

Retford: a microcosm of the pleasantries and problems of the British town.

Angus McNeill Peel looks at the case study of Retford, and what it tells us about British towns

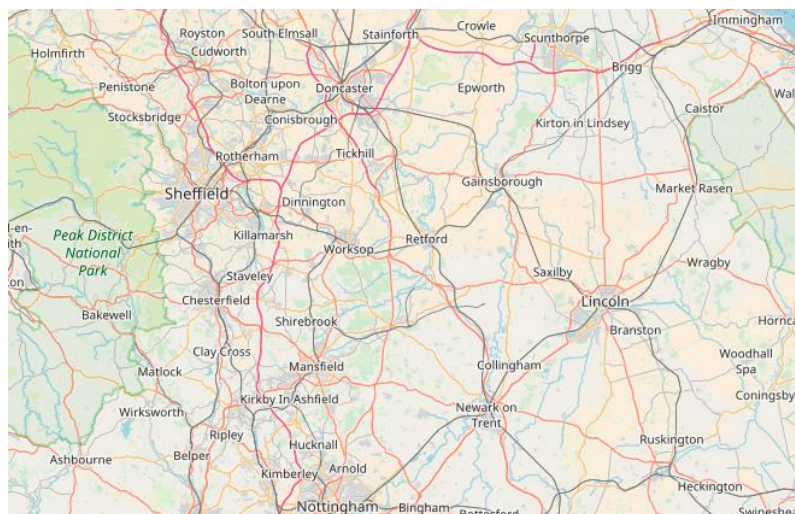
When my grandmother died, I thought I should write about the town in which she lived for most of her life, Retford. In north Nottinghamshire, it is known as a market town although, as I shall discuss, this label may be up for debate. Perhaps, more importantly, it seems a microcosm of the British town- with its pleasantries and problems.

Let's get over the hurdle of some facts and definitions:

Retford at the last census, 2011, had a population of near precisely 22,000. So it counts as somewhere between a small and large town.

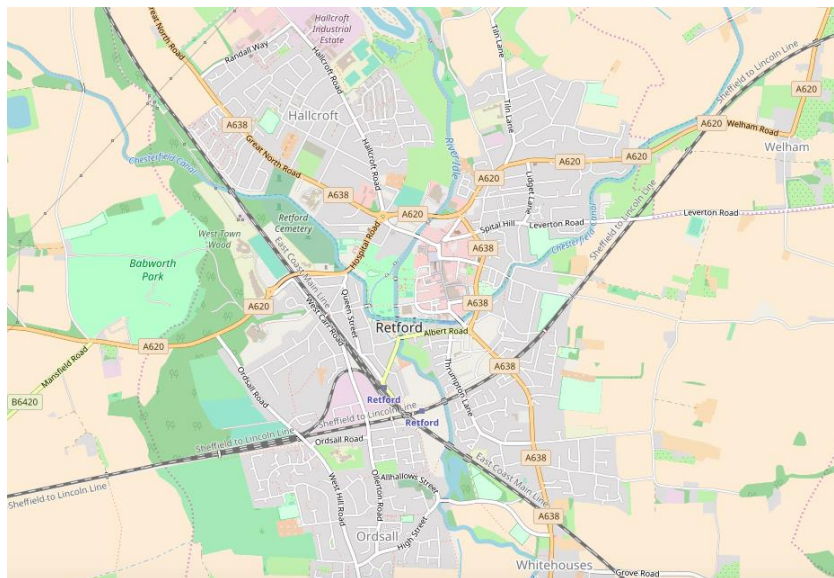
What is a town? Well, confusingly, it encompasses a vast swathe of British settlements. Fordwich in Kent and Llanwrtyd Wells in Powys, Wales, have populations under 1,000 and would seem like villages to most people but actually have town councils. Reading in Berkshire is a town but has a very large population of 230,000. Cities have traditionally rendered their status from having cathedrals or particular historic significance, with population only taken into consideration from 1888 administrative reforms onwards. Towns were defined by the medieval charter, which gave recognition to a settlement such that it could be represented by a council of aldermen with bailiffs and burgesses regulating its commerce. Markets were a crucial necessity in any place gaining such authority and freedoms from the crown. In Scotland, towns were known as burghs, and had even more legislative powers than those in England and Wales. Retford was a centre of commerce for its surrounding arable lands and pasture, which would have been mostly common land, and received a charter in 1246 from Henry III to hold a fair.

Where is Retford? Not a place familiar to most of us, it may be most known as a stop on the East Coast Mainline between London and Edinburgh. Its population would not support such a call on a fast railway, but it offers connections by another railway to Lincoln, Sheffield and Worksop. It is very much on a vague dividing line between the North and the East Midlands. This map helps give further context.



Retford is about equidistant from Sheffield and Lincoln, Doncaster and Newark on Trent.

Retford is near the River Trent so situated in flat, low-lying lands, with a tributary the River Idle flowing through the town. Retford is named after a 'red ford' on this river, as the clay rich soils would have cloyed to carts as they crossed the water. It is now bypassed by the A1, which in a way is a return to Retford's original relationship to the Great North Road. The Roman route ran about five miles to the west of Retford, and fell into disuse as it was diverted by a modern road into the town in the 18th century. This allowed a sleepy market town to gain trade from travellers, and many of the coaching inns from this era remain. In the 1960s, the heavy traffic through the narrow streets came to an end, and even the old way through the town centre has been pedestrianised, bypassed in town by a depressing articulated road.



Retford is defined by its railways and waterways, with a pre-industrial core and disparate modern residential suburbs.

History

Retford is an old borough, having been established in 1105 under Henry I. It would maintain this borough status all the way until 1975, when it was reorganised into Bassetlaw District Council. There is a strange detail in the definition of its name- on most maps and documents it is known as East Retford. This is because the Idle's flooding meant that the west side was originally settled, but diversion and river management allowed for the eastern side to gradually grow in importance, and despite being less than 200 metres away from each other, the sides had officially separate names. East Retford can still be seen on road signs in the area, and locals will often refer to West Retford as quite a distinct place despite, in reality, it being simply a coherent part of the overall town.



St Swithun's, commonly known as East Retford church.

Transport has been central to Retford's history. Much of the town's persistence and success has been down to its geography. Market towns that serve a small rural area usually never quite grow to 22,000, and this is because Retford in the past attracted industry, and later commuters to the reviving cities of Leeds and Sheffield. The Chesterfield Canal was built through Retford in 1777, and this is when manufacturing really began. Retford became known for chemicals, rubber and tanning, while rail required large employment from 1849 when it became an important junction. Coal loading, water pumping and maintenance required much vaster time and labour resources in those days, and this is when the first worker terraces were built in the west of the town. In its way, Retford represents the transitional zone between industrial South Yorkshire and rural Lincolnshire, with its more recognisably north of England/ Welsh valleys style terraced housing just next to Georgian cottages from the rural era.



Most of Retford's buildings are red brick and 19th century with a scattering of Georgian survivals. A Russian cannon captured during the Crimean war is an unusual town monument.

Retford Today

To me, at least, Retford's decidedly average geographical context and statistics grant it potential to be an excellent case study of the British town. This encompasses pleasantries and problems. Retford, on the whole, has some lovely features and is very popular with families and the elderly. It has a large park by the river, with gnarled oak trees and well-tended flower beds. The markets are still going without obvious struggles, even if most of the residents can be found in the well attended supermarkets adjacent to the bypass. However, there is increasingly an identity issue.



Market stall in the town centre.

Retford has undergone deindustrialisation while increasingly attracting commuters. This seems to be the situation for many towns across the country that are quite near to big cities which have embraced the successful service sector. From Bangor in Northern Ireland, Banbury in England, Burntisland in Scotland to Barry in Wales, to name a few examples beginning with B (there are a lot of these places), this creates a disconnect between dormitory suburbs and the old town centre. It is clear this is already occurring given the amount of peripheral housebuilding and traffic jams to reach the station in the mornings. In the last five years, there have only been two housing developments within five minutes walk of the town square, while there have been seven on Retford's outskirts, most of which some thirty minutes walk or five minutes drive from the centre. Not only is this encouraging car-reliance, it is impractical for children walking to schools or elderly residents who wish to be near shops and services. Commuters are likely to increase burdens on the town's roads unless new housing is within walking distance of the mainline station. Retford's identity as a market town may also be under question if new housing does not contribute to a walkable commercial core.

Retford speaks to a problem in British planning - too often rules are followed but communities are not engaged in a process of deciding how we want to enhance the communities we live in. This is not a dry, legislative exercise but an exciting premise that any place, big or small, iconic or everyday, can be cared about. Policymakers and planners should grapple with how we can make the planning process more collaborative and inclusive, so that the British town can seek community and a sense

of place while adapting to the economic winds of today. Retford is a real insight into the importance of civic pride and shared identity in maintaining the status of a town.



Retford town hall and war memorial in the market square.

Angus McNeill Peel is an Urban Planning Student at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a geography graduate from the University of Oxford. He has researched the design of public space in Copenhagen and infrastructure to improve access for pedestrians and cyclists in London. He intends to pursue a career in urban planning and design.