

“ CONTEMPORARY OTHERWORLDLY GAZETTEERS ”



# THEME: VIOLENCE



PSYCHOGEOGRAPHIC SURVEY OF ELMET



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Today, walking around Elmet is a pleasant experience. There are traditional villages, country churches, pubs, fields, hedgerows and barns. But it was not always such a pleasant sight. In fact, the scars of violence and military action are not simply still seen, but define the landscape today.

Like a spinal column running up the body, the Ridge Road from Castleford to Tadcaster cuts through the centre of Elmet like a knife. With possible origins as a pre-historic pathway, the route was established for good by the invading Roman army in the middle of the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD. Part of the famous Ermine Street linking York to London, this road has remained in almost constant use for two millennia, rising to notoriety in the 18<sup>th</sup> century when it became a part of the Great North Road plagued by highwaymen such as Dick Turpin who now lies in St George's graveyard in Fishergate, York.

While a road itself seems somewhat benign, it is important to understand that such a major construction was built to enable an oppressive régime an efficient route to move its army across the country. It seems no small coincidence that the road ploughs straight through the Aberford Dyke system (see page 42 for more

information), which is thought by some to be an Iron Age defensive structure. It passes close to the similarly aged hill fort in Barwick-in-Elmet before curving away (in very un-Roman-like fashion) to Tadcaster where a fort was built on the banks of the Wharfe, a notoriously treacherous river to cross. From there the road marches on to the legionary fortress in York. While it may well follow the same or a similar route to even more ancient trackway, this road was not built simply because it is the easiest way of getting from A to B – it was built to ensure the local people were kept in check. Perhaps we should not be so surprised that after nearly 400 years of Roman rule the native people appeared exceptionally keen to re-establish themselves.

Two hundred years later and only two decades after its formal amalgamation into the Kingdom of Northumbria on Easter Sunday AD 627, a huge battle was fought in



The 18<sup>th</sup> century bridge over the Cock Beck in Aberford; the original width of the river is evidenced by two arches that are no longer used

Elmet between King Oswiu of Bernicia and King Penda of Mercia, the last pagan king of England. It seems that Penda was travelling along the aforementioned road when he met Oswiu in battle by the banks of a river called the Winwaed. There was great animosity between these kingdoms, in part because of religious differences, but the reasons behind the battle and even the true location of the river Winwaed itself have never been discovered. However it seems likely it was the Cock Beck that runs from Winmoor in Leeds into Aberford where the Ridge Road crosses it, originally as a ford, although now as a bridge, particularly as Bede places the battle in the region of *Loidis*. While it is now only a stream, it was originally much wider. The battle was apparently fought by the river in heavy rain and more soldiers drowned than were killed by the sword. King Penda was slain and with him English paganism.

Eight hundred years later, the road and river were once again the scene of bloodshed. Civil war between the houses of York and Lancaster raged throughout the nation and Towton became the deciding battlefield, ushering in the brief reign of the House of York, before its eventual collapse to the Tudors. The Battle of Towton has been named the bloodiest and the largest battle ever to be fought on English soil, with an estimated 28,000 lives lost or wounded. The battlefield is now a vacant, still, place, absent of life. The event is memorialised by a roadside cross and the naming of a field called the Bloody Meadow where it is said the river ran red for three days after the battle. The same road was again the artery which brought both armies to a head and it was the same river which entrapped and brought an end to the lives of many. Even



**Above:** The Bloody Meadow where the heat of the battle took place  
**Opposite:** The 20<sup>th</sup> century road-side cross marking the battlefield  
**Below:** Saxton church where many bodies were buried





today remnants of the battle are still being unearthed, with some of the first English handguns ever to be found recovered from a field only a few years ago.

As times changed and technology progressed forwards, so did the methods and instruments of war. The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought the age of mechanised warfare which began to see the old wounds of Elmet reopened. At the centre of Barwick-in-Elmet is the Wendel Hill and Hall Tower earthworks, an Iron Age hillfort refortified by the Normans as a motte and bailey castle sometime in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Few excavations have been carried out and as such the fort's origins are not truly known, although it is thought that the Norman castle was only functional for a few years. However during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the earthworks were once again brought back into military use when the Royal Observation Corps built an observation post on top of the Norman motte to view the skies to east, watching to see bombing raids on the industrial city of Leeds. Its foundations can still be seen.

This was not the only mark of the Second World War in Elmet. Thorpe Arch in the north was the site of a huge Royal Ordnance Factory producing munitions for WWII and the Korean War before being closed in 1958. The site was so large it had its own internal railway line with four stops and connections to the London & North Eastern Railway mainline. Although no longer a munitions factory, the site still retains many of its military buildings including pillboxes and defensive structures hidden amongst an industrial estate which also houses a prison and the northern branch of the British Library.

The RAF also built a number of airfields across the





The Norman ditch and embankment at Hall Tower Hill in Barwick-in-Elmet

region, some now totally overgrown and disused, others lasting longer in military hands before being finally decommissioned in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century. The former RAF Church Fenton now houses Leeds East Airport, truly connecting Elmet to the wider world in a way not seen before in its history. Sherburn Airfield now hosts an aero club for aspiring pilots. But the runways are in a way new scars on a landscape marked with pain. While it may seem as though airfields have little in common with Roman roads, here they instead form a cohesive picture of a military presence and the activities of war across the region for over two millennia.

Much of this seems somewhat abstract and detached from the reality of present-day life in Elmet. While perhaps an enlightening history lesson, what do the fortunes of dead kings and foreign emperors bear on the lives of Elmetians today? The answer is somewhat plain. While war and violence thankfully do not affect many lives within this region now, the very land itself has been shaped countless times by dynastic struggles, war, conquest, bloodshed and battle. The presence of war whether obvious or obscured is never benign and its grim legacy stalks the land. People travel to work down roads which once carried armies. Sheep graze by the banks of the river that has ran red with death. Travellers land on concrete strips that once lifted steel wings on a voyage to obliterate European cities. Whether violence can be seen with the eyes in Elmet, it is most certainly buried in its ebony loam.



A forgotten part of the Roman Ridge Road south of Aberford, now cut apart and bypassed by Junction 43 of the A1(M)



While much of RAF Church Fenton has been converted into a modern airport, many ruins remain, including this observation tower



The former military presence in Church Fenton is still felt today as evidenced by the name and insignia used for its local pub