

“ CONTEMPORARY OTHERWORLDLY GAZETTEERS ”



# GENERAL SURVEY



PSYCHOGEOGRAPHIC SURVEY OF ELMET



SHEPHERD CEMETERY 30

SHEPHERD CEMETERY

SHEPHERD CEMETERY  
PARK PATH

SHEPHERD CEMETERY

# GENERAL SURVEY

When the Romans departed these shores for good in AD 410, the province of *Britannia* was in a state of flux. Oppressed in the north by Pictish raiders and the in east from Angles and Saxons raiding from the continent, some have argued that by the time of Emperor Honorius' now infamous *Rescript*, the north of province had ceased to be under Roman control for some time.

That is perhaps why the region seems to have so quickly broken apart into smaller kingdoms ruled by local warlords and chieftans. It is likely too that this is why they resisted Anglo-Saxon rule so vehemently and maintained a distinct culture long after their conquest. This was the time commently known today at the 'Dark Ages' – the age of legendly figures such as Vortigern, Taliesin and King Arthur.

The validity and historical legitimacy of these characters is beyond the purview of this report but their mention helps raise an important point. We know very little of them and do not truly know if they were even real men or mere figments of myth. As such what we know of Elmet is also very limited indeed. It appears as a Brythonic kingdom, possibly emerging from the kingdoms of Rheged and Ebrauc, focused on what today is known as Cumbria

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A signpost directing travellers to Sherburn-in-Elmet

and York respectively. At its height, Elmet seems to have covered an area similar to what became the West Riding of Yorkshire under the Norsemen, bound by the river Wharfe in the north and the Sheaf in the south. Its eastern edge was found on the banks of the Humber and its western edge, the area known today as Craven, which may well have been a minor British kingdom itself.

The only contemporary writings to mention Elmet are the ancient Welsh poets which placed it with the other kingdoms of the *Hen Ogledd*, ‘the Old North’, the land of the Bretons before the English rose to power. There are only a handful of mentions in later works, including the Venerable Bede, as well as the Saxon *Tribal Hidage* of the late 7<sup>th</sup> century which described the land of the *Elmetsæte* as being equivalent to the later Lower Skyrack and Barkston Ash wapentakes. It seems as though this final definition is the one which ‘stuck’, as it were, as it is now this hinterland – east of Leeds and west of York – which is how Elmet may best be defined today, although it is impossible to place any real border upon the region.

This theme of resistance and persistence is one which arises repeatedly across our psychogeographic survey. One example is the triumphal arch on the Parlington Estate which is the only memorial of its kind in Britain dedicated to the victory of the American colonists in the War of Independence. The inscription on the arch reads:

LIBERTY IN N.AMERICA TRIUMPHANT MDCCLXXXIII

If this were all the arch merely was, it would represent a strong link to the Elmetian spirit of resistance to an oppressor. However, the arch was modelled on the famous



The triumphal arch on the Parlington Estate

Arch of Constantine in Rome which is no insignificant fact. Constantine the Great was crowned emperor by his soldiers nearby in York in AD 306 and his figure seems to have loomed large over the Britons of the 4<sup>th</sup> and 5<sup>th</sup> century. As the emperor who established the wholesale adoption of Christianity and briefly united the western and eastern halves of the empire, he ushered in a renaissance of sorts from the crises of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. It seems as though he became a celebrated figure in the province who helped raise him to the imperial throne. Several nearby holy wells are dedicated to his mother, St Helen, and in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century a British general, also named Constantine, was once again raised to the status of emperor, but this time the reign did not end in glory but execution, and the final removal of soldiers from Britannia. Some historians have remarked that he was perhaps given such support from the garrisoned soldiers simply because of the status attached to his name. Whether Sir Thomas Gascoigne realised or not, he was ‘tapping into’ a significant theme within the history of this land by erecting an arch in the style of Constantine the Great. The arch itself is a testament to the psychogeography of the land persisting throughout the passing of time.

While attitudes to authority and affiliations to ancient figures have changed little over time, so the land use has also remained remarkably static. The meaning behind the name Barwick-in-Elmet lies in the Old English *bere wic*, meaning ‘barley settlement’ or ‘barley farm’. Even today, many of the fields surrounding the village still produce barley and much of the land in Elmet is still given over to agriculture. Even the mines and heavier industry that



Barley growing in fields surrounding Barwick-in-Elmet





A potato crop ready for harvest in fields just outside Sherburn-in-Elmet







Much of the countryside in Elmet is bursting with flora, fauna and fungi throughout all seasons



boomed during the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in the southern parts of the region have largely vanished from the landscape today. Indeed in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, it is recorded that wool from Elmet was of higher quality than that of Thirsk or York. Once again we discover a rich vein of continuity to be found in this landscape.

Although not perhaps understood by all, one thing that does seem to be generally accepted and celebrated is the name of Elmet across the region. The name has become attached to several businesses, particularly food outlets and social clubs, possibly indicating that the name indicates some sense of unity and social cohesion. Furthermore in the year 1983, a new parliamentary constituency was formed from the old Barkston Ash constituency (itself a relic of the ancient wapentake) and named Elmet. While it did not cover as much area as the region we have surveyed, and was later enlarged to become Elmet and Rothwell, it seems as though the name was chosen as it represented a unifying focus to an area which in as many respects is a disparate collection of villages and small towns separated by fields and greenbelt. While it is unlikely that every resident of the broader region of Elmet we are now examining has a good understanding of the history and psychogeographic themes within their land, the name itself does at least seem to hold significance and represent a cohesive force within the landscape.

The larger themes and key points of interests are discussed separately in the following pages. For now, it is worth stating that this survey is in many ways incomplete. It is here that a comparison to the ‘Dark Ages’ of Elmet’s origins is worthwhile – such a time is knowable only to





Examples of restaurants, social clubs and takeaways all bearing the name Elmet from across the region



a very limited and particular extent. As with all history, it impossible to truly experience it from a distance. To examine the past is akin to examining one's face in a misted mirror. For certain events or periods of time, the mirror may be mostly clear and produce an accurate image. And for others, the mist becomes so opaque that only a very limited comprehension of the image can be achieved. So it is with Elmet's origins and its continued perpetuity throughout the epochs that have followed. It is possible to penetrate the earth, to peel back the layers and perceive the forces that made the land and continue to shape it – but only dimly, faintly and with much work.

To truly know Elmet, one would have to walk backwards through the pathways and byroads, back to a time almost totally lost to the contemporary *zeitgeist*. This report, we hope, provides enough insight to look beyond the obvious and to perceive the subliminal tectonic forces that still mould this land, like a ghostly glacier dragging its heels as it creeps slowly down the mountainside, only to be lost in the ocean. Luckily for us, Elmet is not yet lost, only obscured, and living well in the land it once claimed for its own.

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Sunbeams burst through the clouds over fields south of Aberford

