

The Yorkshire town that's gone from dirty old buildings to New Age nirvana

William Cook



From dirty old town... to New Age nirvana

Bernard Ingham once told a story about a reporter from the *Financial Times* who went to cover an election in Ingham's hometown of Hebden Bridge. The reporter went into a café and ordered a cappuccino. 'Nay lad,' said the waitress. 'You'll have to go to Leeds for that.'

Ingham told that story to illustrate the no-nonsense attitudes of the rugged town he grew up in — attitudes that shaped the man who became Margaret Thatcher's muscular press secretary. So it's wonderfully ironic that Hebden Bridge is now full of fair trade craft shops and vegan cafés. Nowadays you'll have no trouble ordering a cappuccino — so long as you like it made from ethically sourced coffee beans.

Like that *Financial Times* reporter, I first came to Hebden Bridge to write a newspaper story. My story was about Ted Hughes, who grew up a few miles away, in

Mytholmroyd. Later, Ted lived in Heptonstall, a windswept village up on the moors above Hebden Bridge, with his first wife, Sylvia Plath. After Sylvia killed herself, she was buried in the graveyard there.

Mytholmroyd hasn't changed much and nor has Heptonstall. So how come Hebden Bridge been transformed from dirty old town to New Age nirvana? The answer is hippies and lesbians. They were attracted by the profusion of cheap property, left behind when the mills closed down, and the atmospheric setting — on the confluence of two rivers, hidden in a narrow valley. They spruced up the handsome sandstone houses, and all sorts of beatniks flooded in. You might think a town full of idealistic dreamers would spell disaster, but it attracted lots of tourists, and incomers with cash to spend. I spent a week there this summer with my wife and our two teenage children. The weather was awful, but we had a great time.

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We rented a terraced house on the edge of town, on a steep slope above the river. The living room doubled as a yoga studio — very Hebden Bridge. We walked into town each morning, along the dark, leafy river bank, and back again every evening through what Ted Hughes called a 'gorge of ruined mills'. We spent several happy, idle afternoons simply pottering around town. I loved the Hebden Bridge Picture House with its art deco interiors, and the quaint old railway station, its original signage still intact.

One day we drove over the moors to Oxenhope, and caught the steam train to Oakworth, where they filmed *The Railway Children*. On the way back we stopped off at Haworth to see the parsonage where the Brontë sisters lived and the church where their father preached. Back in Hebden Bridge we had a slap up meal in the Tibetan Kitchen. My son and I both had bellyache, but only because we ate so much.

Driving back to London, I kept thinking about Sylvia Plath — how much she loved the Calder Valley and the moors above it, and sometimes hated it: a ‘wild, green landscape of bare hills, crisscrossed by innumerable black stone walls like a spider’s web’. When the clouds darken and the rain comes down it’s a dank, oppressive place, but when the sky clears and the sun shines it’s sublime.

‘Lower the window, lad,’ Bernard Ingham told a colleague, as they passed through Hebden Bridge by train. ‘Take a good sniff of that air, because you’re nearer to heaven now than you ever will be on earth.’

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