

Good morning everyone. Thank you very much indeed for asking me to be here today. I'm on an assignment from Canon Coates; he thought I might talk about this part of the world--The East Midlands-- as seen from my perspective as a long-established reporter for the BBC. We've called it "From our ex correspondent" because that's exactly what it is: I stopped working for BBC News at the end of last summer, and thus for me thinking about the past is almost inevitable. And my past is bound up with the East Midlands, because it is where I spent most of the first 17 years of my life, which I'll explain in a moment.

Now, most of my more than 40 years at the BBC was taken up with reporting business and financial news, something which I am not *particularly* going to do here today. Radio is a wonderful medium to work in. You don't have to dress up for it. Radio is quick and easy to do compared with the cumbersomeness of television or the elaborate teamwork of print journalism. Many years ago, the late Alistair Cooke described radio—in a speech to the American Medical Association—as “a modest kind of literature for the blind.”

And he went on to describe a process very similar to the way we tried to make radio programmes about business: “I go to the men at the top,” he said, and—alas-- they still are predominantly men—“I go to the men at the top, and ask the questions a child would ask.” In fact, the trick of it is not to ask childlike questions, but to ask the question *the listener would ask if he or she were there in person*..particularly the supplementary questions, which is where it gets interesting..that interaction with the imagined listener on your shoulder, like a pet monkey.

Though it became fashionable in broadcasting during my 40 years in it, business is not of course immediately attention-grabbing for a general audience; I very much enjoyed the job because it was always quite hard to make the subject compelling, or at least interesting. That difficulty was itself stimulating. So, for 28 years I made a programme called *In Business* for BBC Radio 4, and in the year 2000 we added a World Service version called *Global Business*. It which meant that I spent a lot of my time on the road, or in the air, chasing people and ideas.

Radio is good at ideas..and at storytelling. TV is about grabbing attention and holding on to it. Print is better at analysis, but I do not have an

analytical mind, just a head full of impressions, some of which I will go on about today.

In *In Business*--at a time of great disruption to much of the working world--we were trying to report on (or make guesses about) the shape of the future before it became absolutely clear. It was a blessed job; I did not have to do what most of my colleagues were doing, report on the share prices along the bottom of the TV screen. The assignment was a liberating one, because of the encounters I had in so many countries and societies. But I grew to have one personal assessment mechanism for every trip abroad. It was: *whether or not I encountered a suitable subject to fashion into a dispatch for From Our Own Correspondent*.

You may know it: the programme known as "FooC" in the trade, started in 1955. It's been running almost every week for the past 63 years. Five just-over-five-minute reports from every corner of the world, apart from Britain which now has its own correspondent show. There was always a very special magic about the process of encountering a suitable subject to write a dispatch about. And on every journey where it happened, the From Our Own Correspondent *moment* was the high point of the trip> It was the thing that made it all worthwhile.

You never knew when or how it might occur, but there were similar experiences all over the world. At some stage just as things were getting tiring, the producer and I would have an often unplanned encounter that clicked. Very often it would be domestic. You would be invited into someone's home, or asked to stay for supper. And then the stories would start being told. About the man from Ceylon who was treated so patronisingly as a trainee in the London Tea Market in the 1950s that he went home to what became Sri Lanka and determined to sell his own branded tea to the world. From scratch, he built it to an international brand. Or the cheese making dairy I knew in a tiny Swiss village which closed and took with it a chunk of the village way of life. Or sitting down in a museum café in a sudden tropical rainstorm in the city of Medellin in Colombia and watching as a young barista talked me through the methodical way to make the best cup of coffee that I have ever drunk in my life (Columbian single estate, of course). Then, suddenly, there ran through my head the thoughts of four decades of reporting on coffee prices and production; and as we waited for the drenching tropical rain to stop. Perfect for a FooC, so I wrote it then and there.

There were dozens of these *From Our Own Correspondent* moments in the course of a reporting lifetime. Always they were the crowning glory of

the trip, confirmation that coming there had been a good idea. When they didn't happen, fair enough; there would always be another chance of a random encounter, somewhere else, and five-and-a-half unique minutes on the air.

And this talk too is the result of a random encounter. Over supper last year, I happened to mention my boyhood memories of the oak leaves of Southwell and of an impressive performance of Faure's Requiem I heard here in the late 1950s. Canon Coates's eventual response was an invitation to cast a correspondent's eye upon the region, and report to you about it. An *ex* correspondent's. Like so much reporting, this will be superficial, and probably wrong. Let's see..

Even though I lived for 16 years in the East Midlands, it was decades ago. And I did never quite discovered where it was. Our radio then came from Manchester. So did our television: when commercial TV arrived in the 1950s, we were part of what the TV company who won the franchise proudly called Granadaland, which stretched down into Norfolk. This vast TV empire meant that for East Midlands events to be pictured on the 6pm regional news, things had to happen before 12 noon. Then the raw film could be couriered by motorcycle over the Pennines, to be developed in Manchester. We had our own news sources here: four competing local evening newspapers were sold every day in the marketplace in Gainsborough. Believe me there wasn't much news for them to cover. That was the pleasure of living there. These days the broadcast East Midlands are is more circumscribed: Humberside and Lincolnshire and that curious bit of North Norfolk are hived off by the BBC into their own strange heterogeneous region run from Hull. They are still dominated by the curious reach of the Belmont transmitter. Technology rules OK.

So where in Britain were these "East Midlands"? Intrigued by this, I remember taking out a ruler one dull afternoon in the 1950s and placing it on the map of the British Isles in my small home atlas in which vast swathes of the world were still coloured British Empire pink. A puzzle emerged: here we were in Gainsborough *definitely in the Midlands*. But lay the ruler across the map and we turned out to be on exactly the same latitude as that city regarded as absolutely at the heart of The North: Greater Manchester.

The island of Britain has a strange fracture up the middle of it: you have to get up to somewhere north of York before you can be sure of being in the North East. You will be well north of Manchester by then. You will have left the East Midlands well behind you.

Now of course I was living in Lincolnshire, whose connection to the rest of the country is not ever so well defined. Go back far enough and you'll discover the Mediaeval days; then the diocese of Lincoln stretched as far south as Oxford. But even in the 1950s and 60s, the East Midlands as represented by places like Southwell and Nottingham seemed a long way away from us in Lincolnshire, even though we were sort of part of it. (when individual county councils were still so powerful).

Everybody knows where and what Yorkshire is, and the West Country and East Anglia. But The East Midlands is mainly the name of the airport, a now disappeared regional development authority, a train company, and not very much else. Does the term give comfort or identity to the people who live and work here? Not sure that it does..not in the way that Yorkshire does. The Leeds daily paper *The Yorkshire Post* used to advertise itself with exciting confidence as "Yorkshire's National Newspaper". Don't think that could happen here. "Not a coherent region, the East Midlands " says an American university quoted on Wikipedia. I will return to this enigma.

Now, *From Our Own Correspondent* is the one place in BBC News where the reporter is allowed to become a little bit personal, so at this point I hope you will indulge me if I intrude a little of my own East Midlands experience into this. I grew up in Lincolnshire; on the Tennessonian Wolds in Horncastle, in the Trentside town of Gainsborough, and at boarding School in Lincoln. Your East Midlands perhaps not, but it was a deeply imprinting experience. Gainsborough lingers particularly in the memory. Here's some of what I said about it in a BBC News blog nearly four years ago. It was supposedly about the way Britain's manufacturing industry had ebbed away in my lifetime:

🌀 **The train stopped in the countryside. The signal was sticking at 90 degrees.** It was not a red light, but one of the old-fashioned semaphore arm signals was barring our way. Not something you encounter very often today. I was on the way from Newcastle to London on a recent, golden, Saturday afternoon. At Doncaster the train was diverted via Lincoln because of engineering work on the line. Diverted into my past. I suddenly realised that the town bathed in late sunlight across the river I was staring at as we waited for the signal to change was one of those Lincolnshire places I grew up in. It was Gainsborough, on which the fictional town of St Ogg's was based in the George Eliot novel *The Mill on the Floss*. The river was the smug and silver Trent.

I grew up in a cold 19th Century bank house behind the Midland Bank in the town's market place. The house had a big walled garden, stables for the bank horses, dog kennels, cherry trees. There used to be a big orchard, but it had been commandeered during the war as an open-air parts store for one of the main industries in Gainsborough, Marshall Tractors.

Marshall's dominated the town. Founded as a local engineering firm in 1848, William Marshall expanded with a range of celebrated tractors and big road rollers. The company built the vast Britannia Iron Works in a central position in the town. It was said to be for a time the largest factory in Europe. It was glimpsed in an unlikely encounter by the author Virginia Woolf, who likened it to the Doge's Palace in Venice.

It was certainly imposing. Through the works gates ebbed and flowed thousands of workers, like an LS Lowry painting. The factory hooter told the time for the whole of the town, work starting at eight o'clock, a lunch break and then a final hoot at five. There were violent ups and downs in the company's 150 years of history, but it stayed true to its engineering origins, with a flow of mighty steam rollers, naval guns, tea processing machines, farm tractors and (in World War II) midget submarines.

Once a year there was an open day at the Marshall's plant; visitors (like me as a small boy) came in queues to wonder at the iron founding process and the great machines that made other great machines, and the bustle and glow of it all. In the Doge's Palace, it felt so secure, so permanent. But it wasn't, and Marshall's closed in the 1990s, defeated by big company competition, and advancing agricultural technology.

Quite by coincidence I went back soon afterwards to make a programme. Symbolically, this palace of engineering had become a kind of heritage collection of Britain's industrial past. The new occupant of the vast plant was a business selling second-hand industrial equipment, mainly for export to the developing world. There were dozens, if not hundreds of metal tables for precision work, big cranes and vast lathes bought at knockdown prices from old shipyards. They could have gone for scrap, but there was a big market for old machine tools in newer countries.

This huge works had employed as many as 5,000 people making armaments in the War; now it had only 25. We did the interview in a fine wood panelled boardroom with high windows, like the Phillip Larkin poem.

The head of the second-hand machinery company told me that he had heard that on Fridays at Marshall's, the company car used to be sent down to Melton Mowbray to bring back an authentic pork pie for the directors' lunch. One hundred miles there and back, a rather modest symbol of corporate extravagance, I would have thought. Even so, it had impressed him enough to retell it years later.

I have also no idea whether it is true. But the story added to the poignancy of that encounter with an outpost of Britain's former manufacturing glory, then being sold off bit by bit abroad. In 2007 the Britannia Works changed again. It has been converted into a retail experience - 29 largely chain store shops in what is now called Marshall's Yard. Once they built powerful tractors with the glorious name of Field-Marshal there. Now they sell clothes.

There were other notable Gainsborough industries in my childhood, too. Rose Brothers made wrapping machinery that was exported all over the world. It began in the 1880s when William Rose, something of a prodigy, invented what some people say is the very first packaging machine - to wrap tobacco, until then sold loose and packed on demand behind the counter. The company added cigarettes and confectionery as well, and even made a few cars.

Like Marshall's, Rose Brothers was busy and inventive during both world wars. The company helped with Barnes Wallace's famous bouncing bomb, delivered to its target in Germany from a Lincolnshire RAF base by the Dambusters, and with a famous gun turret for the Lancaster bomber. But as with Marshall's, international competition began to bite into Rose's success in the post-WWII era. After mergers, the Gainsborough factory closed in 1987. Actually the Rose name lives on, bought by a local company called AMP in 1990. Cadbury's Roses chocolates also took their name from the company that wrapped them.

Engineering was deep in the blood in Gainsborough. In the 1950s the town's model railway society was said to be the biggest in the world. Its annual show attracted hundreds of silent, wondering spectators. *(The society is still going strong, resolutely running an East Coast timetable out of a model King's Cross station in an old school in the town. There are now lots of weekend open days.)*

To the annual model railway show one year when I was there a quiet visitor brought a small portable folding layout on which he spent the afternoon shepherding his trains around the hilly landscape of the model

of the Isle of Sodor, his invention. He was utterly absorbed in it. I do not remember many onlookers paying particular attention. But this was the man who created a publishing and later TV phenomenon - the Rev W Audrey. The thin controller devotedly manoeuvred a tiny model of his beloved Thomas the Tank Engine round the small circuit he brought with him, packed in what was probably his Morris Minor, driven up from his Cambridgeshire vicarage for the day. A journey further than that of the pork pies.

But that was a long time ago. The other day, after five minutes of waiting, the signal clanged up to "go". The train slowly gathered speed. We crossed the river, and Gainsborough edged by, gilded by the setting sun. The past is another country, and we did things differently there. 6

That was what I wrote after the train stopped on a golden Saturday afternoon. And that was just a little town. A vibrantly industrial city such as Nottingham underwent similar industrial disruption: textiles gone, (except for the Lace Quarter), tobacco gone, bicycles hugely reduced with manufacturing packed off abroad, Boots the Chemist merged into an international giant, outgrowing its roots. Above all, coalmining disappeared: 40,000 coalmining jobs gone in Nottinghamshire, a change which is still astonishing, decades after it started to happen. Yes, so much of what shaped the industrial, manufacturing, era is now the stuff of story books and the heritage industry.

My Gainsborough life seems like something out of the 19th century, not the middle of the 20th. We lived in the Bank House, behind the bank in the Marketplace, with that huge garden, cut off from the rest of the town perched on the Trent. We would rush down to the riverside to see the occasional launch of a new barge from the boatyard on the Nottinghamshire bank, or to hope we might see the Trent equivalent of the Severn bore, the Aegir. A tidal wave sweeping up the normally placid river from the Humber.

Now wherever you are in the world, as I've learned from dozens of hopeful presentation by local worthies, regional identities seem to matter, and not just so that ignorant British southerners know where you coming from. Any area seeking to attract inward investment (and of course that vital commodity, tourists) needs a story to tell. One of the very best examples I've encountered is a city in the middle of Romania called Sibui. A very historic place with a fine if decrepit series of ancient market places, for centuries Sibiu had been one of the *German* towns of Romania. It's an

area with many long-established German and Austrian settlers. They maintained their way of life and German language for hundreds of years after staying behind after crusades to the Holy Land or as part of the Austro-Hungarian army. In the 20th century, the German population severely diminished. Many perished in Soviet gulags or went back to Germany after communism.

But Sibiu played the German card hard when Romania entered the EU. It pushed for the City to be European City of Culture, which it was in 2007. The campaign precipitated a big clean up and restoration campaign which turned it into a striking international tourist centre. And although less than two percent of the city's population of 150-thousand is still German, the mayor used the idea of a Saxon identity and what he said was the persistence of a German hard-work ethic to attract some significant inward investment from truly German companies. And a lot of jobs. Sibiu is a notable success story, inspired by the In Southwell, as the blue plaques testify, we are surrounded by stories. place's historic identify and the ability to weave a good story round it. By the way, that mayor, Klaus Iohannis, went on to eventually be elected President of Romania, which he still is.

Regions need stories. In Southwell, as the blue plaques testify, we are surrounded by stories. So what is the story of the East Midlands that I would tell to a detached radio audience, as well as to you? Let me go back to that question of identity. What was the region I grew up in, where I lived until I was 17? Mention of Lincolnshire draws attention to the East Midlands problem. It is big, and remote, and stretches to the sea, and has very little to do with many other parts of the region. The region sprawls from the North Sea right over to Derbyshire: a county which, of course, contains the place in Britain that is farthest from the sea. This region also has the place which the Ordnance Survey says is the very centre of England, a farm in Leicestershire. If you are being cynical, you might say that the East Midlands is the bit left over when the other parts of Britain were defined. It's slightly similar to the way the Kingdom of Belgium was invented by the great powers in 1831, out of what did not fit into anywhere else.

The nearest I got to participating in the East Midlands experience (as opposed to just living in it) was a slightly nervous conference I chaired some years ago for a body known as the East Midlands Development Agency. I'm told they did quite a good job, but even that slender representative body for the whole of the area is now defunct, with



economic development devolved to local councils. Perhaps the East Midlands needs a name of its own, not for itself (you know where you are) but to help outsiders recognise it.

And yet: on the East coast rail line travelling north, on a clear day I delight in glimpsing the tiny silhouette of Lincoln Cathedral, far away on its hill, for about five seconds at a very particular spot between Newark and Retford. The Trent's ample waters also produced that extraordinary cluster of power stations along its banks which once produced a quarter of all of Britain's electricity. I remember the building of West Burton power station, and how it added a vast architectural presence to the horizontal Trent landscape. In the floodplain of the Trent, the succession of power stations has a cathedral-like impact.

And then looking back at history, you soon get back a thousand years or so to the Danelaw. Of course, that designated the realm occupied by the Vikings in ninth century England; the name is not suitable now. But when you look harder at the concept, you find that the five main towns of the Danelaw were Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford..quite a good stab at delineating this East Midlands area.

We cannot really revive the name Mercia for this region, because that in its Anglo Saxon heyday included the West Midlands. So, what's the distinctive geographical thing about the East Midlands? Well, a river runs through it. Think of this region as Trent, or Trentland or something similar. Then I for one can begin to grasp where it is and how it sits in the centre of England. And the Trent is quite a river, dominating the landscape for hundreds of miles. It is—I suppose—the remnant of the great lake dammed up by the Lincoln Edge that at one stage broke through its defining cliff at Lincoln and then sent its silt all the way down to the Wash, creating the Fens.

*(There's a curious thing about rivers. When politicians and diplomats look at maps, they see the blue lines of water as boundaries, and move to create regions or nations states designated by river lines. But to the people who actually live in river valleys waterways are trade arteries; yes, the big rivers stop road and rail communications, but the people on either bank of a river are often in fairly close boat contact, so that rivers may be uniting phenomena as well as dividers. A national boundary drawn along a river at some kind of armistice conference may be dividing people with a very common interest.)*

Geography of course is about maps, and history (and politics) is about chaps, and chappesses, and when you think about recent developments, it's impossible not to mention Brexit in this correspondent's view of the East Midlands. The first overseas workers I encountered were Poles who had come to Lincolnshire to fly RAF planes during the war, and settled here afterwards. I met them working as chicken sexers, a job they were supposed to have a special talent for. They were employed in the new broiler chicken industry that started taking over farming in the 1950s. Rural Lincolnshire was a pioneer. And as eating habits changed and supermarkets became the way we bought food, the agriculture industry adapted to the new supply chains.

In the middle of their relentlessly flat rolling acres Fenland farmers built huge sheds to process, pack and label vegetables for their new supermarket customers. A whole new industry was born; it employed imported workers from the Mediterranean. The packing plants soon became more than seasonal employment. The food that need packing was flown in from all over the world to satisfy the new demand of mass consumers. The migrant workers settled and put down roots.

But we know what friction this created in towns such as Boston and Skegness. These were the places where the Europe referendum gave people a chance to express some kind of discontent with the way their country had changed in the decades since Europe happened. Londoners were wrapped in a cocoon of relative prosperity, booming property prices, and self-belief. They did not realise what was taking place in much of the rest of the country during the referendum. They did not understand what a chance was being offered to voters to turn the clock back.

You had only to travel 50 miles out of London to see the Brexit signs bristling in the fields. But the chattering classes clustered round the capital did not take it seriously until it happened. In London Brexit felt like a redefinition of Britain, but from outside London it was perhaps a reassertion of the country I grew up in, for better or for worse. I speak dispassionately, as a balanced BBC reporter was always supposed to be. I have to confess that my wife is Dutch, and remains so. Brexit may pose a domestic problem. But now the situation has been horribly complicated by last week's general election. Though the political map of the East Midlands did not change very much, we will all have to live with the consequences of the Europe referendum for a very long time-- and with how if and when Brexit is finally delivered--for a very long time. How long? Your guess is as good as Mrs May's.

Of course the Brexit referendum result was more than just a great big protest vote. That clever magazine *The Economist* identified the 10 ten local authorities in England, Wales and Scotland that saw the largest proportional increase in foreign-born people in the 10 years from 2005 to 2015; it calls the places in "Migrantland". Three of the 10 are in the East Midlands. Top of the whole list is Boston, in Lincolnshire. There, between 2005 and 2015, the number of foreign-born residents rose from about 1,000 to 16,000. In 2005 immigrants were about one in 50 of the local population. They are now one in four. In the referendum Boston voted for Brexit by 76:24, the highest margin of any local authority. It is very uncomfortable to live in a place where the physical makeup has changed so much in such a short time.

In my relentless search of the East Midlands, I went earlier this year to the National Theatre to see the post Brexit referendum play "My Country: a work in progress". It's been touring the country since I saw it. It was created out of hundreds of interviews with ordinary people, interspersed with poems by the poet laureate Carol Duffy. I went because the reviews mentioned that as well as Britannia herself, the other characters were the regions. The blurb said: "Britannia calls a meeting, to listen to her people. Caledonia, Cymru, East Midlands, North East, Northern Ireland and the South West". But in fact they turned out to be mainly cities on their own, speaking in the right accents, yes, but hardly representing anything but themselves.

The East Midlands was there on the map in the programme all right. It was represented by an actress playing a woman of Asian origin from Leicester. She spoke some of the expressions gathered by the National Theatre researchers as they tried to construct (I think) a picture of the identity of Britain. It did not mean much to me. Little sense emerged of the East Midlands, or even Leicester. Yes it was ambitious for the National to try to portray post Brexit Britain. It was interesting that the East Midlands got on the stage. But it was not much of a play, though it may have evolved now on its journey round the country. After last week's complicating election, though, I wonder how relevant it is? It finishes in the East End of London in July.

As your ex correspondent seeking enlightenment I was also drawn to the concept of the East Midlands as "Invisible Britain". That is the name of a documentary film about the Nottingham-based group called the Sleaford Mods. As you may know, they are magnificently foul-mouthed..too foulmouthed to quote their lyrics here. The movie is described like this:

***Sleaford Mods – Invisible Britain*** is a feature documentary that shows the most relevant and uncompromising British band in years sticking two fingers up to the zeitgeist and articulating the rage and desperation of those without a voice in austerity Britain. The film follows Sleaford Mods on a tour of the UK in the run up to the 2015 General Election, visiting the neglected, broken down and boarded up parts of the country that many would prefer to ignore. Part band doc, part look at the state of the nation, the documentary features individuals and communities attempting to find hope among the ruins, against a blistering soundtrack by Sleaford Mods.

It is of course revealing that an excoriating group like this should root itself so determinedly in this region. The two man band comes from Mrs Thatcher's Grantham, and from Saxilby near Lincoln. Two men in their 40s still burning with the anger and rejection so many teenagers feel. "Resistance in motion," is what they call their shows. I went off to see the newest movie "A Bunch of Kunst" the other night. I expected to be depressed and annoyed. But the movie—and the two Mods—had an engaging kind of charm. In two or three years they went from filling back rooms in pubs to ranting to thousands at rock festivals at home and abroad.

The really impressive thing was the sheer naked enthusiasm of the fans who crowded into their performances and knew every word of their denunciations of terrible jobs and identity-eroding encounters. Out of Nottingham, or Lincolnshire or wherever, they voice the dizzying unfairness of a dispossessed generation. It has now (as we saw in the General Election) become a very significant political force. It's another question of identity.

Turning to my ex business beat, as a place in the middle of the country, the East Midlands economy is somewhat similar to its geography. Not as ebullient as London and ROSELAND, which is what rather boring economists call the "Rest of South East England". But it is not doing too badly at all. The accountants PWC predict that this year the E Midlands will be the fastest growing region outside SE England. But there is still Brexit to cope with. That may (or may not) cast a shadow over manufacturing and the logistics and warehousing that is an important part of the economy here.

As I've already hinted, I had been slightly demoralised by the decline I glimpsed in places such as Gainsborough, the decline of textiles and tobacco and bicycles in Nottingham, the extraordinary decline of that

great fishing port Grimsby. There, I'm told some pubs open early in the morning and raise the price of beer on an hourly basis, a terrible incitement to drink early and drink often. Another personal economic indicator was that I wasn't very often asked to make business programmes from the region. But I did once go to report on what was eventually to be the successful attempt of Melton Mowbray to register that celebrated Melton Mowbray Pork Pie as a product with Protected Geographical Status, an *appellation controlee* for food that may or may not work after Brexit.

You have to make the MM pie in MM. Of course the pigs that went into the pies were part of a curious chain of circumstances, the bi-product of that other protected local speciality Stilton cheese (never made in Stilton, of course, just brought to market there), and of riding to hounds, another local speciality, protected or not. The cheese-making process produces surplus whey which is fed to pigs, hence the pork that goes into the pies..which had to be insulated from shock with a inner coat of jelly so that hunters riding to hounds could enjoy their portable lunch without it being jolted to pieces by jumping over hedges all the morning. Hence the pork pie and its rooted local origins. That, anyway, is what they told me in Melton Mowbray. I'm afraid that on that occasion I came away from the East Midlands with the feeling that the area was in heritage mode: in thrall to the myths of its past, a bit like Robin Hood.

But I was wrong. Look at the figures and you will see that the East Midlands is right in the middle of UK economic performance, with a sustained manufacturing base that is doing rather better than places such as Yorkshire. For a long time I was puzzled about one particular facet of the *West Midlands*. People would come from all over the world to the University of Warwick to learn about the future of manufacturing at the feet of globally acknowledged experts such as Professor Lord Kumar Bhattacharyya. He presided over the most marvelous up to the minute demo facilities in what has been a very successful establishment. But to get to Warwick University, most visitors would have to travel through what was ten or 20 years ago a wasteland of abandoned and derelict factories. It was the obverse of what the Prof was talking about.

It seemed odd and hopeless then. But not now, when the West Midlands has seen an extraordinary industrial revival. It is centered on the automobile industry and Jaguar Landrover, now owned by Tata of India. And the *East Midlands*, of course, has Toyota, employing two-and-a-half thousand people near Derby. The supply chain for these giant companies

is remarkable: go into industrial estates all over the Midlands and you will find little engineering shops, often family-owned, busy making components that go into components that go into components that eventually become recognizable parts of cars.

The celebrated Japan-inspired hyper-efficient just-in-time production process means that components have to be made clustered round the main production plant. This is another kind of invisible Britain; 85 percent of Toyota's total East Midlands production of 180-thousand vehicles last year was exported. Of course (again) big Brexit clouds hang over that record if the EU were to impose tariffs on cars made in outside-the- EU Britain.

It has to be noted that –even with profound Brexit uncertainties--Toyota has said recently it will spend £240-million on upgrading the Burnaston plant. But that's something that it has to do as part of a corporate global programme of car model standardization. How can any export business take investment decisions when it does not know how much its products will cost in its main markets in a few years time, because of the tariff uncertainties? That's the cloud that Brexit puts over a swathe of Midlands industries, not just the car makers: paralysis, or (at best) muddling through.

The fact that the Midlands are midlands is, of course, another important component of the economy here. The great big box warehouses that are a feature of the landscape here (like the power stations in the Trent valley) are a vital component of the way Britain now works. They are not great employers of people—it's mainly robotised inside—but they are very much part of the region story.

When the shipping container revolutionised international trade in the 1970s and 80s, the whole distribution geography of Britain changed. It wrested power away from the traditional city centre dockworkers who dominated imports and exports until then. It layed waste to the 19th century portside warehouses and the railways that served them. At the same time, small town centre stores were being replaced by huge supermarkets and out-of- town shopping centres. The East Midlands had land and labour far cheaper than in the South; it had a road network reaching out to almost the whole of Britain.

Along the motorways distributors, developers and retailers built those huge warehouses. In them the goods of the new consumer classes were brought in from China and trucked out to consumer Britain. And now

those big boxes (as they are called in the property business) are being replaced by even bigger ones with huge numbers of overworked, underpaid employees who walk miles and are under quite relentless pressure to make up consignments..for Amazon. It has centres in Doncaster and Peterborough (which is both in the E Midlands and not). Amazon has mighty ambitions to sell everything. But how long before the whole process is almost entirely robotised, and the new jobs are lost, is a matter of argument. But that is going to happen, inevitably (I will come back to this in a moment). Then there will just be the big boxes.

When it comes to identity, I had a fascinating encounter two or three years ago in the South American city of Medellin in Colombia. Twenty-six years ago, it had the unenviable reputation of being known as the Murder Capital of the World: 381 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants, a place ruled by gangs controlling the distribution of cocaine grown in Peru and sold all over the USA. Eventually, after bitter and prolonged fighting, the Colombian army (backed by covert American aid) defeated the gangs, and killed the billionaire leader of the cartel, Pablo Escobar, who had wielded big political clout in the country.

After gang warfare was brutally snuffed out, Medellin needed a recovery strategy. It got it through a succession of powerful and visionary mayors. I went to see one of them. Medellin is a balmy, beautiful city set in a steep, straight valley still famous for the exquisite coffee grown in the hills around it. The mayors have transformed Medellin by using the state-owned utility company to bring power, water and sewerage system to the shanty towns that have grown higher and higher up the valley sides above the city. They have built a new metro service along the valley bottom and linked distant barrios to the centre of the city with cable cars. Libraries and enterprise centres have been created in the slums. The city's parks and squares are vibrant with life. Foreign companies are investing in Medellin. Ask the mayor what the strategy has been, he has no hesitation in replying: if you are known as the murder capital of the world, he said, what a story you have to tell to the world about losing that reputation!

I'm mentioning this encounter because it says a lot about the potential power of mayors, particularly in a world where fairly recently we reached the point where more people now live in cities than in rural places. And yet mayors are still thought of in many places as purely representative people. They war chains and seek self publicity. But if regions are to gain genuine power and influence then the people who will embody their hopes

and aspirations need to be elected mayors. And they need to have revenue raising powers.

As in Medellin, ambitious and persistent mayors can personify a region, give it voice, shape its future and bring grass-roots realism to economies and societies dominated by capital cities and the currently ruling classes. The new breed of mayors are still feeling their way in Britain. But they are heading a movement which deserves serious consideration. Look at the confidence that the election of a new mayor seems to have given the West Midlands. Of course, I know that one city dominates the West Midlands whereas the East Midlands is contested territory between several cities. And Leicester already has an executive elected mayor.

But if this region is willing to embrace the need for someone to speak for it and represent it, great things may follow. They would follow not immediately but over time, as the mayorial system evolves throughout the whole country. And if the United Kingdom were to fragment further after Brexit, then the regions are going to become the defining components of Britain. A mayoralty may not properly fit a region of several cities but not a dominant one. But it may be a useful catalyst towards proper representation in a country that is changing shape. Think of what happened in Sibiu in Romania where a clever mayor seized on the city's fascinating history..and turned it into a current and future Saxon opportunity. An East Midlands Mayor would be a very interesting, evolving, creation. A Trentish Mayor, a Mayor of Trentland?

One way of trying to define the future is to think about education, a big potential changemaker in society and economies. When I was a schoolboy, filmmakers descended on Lincoln to make what was seen at the time as a racy black-and-a-white movie about marital shenanigans in a small-town university. Lincoln was renamed Kilminster for the film. It was notable for the first big screen appearances of Ian McShane and the late John Hurt. Only a few years before John Hurt had been told by his (and later, my,) headmaster at Lincoln School that his acting ambitions were futile. I went to watch him filming a rag week scene in the streets. But the idea of a university in Lincoln seemed pretty remote then, a fantasy.

Decades later, there are now three universities in Lincoln, and there were at one stage four. When the University of Lincoln were kind enough to present me with an honorary doctorship (of business admin) eight years ago, they told me that the university was estimated to generate at least two hundred million pounds worth of revenue for the city every year. And



universities generate jobs and ideas—outside ideas-- and research (and emotions too..it's a bit like the Wild and the Willing.) That's the impact education brings to a small city.

If you are trying to extend your antennae into the future, the universities are a good place to look. I mentioned the number of jobs in logistics in the East Midlands that must be under long-term threat from automated factories and warehouses..and even self-driving trucks and cars. If they ever catch on in our crammed and crazy paving island so unlike the grids and interstates of California where the self driving enthusiasts live and work. But all over the East Midlands people are at work using the robots and maybe artificial intelligence which are going to dominate our future.

*[It is still pretty much ignored by the people who run this country, who do not see how disruptive the digital era is going to be of the 20th century way of life politicians mostly grew up in (19th century if you think about the shape and appearance of the Palace of Westminster which so many politicians spent good parts of their time in). Why this inability to see what is going to happen to us? Because, as the significant Canadian media philosopher Marshall McLuhan said so memorably many decades ago: "We tend to see the future through the rear-view mirror of the past". (The car was called the horseless carriage, the radio was the wire-less.)]*

But in several E Midlands encounters, I have seen the future already happening or trying to. Seven years ago, I watched in the operating theatre at Glenfield Hospital in Leicester from behind a computer console, un-scrubbed up, as robot assisted surgery cured a patient of severely debilitating heart flutters before my very eyes..breathtaking, and a world first procedure when it had been carried out a few months previously in Leicester. At Loughborough University I have watched them 3D printing houses in a rig as big as a bus: a swiveling head squirts quick-drying concrete to build walls and floors, again before your eyes. That's academic and hard to do in the real world because the concrete tends to clog up the spray head.

But in a plant in Harworth in Nottinghamshire—just ten miles south of Doncaster—they are revolutionising the pretty traditional construction industry by using computer controls to three-D print the moulds from which concrete components can then be cast. This process has reduced the time it takes to create the complex concrete shapes used in the new Crossrail tunnels in London from eight days to three hours. It's going to change for good the way construction is done.

And at the University of Nottingham, there is another 3D printing facility called the Centre for Advanced Manufacturing. That attracts attention from all over the world. Three-d printing a technique of laying down ultra thin layers of plastic or metal powder in computer controlled shapes. Like an over and over again photocopier, the layers build up on top of each other. They are then welded or "sintered" into shapes often impossible to make in conventional manufacturing: intricate latticework, for example, or bespoke false teeth. Since you build up shapes from scratch, you don't grind down metal or take months making moulds. Every shape (generated first as a computer programme before it prints it) can be unique.

This is a very big change in the way we have made things since Henry Ford's Model T plant in Detroit more than 100 years ago. The production line era of mass manufacturing has dominated world industry for the whole of the 20th century. If it is not now coming to a close, then it will be almost certainly partly replaced by local, infinitely flexible, products. They come straight off the computer screen into production to be sold almost immediately, and they are designed and made to order.

They are pioneering this at Nottingham University. It also happens to be the place where decades ago, healthcare was transformed by the development of the MRI scanner by the Nobel Prize winner Sir Peter Mansfield, who died earlier this year. These striking new 3D techniques are not going to produce thousands of jobs, of course. The machines will do work previously done by people. But this is how work will be done in the future. Big things are happening inside anonymous plants in the East Midlands, and the universities. Really important things.

And if that array of power stations along the River Trent is eventually doomed by the end of coal as an energy source, then perhaps the East Midlands has an answer. It is not actually very new: for more than 60 years, the fields of some parts of Lincolnshire have been studded with those modest pumps called nodding donkeys. They pumped E Midlands oil in very small quantities which hardly anyone outside the region knew about. I know that we had oil underneath our garden in Gainsborough. But here comes fracking, exploiting what the experts tell me are huge new oil but mainly gas reserves deep under the surface. Another North Sea oil field in significance, they say, or even bigger. But neighbours don't like the disturbance, or the threat of earth tremors, or the way the ground shrinks as gas is pumped out. The North of Holland has horrible stories. We shall see.

After all those regional considerations, the more I worried about the lack of identity I felt for this region where I grew up, the more I realised that as a correspondent I was seeking the wrong thing. I was looking for a marketing, public relations sort of identity that did not have much to do with the reality of the place itself or the people who live and work here. And then my eye settled on a full page advertisement in the Church Times last month for some important jobs in the Diocese of Southwell and Nottingham. It had a picture of Sherwood Forest and what at first sight I thought was St Paul's Cathedral, though it turned out to be Nottingham City Hall. Along with the details of the jobs was a capsule description of the place..the diocese, the East Midlands itself, perhaps.

"Nottinghamshire," it said, "is a county of forests and rivers, heritage and cutting-edge research, education entertainment and sport. The city is dynamic and diverse, designated as one of the 10 core cities in the UK. The wider diocese incorporates ancient market towns, many rural villages and former mining communities." Unexceptionable, perhaps, but precious—perhaps—because of that normalness. A place where people want to live, and prosper, but where prospering can also be tough and lonely.

*(At the same time, beware of slogans. All the C of E dioceses were recently asked to come up with a mission statement encapsulating everything they do—in just three words. The press reviewer in the Church Times, Andrew Brown, described the process as "an invitation to drivel and worse," and he also—I'm afraid—singled out the three words from diocese of Southwell and Nottingham as being—perhaps, he said—the worst. The phrase he objected to was: "Wider, Younger, Deeper." And it does rather suggest inspiration to a deadline at the end of a group away day, with general agreement on a phrase which gets us all away not too late in the afternoon, and will not rock any boats.)*

So let me bring this ramble round your East Midlands to some kind of conclusion. Here is the Britain of DH Lawrence, and Byron and Robin Hood and Isaac Newton. (The greatest mind in Britain commemorated by a shopping centre in Grantham: Gainsborough all over again.) And Erasmus Darwin, born near Newark, grandfather of the evolutionist Charles Darwin and himself a prolific thinker and inventor who believed that man came from a single ancestor, and had evolved over time.

A region that gave us Tennyson and Ibuprofen invented at Boots in Nottingham and Richard the third's burial place in a city, Leicester which in 1936 The League of Nations identified as the second richest city in

Europe. The designation hastened an influx of immigrants from the Continent and Leicester eventually turned into a city of incomers from so many other places. This is region with Lincoln Cathedral on its great hill, and the enduring spirit of your oak leaves, as fresh now as they were when they were carved 800 years ago. A region of great cheese and pies and potatoes, and some of the most productive land in the world. But all those are clichés, the obvious things.

The more I thought about it, the more I realised I had been on a false errand. I had been looking for something that wasn't really there, and that was the point. In fact, the identity of the East Midlands was in plain sight all the time, so plain that I had not seen it. It's not splashy, not attention getting, not shouting about itself. As that diocese job advertisement said, the East Midlands is a mostly calm place, steadily getting on with its own business. Its cities are slightly in rivalry with each other. Its great diversity can be problematic. But it is at the heart of things. Unproclaimed, it is trying to do things properly.

Maybe it is in danger of being discovered. The acclaimed novelist Adam Thorpe has just published a novel which is getting a lot of attention called *Missing Fay*. It's about a girl on a council estate who goes missing, evocatively told. The place is Lincoln, and it is very present in the book. Beware of literary identities, though. A new book by the biographer Peter Parker portrays the influence of AE Housman's poem *A Shropshire Lad* on generations of English readers suborned by the lure of the Blue Remembered Hills of Wenlock Edge and the Welsh Marches..etc.

A dangerously perverse pull towards a fantasy England, I would have thought. The land of lost delights. Another country certainly, but one too real in the English imagination ever to have really existed. I must say that I would not want to live there. I would not want to live in the snug and hobbit like West Country. And all over the South of England you can feel the relentless suck of the capital. East Anglia is mainly flat and always awkward. The North is in some essential way not part of the rest of England at all. That leaves us with the Midlands, and then not the West Midlands, which are (in Hillaire Belloc's unfriendly phrase, "sodden and unkind". No, by a process of elimination—I will tell my *From Our Ex-Correspondent* audience, when next I get the chance-- that I have discovered the identity I was looking for. By looking hard at what was in evidence all the time, if I had but noticed it. In plain view, you *are* Invisible Britain, here in the East Midlands. For better or for worse, but mainly for better.