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So You Think You Know About Britain?

Written by Danny Dorling

Published by Constable

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So You Think You Know About Britain?

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Constable • London

Constable & Robinson Ltd
3 The Lanchesters
162 Fulham Palace Road
London W6 9ER
www.constablerobinson.com

First published in the UK by Constable,
an imprint of Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2011

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A copy of the British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-84901-391-8

Printed and bound in the UK

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

For Eric Charlesworth

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am extremely grateful to Leo Hollis of Constable & Robinson for editing far beyond the call of duty. He turned this book from an idea into an argument, and with his merciless red pen, saved you a great deal of grief. Carl Lee read through the whole manuscript and was not backward in coming forward to let me know where he thought I was going wrong. I'm in debt. My colleagues at the University of Sheffield, especially Dan Vickers, Bethan Thomas, Ben Hennig, Anna Barford and Dimitris Ballas, have had to put up with me being more than usually preoccupied, and I am very grateful for their patience and their advice. Paul Coles, also of the University of Sheffield, very carefully redrew all the figures, maps and graphs contained here, and I am very grateful to him for this huge help. Ideas from parts of this book were tested on different audiences who attended about fifty public lectures held during 2010. I am grateful to everyone who put up with me during those lectures, especially those who asked questions and offered criticism. Bronwen and Alison Dorling corrected numerous drafts of my writing yet again, initially getting it into a form good enough for Leo to cross out, and then helping to make my corrections literate: I've always preferred numbers to words, but numbers do not make an argument. Lastly I should thank my grandfather, Eric Charlesworth,

to whom this book is dedicated, and who taught me many years ago that geography matters, and who also corrected a part of a draft of Chapter 1 when I got muddled up about mills, water, steam, iron, coal, North and South. Eric taught geography from 1939 to 1978, bar six years in the Second World War. He was the first to show me how to read a map. Over the years, there have been many people who've helped to put me in my place. Thank you.

INTRODUCTION – GEOGRAPHY MATTERS

This book concerns eight big questions about Britain. In trying to answer them we often find that the bigger picture, the macro scale, reveals a very different story to the one that perhaps we tend to assume at ground level, the one often reported in newspaper headlines. For instance, at ground level it sometimes looks as if there might be too many people to fit on this island; but at macro level we discover that it is the areas with declining population that are finding it hardest to cope, economically and socially. Our country is in need of more young people, and compared to the world level we find that our share of global population is about to halve, and that other parts of the globe are more densely populated.[1]

How can it feel so crowded in Britain when there is, in fact, so much empty land on this island? This is one of the eight big questions about life in Britain today. The other seven concern whether Britain is irreconcilably divided between North and South; how the balance of the sexes is altering and whether the shortage of young men is increasing; just how many immigrants there are, and their effect, or lack thereof; whether we are becoming more ethnically segregated; why town and country are

separating even further; how the aging population might tax our resources, and, finally, what hope is there for the future?

The geography you may have been taught late on a Thursday afternoon at school is not the geography that is taught in universities today. When I was at school I was told that an Ice Age was coming. I was taught things I might need to know if I were to rule West Africa: what crops grew there; what languages the people spoke; and how to dress to survive life in a desert (do not wear nylon in the Sahara, else the fabric will melt and stick to you). My teachers were enthusiastic and friendly but I cannot remember much more than that. Geography then was about tea from Ceylon and rubber-tapping in the Amazon, about who *we*, the British, could exploit, about what *they* had, where *they* were, and how to rule *them*. The younger teachers told us that the textbooks were wrong but that we had to repeat such things to get good marks at A level.

Geography today is taught differently; for example, the main concerns are how human life might be ending with climate catastrophe and the impact of the extinction of so many plant and animal species, and of how growing worldwide inequalities of resources unfairly shape all human life across the planet. We now know, and teach routinely, that no one starves due to bad harvests in the world but because of the greed, poor organisation and a lack of understanding by those in power. Today there are always warehouses full of grain located very near to people who are hungry.

What is being taught about Britain in schools and universities is changing too; however, some teachers may well be getting it wrong, as a few of my teachers did, even if they were right about no longer referring to the rest of the world as some kind of resource that we British could

exploit. Maybe climate change won't be as abrupt as we think; maybe those in power are getting better at getting the grain out of those warehouses. Yet maybe there is still too much rhetoric about 'us' having to 'fight' our way in the world in order to 'compete' ever more fiercely with our economic rivals.

Nevertheless, when it comes to Britain, those who teach and study and profess to try to understand the human geography of this island now think we are living somewhere very different to where we were before. The human geography of Britain has changed in terms of people's lives being less strictly ordered, but even more in terms of how we understand our population to be spaced geographically – as compared to when I was (and *probably* when you were) at school.

You may know some of your neighbours, but access to new kinds of data means we can get to know far more about people online than we find out by living next door to them![2] You may watch television or read the papers but, remember, many of the people who make television programmes or edit the papers were taught in a pre-Internet age. Our media is also incredibly focused in and around southern England. The BBC has a 'North of England' correspondent, but no 'South of England' one, because for the BBC to report from the Home Counties is to report from home, from where the elite sleep at night before driving in along the M40. Likewise for those reporting on behalf of Sky, who often seem to think that Britain is in some ways just the London office of an American corporation.

Our national newspapers are little better: all are based in the capital. This, and the often select education of those who tell much of Britain's news stories, means that an unrepresentative account is often told to the rest of us. It is not the fault of the elite: if you were at school in the 1970s,

were lucky enough to attend university in the 1980s, made your career in London in the 1990s, and settled in or near Surrey within the last ten years then you also would need a 'North of England' correspondent to explain to you what happens in the provinces and the other 'nations and regions'.

This book uses contemporary news stories as launching points to talk about Britain; however, it is not a book about the news. It is a book about where we really live, who is really around us, how things are actually changing, what you find when you count and survey and ask people – and what you see when you do this across the whole country and consider all walks of life. It is a book about a place that roughly sixty-one million people call home,[3] not including the other millions who live abroad but who also call this country 'home'. It is a book not only for the British but also for ex-pats, for tourists, for students, and for anyone who wants a different guide to some of the key issues affecting the human geography of this island today.

Britain is not an easy island to understand and we are living in the curse – and possibly the promise – of especially interesting times; however, it is at just such a time that we most need to question the assumptions often held about Britain and the British. These are the commonly accepted assumptions held by policymakers whose decisions form the bedrock of much of our everyday news. But how much of what we think we know about Britain is true?

The credit crisis shook our faith in banks. We now know that one day the cashpoint machines could dry up. This might be a revelation that changes our thinking as much as when many began to doubt the omnipotence of God. Our Prime Minister told us that Britain was broken and

said that (with our help) he will fix it. But is it so shattered? And if so do we have the will and the tools to mend it? How do we know that apparent certainties are certainties? Who should we believe? I think we need to get back to some basic facts and work from there . . .

CHAPTER 1

DIRTY OLD TOWN – NORTH AND SOUTH

'North-south divide wider than ever'

Guardian, 19 June 2007[1]

All was not well at the height of the longest ever economic boom. In June 2007, three months before police had to ask groups of middle-aged and retired savers to disperse from branches of Northern Rock,[2] it was reported that a two-tier economy had re-emerged in Britain, with the North trailing behind: 'Only a handful of cities outside the south-east such as Cardiff, Edinburgh, Leeds and Nottingham are delivering robust growth, Experian says.' Experian, the credit-reference agency, had written the report that this *Guardian* story was based on. But, as it turned out, Edinburgh and Leeds, who relied so much on banking and finance, had been enjoying growth that was far from robust. Nottingham, home to Experian's operational headquarters, did well when more people were taking out credit and so suffered as a result of the credit crisis; and Cardiff relied on high levels of public-sector jobs, which

were also particularly affected by the crisis, making Cardiff no longer so 'robust'.

We were told it was to be a southern England and middle-class recession, and that the divide that was growing wider at the height of the boom would narrow when the economic crash came and the credit crunch followed. Bankers would suffer, though maybe not so much the rest of us. But it didn't work out that way. By 2010 it was revealed that it had been the North that had been hardest hit and that the divide might be both deepening and shifting further south as towns and cities just within the North-South border appeared most vulnerable, with some showing signs of being economically discarded.[3] To be discarded was to be grouped with the North.

As companies retrenched their expenditure, it became clear that it was best to be as near to the capital as you could be. And that was before the £81 billion of government spending cuts and the half-million public-sector job losses announced by George Osborne on 20 October 2010.[4] Rising unemployment in the North was being contrasted, yet again, with rising employment in the South. In the year to March 2010 an extra thirty-five jobs were recorded as having been created in London for every new position opening up in Yorkshire and the Humber.[5] Huge increases in unemployment in northern, Scottish and Welsh cities were being predicted for 2011–12, simply reflecting the geography of the cuts to come.

The phrase 'unemployment' was first used in Britain around 1888. Men had been losing paid work with increasing frequency since the economic slump that had started slowly in the 1870s. This greatly dampened the celebrations of 1887, the jubilee year of Queen Victoria's reign,

which ended in a harsh winter when many people froze to death, especially those who were poor – among them the families of the men who were newly 'unemployed'. During the 1880s the lowest life expectancy recorded in Britain was in Liverpool – at thirty-six years; in Bristol it was ten years higher.[6]

Many would agree that good health is what matters most to people; however, inequalities in health and longevity, in connection with the North-South divide, have been recognized for years. If we use this as a gauge to judge the divide it quickly becomes apparent that something far more important than wages, or house prices, or even experience of unemployment, fundamentally separates people living in different parts of the country.

Today life expectancy at birth in Liverpool is only between two and three years lower than that in contemporary Bristol, a much smaller gap than that which existed in the 1880s. So has the North-South divide diminished? Perhaps we should look elsewhere for a comparison: the boroughs of Glasgow City and Kensington & Chelsea, for example, indicate that there is still a great divide. When life expectancy is measured from birth in Kensington & Chelsea, women now live eleven years longer, and men thirteen years longer, than the women and men of Glasgow City.[7]

The combined average life expectancy for men and women today is 74.3 in Glasgow City and 86.7 in Kensington & Chelsea; therefore, the gap between an affluent enclave of London and one of the most run-down enclaves of Glasgow is now twelve years, or an additional 17 per cent for those in Kensington & Chelsea. In the 1880s an extra ten years on top of an expectancy of thirty-six was an additional 28 per cent.

As a result, we see that the divide today is undoubtedly narrower than it was between different parts of Britain in

the 1880s; however, it is wider than at any time since at least the early 1920s. (I know this because when I was in my first job as a university lecturer, I spent hundreds of hours typing in columns of figures from dusty old decennial reports concerning how many people had died in remote parts of the country in the 1950s and 1960s.

Also, in the 1990s I had spent far too long in the library squinting at faint numbers that recorded deaths in the 1970s and which survive only as a record in aggregate on microfiche transparencies. The cuts to official statistical reports made by the incoming 1979 government, which did not think we needed so many official statisticians, had made reconstructing the record a time-consuming process. For deaths occurring from the 1980s onwards, digital records were available, and I was given access to these, courtesy of a civil servant concerned by my increasing squint.)

When I put together all this data in 2010, along with the most recent statistics, as well as data some of my colleagues have collected from even earlier, I found that inequalities in mortality between areas in Britain were at their peak since any time after at least 1921. Premature death was the great measurer of the North-South divide, which in 2010 was at its widest for at least ninety years.[8]

While the divide has grown, it has also moved. Over the years, in collaboration with researchers from various disciplines, I compared a whole set of statistics either side of the line, not just mortality rates but also house prices, joblessness and voting patterns. I have even studied statistics on how the size of the head on beer varies across the country (this also has a North-South divide, with the head higher in the North).[9] In 2007 I was looking at a map of health inequalities when I received a phone call from an art gallery asking me if I could draw the line of the divide

on a map. The gallery was called the Lowry; the line I drew for them was ridiculously detailed. Here's the whole route and a section of it:

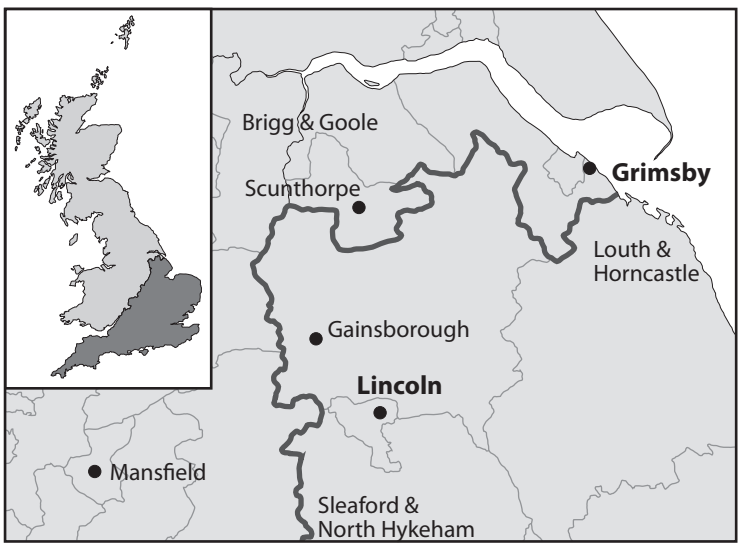


Figure 1: Detail of the North-South Divide: from Newark to Louth

Source: Work with the SASI group, University of Sheffield[10]

This line tells where life-chances divide. Near where I live that line is somewhere just south of the Humber and lying along much of the Trent ('wrong side of t'river' you might say – depending on which side of the river you are from). Elsewhere along its length, the new line can be argued to be part of the furthest outer boundary of London; thus, claims can be made that something has changed distinctly from the past – when this outer boundary really was the divide between highland and lowland Britain. The line

now divides on the one hand the outermost commuting suburbs and exclaves of a metropolis, and on the other hand the runt of the country that is left over and beyond – the North, the bit that is being left behind.[11]

I came to believe in the divide when I tried to explain why some people in some places died earlier than other people in other places in Britain. Many things influence how soon or late a group of people might die, but having accounted for as many of those as I can in my results, I have always been left with this divide on the map, this pattern to which statisticians refer to as the 'residuals'. To understand how I got to this point and what I think explains the divide – what the usual suspects of poverty, behaviour and history cannot alone account for – let's step back a little. All the way back to 1877, when it was so cold in the winter that the British Medical Journal warned against the use of perambulators.[12]

Towards the end of Queen Victoria's jubilee year a baby was born in Barrett Street in Stretford, Lancashire, a town just a mile or so south of what was to become, twenty-two years later, Manchester United's football ground; another mile north was Salford, the smoke-stack punctuated exemplification of an emerging industrialized nation. The baby was named Laurence Stephen Lowry. He died eighty-eight years later at the beginning of 1976, the year in which (as measurements confirm) the people of Britain had 'never had it so good'.[13] Lowry missed out on that long hot summer of 1976, which seems a little unfair given how cold his first winter had been.

Today when people think of the North-South divide in Britain they often recollect Lowry's paintings of the North, complete with images of grey matchstick figures who appear to trudge through flat industrial urban landscapes. In contrast to these rather bleak Northern scenes

you might imagine men wearing white against a lush green backdrop – playing cricket in the south of England, even though cricket was far more popular in the North in the 1880s than it was in the South. Notably, all sports were more popular in that bit of the North, east of the Pennines, where self-employed weavers and other such people who worked from home could choose their own hours and play when they liked, unlike the cotton weavers in towns such as Salford, where they would have been tied to factory hours.

Despite these great differences within the north of England, and between places such as Lancashire and Yorkshire, and Wales and Scotland, the divide that has almost always mattered most has been between the south-east of England and the rest of Britain. Why? And why has it existed for such a long time? Today it is bolstered by the country's reliance on financial industries and the concentration of these industries in London but, in addition to this, geology, topography and even chemistry have all had their parts to play.

Records of the North-South divide can be found as far back as 1086 when the Doomsday book was collated and documented the outcome of the Norman harrowing of northern England. Evidence has emerged recently that before 1066 the population of England had been far higher than it was shortly after 1066, and that people had lived far more sustainably than was ever understood by the Victorian historians and scholars whose studies still influence our current view, which has been tempered by the fact that we now understand that, even though flatter, more fertile land towards the south-east of England made for more prosperous farming; many more people lived in the North before the Normans razed so many of their villages.[14]

Seven hundred years later it was the water of the North (with its particular chemical properties) – and the power

of the stream to turn wheels – that led to industrialization beginning in narrow Derbyshire valleys, spreading to wide Yorkshire valleys, and then (with the coal of the North producing steam) across the great flat expanse of south Lancashire, where the softer water was more suited to cleaning cotton than wool. Industrialization created, at its best, economic power and wealth and, at its worst, the depravity of conditions in its 'dark, satanic' mills and factories.

Superficially, the geology of Britain can appear to underlie the great geographical social divide. For example, apart from in significant regions of Yorkshire, water north of the dividing line is soft, as the (hard) rock it passes through filters away some of the waters' calcium carbonate and so makes it more efficient at dissolving soap. But soon the divide became much more than a matter of where the water runs fast and/or soft, and more a matter of where coal and iron were deposited. The steam age required coal more than fast-running water and partly enabled the mechanization of cloth production, which then required a labour force to become nomadic in order to survive and so move away from their villages to factory towns and cities.

Friedrich Engels lived in Manchester in the 1840s and in 1844 published *The Condition of the Working Class in England*,[15] which he wrote in reaction to his first-hand experience of life in the 'Capital of the North'. He writes, for example, of when he vomited from the stench of the open sewers in little Ireland, one of Manchester's most notorious slums. In turn, these various experiences led to his collaboration with Karl Marx and their joint publication of *The Communist Manifesto* in 1848.

A few years later, in 1855, Elizabeth Gaskell's novel *North and South* was published.[16] It was in reaction to

what she also saw first-hand in Manchester. From different political perspectives these books told similar stories of the poverty peculiarly intensive in the North. Gaskell also entitled a chapter of her earlier book, *Mary Barton* (1848) 'Poverty and Death' and described the consequences of lay-offs at the mills: 'when week after week passed by, and there was no work to be had, and consequently no wages to pay for the bread [which] the children cried aloud for in their young impatience of suffering.'[17]

We know from reconstructed life tables that what both Engels and Gaskell witnessed in the north-west of England were some of the worst ever living conditions and highest ever death rates recorded during peacetime and outside of a pandemic anywhere in the world.[18] For the first fifty years of the nineteenth century, staggering levels of infant and childhood mortality meant that life expectancy in Manchester rarely exceeded an average of twenty-five years.[19]

It was just as much international geography as topography that mattered in determining where the industrial revolution took place, hence where people, especially children, would first be treated as disposable parts in the world's first giant machine – the mill, the production and raison d'être of which depended on resources from abroad and on the control and coercion of great markets such as those in India, where vast quantities of 'Manchester' cotton were sold.[20]

Manchester's reliance on the rest of the world became starkly obvious when, during the American Civil War of 1861–5, the ships of the north of that country blockaded the ports of the south, thus preventing the shipment of one of the South's main exports: cotton. As a result, Manchester experienced a 'cotton famine', which duly affected the newly created working classes, who, like the

factory owners, depended on the labour of slaves who picked the cotton, and the impoverishment of India, which imported the cloth. (Such was the global dominance of Manchester cotton that the word 'Manchester' is still used as a moniker for cotton goods in New Zealand.)

Although the cotton famine of the 1860s led to thousands being laid off in Manchester, by the 1880s it was within London that some of the most acute unemployment was experienced. One of the earliest uses of the word 'unemployment' was to describe the state of some 500 men subsequently re-employed as an act of charity to, among many other tasks, turf a cricket field within London's Paddington recreation grounds in 1888. The men were employed both to relieve a little of their poverty and to create a field for nearby gentry who wished to play the game. (Among those members of the gentry was Lord Randolph Churchill, father to Winston. Notably, one of the gates to the Paddington cricket ground is named after Churchill senior).[21]

There is no clear indication of where the word 'unemployment' was first used, but we know it was around the time when economic depression swept from North to South and ushered in an era when a Manchester-born Welshman, David Lloyd George would be appointed Chancellor of the Exchequer and as such introduce pensions, reduce poverty and later become Prime Minister, during the First World War. Lloyd George's policies did, at least, go some way to change how we thought of people, of how disposable they should be, or not.

It was in the years directly after the First World War that the image of the North-South divide we have today was cast – by the artist Lowry. Later, this image was reinforced by novelists such as Walter Greenwood, whose *Love on*

the Dole, set in Salford in 1931 and published in 1933, left an enduring impression on the middle classes. It was adapted for the stage in 1934 and a million people had seen this stage version by 1935. The play 'moved the mostly middle-class audiences without blaming them'; the playwright succeeded when he 'aimed to touch the heart'.[22]

Seventy-five years later *Love on the Dole* formed the basis for a full-page retrospective in what had been the Manchester *Guardian*[23] and which mentioned George Orwell's 1937 *Road to Wigan Pier*. But it was Lowry who impressed us first.

Lowry's best known images are of life in Salford and Manchester during, between and just after the First and Second World Wars. His depictions have become iconic, if not stereotypical: the traipsing mill workers in their thousands dragging their feet on the way to and from work; the crowds heading for football matches; the factories, mills and chimneys; the flat-capped men bent slightly forward – stereotypes of 'Northern toil'. His depictions entered the mainstream during his lifetime and one of his paintings, *The Pond* (1950), was printed on the then Prime Minister Harold Wilson's Christmas card in 1964, not just because it highlighted Wilson's northern origins but also because it was an image of a time and place where much was beginning to improve.

The North-South divide narrowed in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s and this is highlighted by mortality records, along with a decline in the production of popular images from the northern part of the divide. I was born towards the end of this period, in the South in 1968; later, I emigrated to the North by travelling as far as I could from Oxford while remaining in England: to university in Newcastle upon Tyne in 1986, coming 'up' from Oxford.

In the snobbish world of academic convention everywhere

is located geographically 'down' from Oxford. Trying to explain conventions such as this to people from other countries is very difficult, not least because most people even in Britain have no need to know of such snobbishness, even though academia remains rife with it. Most academics have a university homepage on the Internet and many start this page with a short description of where they are from. Mine begins: 'Danny Dorling was educated at The University of Newcastle upon Tyne', which is true, even though I did not learn as much in lectures and from the library as I did from being in a city different to the one I grew up in, and where I was conventionally educated – at school.[24]

When I was school-age, I learnt that it matters where you grow up within a city, from which quarter you come from. At university I learnt that the fate of large cities, in Britain, depended on their geographical location in the North or South. When I turned up in Newcastle in 1986 it soon became obvious to me that if I had been born and brought up there, my prospects would have been different to those I had benefitted from when growing up in Oxford, even if everything else about my life – my social class, my nutrition and whatever else – had been identical.[25]

It seemed to me that the young men of my age hanging around the streets in Newcastle upon Tyne in the late 1980s had a look in their eyes that was often a little more haunted than was usual in Oxford. In Newcastle the neighbourhoods I lived in were different to those I'd known as a child growing up in the South. In Oxford, I learned to dislike tourists and affluent students alike, but to Newcastle's young men, many of whom were without work since leaving school, students like me looked as ridiculously privileged and as much tourists in their town, as did the *Brideshead Revisited* lookalikes of Oxford that formed part of the background to my childhood.[26]

I lived in Newcastle for ten years and by 1991, at age twenty-three, I was awarded a PhD and had started writing academic papers and then a book.[27] I worked with a lot of people, mostly in the University's Centre for Urban and Regional Development Studies and for what was then called the Regional Research Laboratory for the North East of England. With one colleague, David Atkins, I wrote a report on population change in Britain. Among much else within that report we charted the movements of Britain's shifting population centre.[28] (The centre is the point under which you would have to place your finger to lift the island up and for it to balance perfectly, if human beings were the only objects to have any weight and if all people weighed the same.)

It is not hard to calculate the location of the centre, and not that surprising where you find it, but what shocked me was to learn just how relentlessly it had moved south over the course of almost every year of the last century, apart from a few of those very best years of the 1970s when it did stagger north for a month or twelve. It moved most quickly southwards in the 1930s and in the 1980s. Thus, I was unsurprised to find that while the population in the South was growing, the North was becoming less attractive to the young.

I added to the Northern exodus when I moved back to the South in 1996 to take up a job in Bristol. On arrival I was so shocked by the house prices that I didn't try to buy even a studio flat, despite the fact that I'd had a joint mortgage on a three-bedroom house in Newcastle, where 'decent' property cost much less than a one-bed flat did in Bristol. But I met new people, lived rent-free for a time, and within a couple of years was doing things such as helping to make TV programmes, one of which was called *The Drop-Dead Show*.[29]