

# The North South Divide in England

*Andrew Basden*

## ----- Introduction

To Southerners in England, the North means

“desolation, arctic temperatures, mushy peas, a cultural wasteland with limited shopping opportunities and populated by aggressive trolls.”

To Northerners, North means

“home, truth, beauty, valour, romance, warm and characterful people, real beer and decent chip shops.”

The North-South Divide in England has many facets. It is so severe that The Economist [2012] suggests that north and south England are “almost separate countries”. Yet in some aspects there is little divide.

What are we talking about? Draw a line between the Severn and the Wash and, approximately, the area to north of this, up to the Scottish border, is ‘the North’ while the area below it is ‘the South’. A more precise map, along county or constituency boundaries, has also been drawn. Some insert the Midlands between them. So, here, we do not define it, but focus on the NorthEast England as typical of ‘the North’ and SouthEast England as typical of ‘the South’.

Two divides are most often talked about, or even complained about, economic matters and health, but there are many more divides or differences.

## ----- Many North-South Divides

### --- Economic Divides

“In terms of economic activity, the United Kingdom (UK), with its stark contrast between the prosperous south east and other less affluent areas, is one of the most unequal of the world’s developed states.”

Economic activity is 3% lower in the North. Median pay is £1.60 less every hour. Receipt of public spending is almost £100 lower per person than the English average and £3000 less than that in London. Productivity less, with Tyneside 80% of the average. (Mcr 88%, WYorks 86%, SYorks 77%) Lacking growth-enabling investment. Economic growth is confined almost entirely to the South. [Cambridge Econometrics 2006]

Let us look at some actual data.

Median Annual Earnings for full-time employees (sources: Annual: Statista, 2024; Weekly: ONS)

- ◆ NorthEast = 31,200, 614
- ◆ Northwest = 33,036, 649
- ◆ Yorks + Humber = 31,920, 632
- ◆ EastMids = 31,634, 640
- ◆ WestMids = 33,033, 652
- ◆ East = 34,833, 706
- ◆ London = 44,370, 796
- ◆ SouthEast = 36,260, 724
- ◆ SouthWest = 33,450, 664

But annual income does not tell the whole story, because higher pay often has to go on higher priced goods. For example, the average House prices vary hugely across the regions (Source: ONS, Dec 2023):

- ◆ Northeast = 157,557
- ◆ Northwest = 218,353
- ◆ Yorks + Humber = 207,501
- ◆ EastMids = 248,390
- ◆ WestMids = 252,532
- ◆ East = 342,489
- ◆ London = 508,037
- ◆ SouthEast = 377,162
- ◆ SouthWest = 318,966

In more general terms, we need to take into account the average cost of living. Sadly, the ONS does not seem to have such figures, so I obtained them from abcfinance. They give cost of living per household in each region. So they are not entirely comparable with the above, but give a picture.

- ◆ NorthEast = 20,976
- ◆ Northwest = 23,635
- ◆ Yorks + Humber = 23,506
- ◆ EastMids = 25,478
- ◆ WestMids = 22,666
- ◆ East = 26,789
- ◆ London = 30,898
- ◆ SouthEast = 30,346
- ◆ SouthWest = 25,704

The difference between annual pay and cost of living varies between £6k and £12k.

The ONS offers figures for Gross disposable income per head (for 2022; ONS 2024), which takes into account some of the things that take money from pay, such as taxes and housing:

- ◆ NorthEast = 18,388
- ◆ Northwest = 19,752
- ◆ Yorks + Humber = 19,249
- ◆ EastMids = 19,879
- ◆ WestMids = 19,480
- ◆ East = 23,661
- ◆ London = 32,330
- ◆ SouthEast = 23,058
- ◆ SouthWest = 22,612

These vary between £18 k and £32 k, nearly a ratio of 2:1.

Productivity by region:

- ◆ NorthEast =
- ◆ Northwest =
- ◆ Yorks + Humber =
- ◆ EastMids =
- ◆ WestMids =
- ◆ East =
- ◆ London =
- ◆ SouthEast =
- ◆ SouthWest =

Productivity compared with national average (output per hour worked, ONS 2022):

- ◆ NorthEast = -12.6 %
- ◆ Northwest = -6.8 %

- ◆ Yorks + Humber = -11.3 %
- ◆ EastMids = -15.8 %
- ◆ WestMids = -13.0 %
- ◆ East = -4.6 %
- ◆ London = +26.2 %
- ◆ SouthEast = +10.8 %
- ◆ SouthWest = -6.8 %

However, this depends on what is taken into account and measured as 'output'. In the above figures, it is GVA, Gross Value Added, which measures money rather than goodness. The finance industry, centred in London, has artificially huge GVA. What this shows is that such figures are often meaningless. Let us turn to other Divides.

### --- Health indicators

Health is worse in the North. My source gave the 5 most and least healthy regions for nine maladies, some physical, some mental. Most of the least healthy regions are in the North, most of the most healthy regions, in the South.

- ◆ Asthma: 2 of 5 highest in N. 5 of 5 lowest in SE
- ◆ High BP: 3 of 5 highest in N; 4 of 5 lowest in SE, Mcr in 5 lowest
- ◆ COPD: 5 of 5 highest in N. 5 of 5 lowest in SE
- ◆ Epilepsy: 4 of 4 and 4 of 5 highest in N; 5 of 5 lowest in SE
- ◆ Obesity: 3 of 3 and 3 of 5 highest in N; 5 of 5 lowest in SE
- ◆ Peripheral Arterial Disease: 5 of 5 highest in N; 5 of 5 lowest in SE.
  
- ◆ Dementia 3 of 5 highest in N. 4 of 5 lowest in SE (1 Bm)
- ◆ Depression: 3 of 3 and 3 of 5 highest in N; 5 of 5 lowest in SE
- ◆ Serious mental illness: 3 of 5 highest in N; 1 of 5 high in London; 1 of 5 lowest in N, other in W etc.

Also, rates of some cancers are higher in north - linked with more smoking and alcohol [Meikle 2005].

Smoking (% adults currently smoking, 2023):

- ◆ NorthEast = 14.8
- ◆ Northwest = 14.4
- ◆ Yorks + Humber = 14.1
- ◆ EastMids = 13.4
- ◆ WestMids = 13.8
- ◆ East = 12.9
- ◆ London = 11.5
- ◆ SouthEast = 11.9
- ◆ SouthWest = 12.6

Adults exceeding weekly recommended drinking limit

- ◆ NorthEast = 27 %
- ◆ Northwest = 28 %
- ◆ Yorks + Humber = 24%
- ◆ EastMids = 19 %
- ◆ WestMids = 19 %
- ◆ East = 25 %
- ◆ London = 19 %
- ◆ SouthEast = 25 %
- ◆ SouthWest = 27 %

Consumption of fast food is higher in the North; UK's 10 fattest cities north of the NS line (but include Glasgow) in 2006.

### --- Immeasurable Things

Many factors are not measurable, and especially not by money. Yet they are important.

# For example, Sociality: the North is **friendlier** - many report that.

# Climate: The North is perceived as **cooler in climate**. But in fact the difference is not that big.

# **Fertility of the soil** is lower in the North than the South, partly because of the Pennine hills and moorland running down the middle of the country, which are high, cold, inhospitable moorlands, on which plants grow much more slowly than lower down. So there is less land suited to growing crops.

# The **Landscape** differs. That in the North is wild and wonderful, while that in most of the South is tame by comparison and much of it is urban or suburban. Access to wild places is much easier in the North, which good for mental health - if we use it. This is one of the few advantages the North has over the South.

# **Dialects** differ. A well-known one is pronunciation esp of 'a' as in Bath, either as 'a' is pronounced in 'Cat', or as in 'art'. This is not a problem in itself. The problem lies in the attitude that people have towards Northern and Southern dialects, with many Northern ones being derided, and that which is spoken in them is taken less seriously. Is that one reason why people of the North seem to have less influence?

# The **topography and geology** differ, and this might explain a lot. In the North is most of the coal that powered the Industrial Revolution, and also minerals, iron ore, etc. Most of the mining was done in the North, or the SouthWest (as well as Scotland and Wales). By contrast, the people in the South acted as consumers thereof, and therefore, implicitly, masters thereof, with higher status and less arduous lives.

# **Leisure** activities (hours per day on leisure, ONS):

- ◆ NorthEast = 4.7
- ◆ Northwest = 4.7
- ◆ Yorks + Humber = 4.9
- ◆ EastMids = 5.0
- ◆ WestMids = 4.7
- ◆ East = 5.0
- ◆ London = 4.8
- ◆ SouthEast = 5.0
- ◆ SouthWest = 4.9

### --- History

**History** has played an important part in forming and widening the North-South Divide.

First were the Celtic peoples, all over. Then came the Angles and Saxons into Southern England, around 500 CE. Then came the Vikings, around 800 CE. Viking society was based on conquest and made much use of slavery, so the Northern people suffered more.

Then came the **Normans**, in 1066 (who had been Vikings who had settled in North France), who then became the aristocracy of England, and the Anglo-Saxons and others became serfs - many of whom lived in the North.

As well as that, William the Norman did not like it that the Northern Earls would not submit to him, so he began a campaign of destruction of the North (called "**The Harrying of the North**"), which occurred 1069-1070, over the winter. This destroyed much of value, and arguably the North has never recovered. The Anglo-Norman chronicler Orderic Vitalis wrote:

"The King [William] stopped at nothing to hunt his enemies. He cut down many people and destroyed homes and land. Nowhere else had he shown such cruelty. This made a real change. To his shame, William made no effort to control his fury, punishing the innocent with the guilty. He ordered that crops and herds, tools and food be burned to ashes. More than 100,000 people perished of starvation. I have often praised William in this book, but I can say nothing good about this brutal slaughter. God will punish him."  
[cited in Wikipedia on The Harrying of the North"]

Later came the **War of the Roses**, between the two Northern houses of Lancashire and Yorkshire. War destroys. Again, this set back the North.

Then came the **Industrial Revolution**. It was in the North, with its coal and minerals, that most mining occurred during the Industrial Revolution, and a much greater proportion of the population of the North was employed in heavy industry than in the South. So the range of occupations in the North became unbalanced, lacking many of the more knowledge-intensive and analytical and creative activities and occupations, which are usually seen as superior to manual, industrial occupations, and became concentrated in the South.

Then came Thatcher's **de-industrialisation** which destroyed what the North had come to rely on.

There has been huge **injustice** towards the North. It is no surprise that in some Northerners we find a **grudge** held. But grudge-holding does not solve any problems but just generates more.

### --- Culture

There is a difference in culture and how life expected to function. King [2000] suggests that the North has a "**harsh culture of making-do**" while the South has a "**culture of dependency**". Boberg-Fazlic & Sharp [2013] links this with their finding that you were more likely to be a pauper if your father was a pauper in the South than in the North: there seems to be more dependency on the family in the South than in the North. This might explain an often-noted difference in generosity: people in the North are "more friendly", "more generous". Those in the South tend to have a self-protective Me-and-my-family attitude. Attitudes to the other side: some Northerners are angry towards the South; Southerners are more snobbish towards the North ("it's cold and boring up there") and Northerners. But these differences are not absolute.

Yet again, the North is at a disadvantage.

A rather humorous expression of this is the **opinions** that some Northerners and Southerners tend to hold of each other, often without realising it. Southerners opine "Those Northerners are monkeys. Uncouth, uncultured." Northerners opine "Those Southern fairies. They never to a proper day's work. They spend too much money in wine bars." Or the opinions stated at the start.

### --- Bucking This Trend

However, the Divides are not as simple as that. For one thing, there are factors about which there is no or little divide. For example, of the 24 top research universities, 10 are in the North, 11 in the South, with 2 in Scotland and 1 in Wales.

Even in the indicators we have looked at there are exceptions. 24 of the 50 most prosperous constituencies are north of Severn-Wash line. Tatton, Altrincham, and Sheffield Hallam are in top 10. However, that still leaves 7 in top ten in the South.

Regarding poverty, London has worst blackspots; the Isle of Thanet in Kent is poverty-stricken, whereas Cheshire, and many Yorkshire towns are very prosperous. The real divide is often class or ethnicity within an area. In the Wirral (opposite Liverpool) the richest areas have 4 times income of poorest: "The M53 Divide". According to one source, Manchester is the world's most expensive cities (living costs, 20th in world), eclipsing New York - because of cultural Renaissance, because of clubs, theatres, galleries. But Manchester still has much cheaper living costs than London (6th in world).

Moreover, these prosperous areas of 'the North' tend to be in the southern part of the North. They are where management of large companies tended to live. So, in some ways, they are not to be counted. The North-South Divide is real and concerning.

What we have is a **plethora of factors** that have contributed to the North-South Divide (and there are yet others, not mentioned here), many of them beyond economics or even being measured. How do we understand it all?

### ----- **Understanding the Plethora of Divides**

How may we understand all this complexity? And how do something about it?

### --- **Aspects**

I use the suite of aspects from the Dutch thinker, Herman Dooyeweerd, to help understand all this together. Each aspect may be seen as a sphere of meaningfulness and law: a way in which things can be meaningful, can function and can be good or evil. Each aspect supports a constellation of meaning centred on a kernel meaningfulness, which is expressed in words either as a noun, an adjective or a verb (ongoing activity):

- ◆ Quantitative aspect: amount
- ◆ Spatial aspect: continuous extension
- ◆ Kinematic aspect: flowing movement
- ◆ Physical aspect: energy, fields, forces
- ◆ Biotic/Organic aspect: living as an organism in environment
- ◆ Sensitive/Psychic aspect: feeling and responding
- ◆ Analytical aspect: distinguishing, conceptualising
- ◆ Formative aspect: making, planning, achieving, technology, history
- ◆ Lingual aspect: expressing by symbols
- ◆ Social aspect: socially interacting
- ◆ Economic aspect: frugal use of resources
- ◆ Aesthetic aspect: harmonising, enjoying
- ◆ Juridical aspect: doing justice
- ◆ Ethical aspect: being generous
- ◆ Pistic aspect: believing, committing, aspiring, expecting

("Pistic" is from the Greek, meaning what we actually believe rather than what is expressed in creeds or doctrines.)

Each aspect defines a different kind of good and, from the biotic onwards, also a kind of evil/harm, for example between health and illness up to commitment v. cowardice.

Each aspect is **irreducibly distinct** from others, not reducible to any, not even to any combination of them. So, for example, not everything can be explained by physical conditions, nor by economic conditions, nor by history, etc. But all these have some impact and contribution to the overall North-South Divide. To understand a complex situation like the North-south Divide it is useful first to discern each of its aspects separately.

But also each aspect is inherently linked to others, by analogy and dependency, and there is no conflict among them. **Inter-aspect dependency** is important in understanding complex situations; for example the social functioning depends on lingual, the lingual on formative and analytic (i.e. semantics depends on syntax and lexics), and so on. Moreover, our functioning in later aspects affects that in earlier aspects; especially what we (society and individuals) take as ultimately meaningful affects the enacting of legislation, what we buy and sell, the kind of social institutions we form, the technology we devise, and even the food we grow or gather, etc.

All human activity is **multi-aspectual functioning**, i.e. exhibits all aspects. For example, in reading this you are alive (biotic), seeing or hearing (sensitive), detecting words and concepts (analytical), structuring them (formative), understanding the meanings they carry (lingual), tacitly acknowledging shared unwritten meanings (social), not wasting time (economic), trying to understand the whole topic (aesthetic), doing justice to the topic (juridical), maybe forgiving mistakes I have made (ethical), and believing or disbelieving what has been written (pistic). Each aspect of our functioning has its own kind of repercussion ('causality'), biotic functioning has biotic repercussions, social has social, etc. But, with inter-aspect dependency there is also repercussions in other aspects. The timescale of aspectual repercussions lengthens with the aspectual order: repercussions of faith functioning can be decades in being fulfilling: what we call **long-term effects**.

Knowing aspects can:

- ◆ Help us separate things out.
- ◆ Help us understand things more deeply and 'listen' more attentively, for example the roots of North-South Divides.
- ◆ Help us see what might be missing: hidden issues.
- ◆ Offer guidance, because each aspect comes with norms to guide us; for example, how to reduce Divides.

### --- **Aspects of the North-South Divide**

The very North-South Divide itself is meaningful spatially. But it has most of the other aspects along with it. Most of the factors in the North-South Divide are meaningful in one or other of these aspects:

- ◆ Quantitative aspect: some factors are converted to figures
- ◆ Spatial aspect: the very North-South Divide itself, and each of the areas within it; where data on health problems have been recorded
- ◆ Kinematic aspect:
- ◆ Physical aspect: geology
- ◆ Biotic/Organic aspect: soil fertility; health
- ◆ Sensitive/Psychic aspect: mental health
- ◆ Analytical aspect: university research
- ◆ Formative aspect: 1. industry; 2. history (as what people do and achieve)
- ◆ Lingual aspect: dialects, opinions expressed
- ◆ Social aspect: friendliness
- ◆ Economic aspect: income (also the limitations on minerals, so mining cannot continue forever)

- ◆ Aesthetic aspect: leisure
- ◆ Juridical aspect: injustice
- ◆ Ethical aspect: generosity
- ◆ Pistic aspect: culture

And many more factors, each meaningful in one or more aspects.

### --- Example: History of North-South Divide

Each human activity is multi-aspectual, i.e. it exhibits all aspects. As an example, let us analyse the history aspectually. What we do is to identify in which aspect(s) something is meaningful, but the functioning of players involved in that history and what they were aiming at. The entire history itself is one of human planning and achieving, which is meaningful in the formative aspect, running through all as a common thread.

1. Invasions by Angles, Saxons, Vikings and Normans: The immediate impact, of resources destroyed by war, is economic and biotic (food) both negative. But this can, and usually is, rectified within a few years. The longer-term impact is the bringing in of culture: beliefs, expectations, aspirations, etc. (pistic aspect). The Vikings brought in a culture of fighting, warrior-elites and slavery (formative, juridical, social aspects).

2. The Normans, who had been Vikings entering northern France 200 years before, brought something similar, but it had been somewhat mellowed by European Christianity (ethical aspect): Elitism of aristocrats (Normans) versus serfs (Anglo-Saxons), which evolved in time into the English class system and class consciousness and division of language (social aspect, lingual aspect). The Harrying of the North was a gross evil in the ethical and juridical aspects, motivated by pistic evil of self-idolatry, and it resulted in destruction of resources like tools and homes (economic aspect), of families and communities (social aspect), and of food (biotic aspect), leading to major starvation. It also robbed people in the North of dignity (pistic evil). The Wars of the Roses did similar, and was motivated by pistic and ethical evils.

3. The Industrial Revolution was motivated by different, multiple things, including positive things like the excitement of innovation (formative aspect) and the desire to find some way to improve the life of people in Britain (social) without depending on slavery, but also negative things like greed of the factory owners (ethical evil), oppression of workers (juridical) and smog and unhealthy conditions (biotic). It grew in the North rather than the South, because of the rich minerals available (physical and economic aspects). Northern towns became very wealthy - but they squandered their wealth (economic dysfunction and ethical) and declined. The skills developed in industry and mining (formative aspect) became an important source of dignity for Northern people (pistic).

4. Mrs. Thatcher's de-industrialisation was motivated (pistic aspect) by both idolatry of money (pistic evil) and a vision of the future as post-industrial (pistic neutral), and also perhaps partly by personal animosity towards the over-powerful Trades Unions (ethical selfishness by both sides). Its impact was to destroy the occupations of people (economic harm) and make them over-dependent on the State (social harm), which seeped into people's expectations and aspirations for life (pistic aspect). It also led to much mental illness (psychical harm).

This shows how identifying in which aspects a factor is meaningful can help clarify issues by separating them out. Notice the importance of the pistic and ethical aspects in all this: mindset and attitude that impact all else.

This opens the way for further research and analysis, by directing us to explore some of these aspects in more depth, and also to give attention to



aspects that have not been mentioned, such as the lingual and aesthetic. Did they have any role? It can also offer guidance for reducing the North-South Divides.

### **--- Possibilities for Reducing North-South Divides**

Since each aspect has both positive and negative, reduction in North-South Divides can be discussed in terms of in which aspects are we functioning poorly and what can we do about it. Most action seems to be economic, but we need action in all aspects together, not just one or two. In particular, issues of attitude (ethical aspect) and dignity, expectations, aspirations and mindset (pistic aspect) are probably more important but less visible and less easy to plan for. Therein lies the challenge.

### **----- Conclusion**

Try understanding the North-South Divide via aspects, and we see multiple differences, each of which interacts with the others. This makes it very tricky to resolve. But perhaps the most important changes to make are neither economic nor health-related but cultural, in terms of beliefs, sense of what is of ultimate meaningfulness and commitment to that, and to removing a grudging spirit. Stop comparing ourselves with 'the south' and get on with bringing Good to the world.

Just a thought, maybe worth thinking about?

### **References**

Boberg-Fazlic N, Sharp P. 2013. North and South: Social mobility and welfare spending in preindustrial England. European Historical Economics Society Working Papers in Economic History, No. 37.

Economist. 2012. The Great Divide. *The Economist*, Vol 404, No 88.2, 15-21. September 2012.

King S. 2000. *Poverty and Welfare in England, 1700-1850, A Regional Perspective*. Manchester University Press.

Meikle J. 2005. Cancer atlas reveals North-South Divide. *The Guardian*, Wednesday 6th July 2005.

-----

Andrew Basden, 6 November 2024