a country worker had found employment in the towns or had emigrated. Yet, in spite of these two small areas where people are closely massed, the rest of the county contains so few inhabitants that the North Riding is among the most sparsely peopled of our counties.



**Corporation Road, Middlesbrough**

The mushroom town, Middlesbrough,, is indeed a remarkable illustration of the manner in which the working of the huge stores of iron ore in the Cleveland Hills is transforming this part of the county—turning it from a quiet farming region into a noisy and bustling manufacturing centre. A hundred years ago the site of Middlesbrough was occupied by a few farmsteads;

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now a population of over a hundred thousand finds work in the smelting and working of iron, and in the shipping, ship-building, and other industries that iron has drawn to the spot.

The coast towns—chiefly Scarborough, which is also the greatest of Yorkshire watering places, and Whitby,



**Scarborough, South Bay**

where a busy new town has grown up alongside the ancient one—have a great fishing industry. Scarborough stands fourth of the north-eastern fishing ports, only Hull, Hartlepool, and Shields having greater quantities of fish brought in.

Rich as the North Riding is in natural beauty, the



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## GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

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beauty of broken mountains and rushing torrents, of smiling farm lands and of cliff-bordered coast; rich as it is in interest as an example of modern industry, it is richer still in what appeals most to the student of plant and animal life. Upper Teesdale and the wide moorlands are productive hunting-grounds for the botanist; among the dales running into the Pennines certain birds and animals, elsewhere disappearing from our islands, still find refuge; and the varied coast, with its rock-sheltered bays, has a wealth of marine life.

For the historian, too, the county is of special interest. From the earliest time the North Riding must have been an important district. A surprising number of remains of primitive man have been found here, mainly in barrows on the moors. Roman relics—as we might expect seeing that York, the Roman capital of the island, could be called “*altera Roma*,” “a second Rome”—are most plentiful. Whitby Abbey and Stamford Bridge remind us of notable events. Northallerton is only one of the many places on the Great North Road where Englishman and Scot fought. And if in modern times our history is mainly the story of peaceful industrial development, it is not the less but rather the more noteworthy. Nowhere else can we see so clearly the working of what is called the “Industrial Revolution,” the change from a farming England to an England of factories and workshops.

The North Riding, which we now proceed to study in detail, occupies that part of the eastern slope from the Pennines which lies south of Durham and north of the

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East and West Ridings. But, as we shall see, the boundaries of the counties on the sides of the great divide are not quite along the line of water-parting. The Greta, for instance, flows into the North Riding from Westmorland, where it rises on the flattened height called Stainmore Forest.

**3. Size. Shape. Boundaries.**

The North Riding is fourth in area of the counties of England. It extends over 1,357,433 acres, or 2121 square miles of land: its neighbour to the south, the West Riding (largest of all our counties), Lincolnshire, and Devonshire, alone have a greater extent. It is a little more than twice the size of Durham, its neighbour to the north; and no fewer than fourteen Rutlands would be needed to cover its surface.

The county forms an irregular four-sided figure with one great angle of land, having York at the point, towards the south. It is roughly an oblong, stretching about twice as far east and west as it does north and south, and having a triangle on its southern side. The longest line that can be drawn within the area is from the north-western corner, where Maize Beck joins the infant Tees, to the south-eastern corner, a little north of where the spur of rock, Filey Brigg, runs a mile into the sea. This line measures about 87 miles, and a line from Redcar to York, a distance of 45 miles, is the longest that can be drawn directly north and south.