

# An ancient tongue



## Introduction

For most people, full Yorkshire dialect, as opposed to simply a Yorkshire accent, is best thought of as a foreign language. It represents as distinctive a pattern of grammar, spelling, vocabulary, accent and intonation as French or German or any other European language. But Yorkshire dialect is frequently sniggered at and equated with simple speech for simple folk. But phrases like *ee bah goom* and *trouble at mill* are rarely heard outside comedy sketches. Yorkshire dialect is far more than that. It is an ancient form of speech and many of the words used are signposts to our history and reflect the language of Angles, Saxons and Vikings – connections that have long since been dropped from Standard English. People who speak modern German will feel at home with Yorkshire dialect since some words reflect those in their own language but have again been ‘ironed out’ of Standard English.

Like any language, Yorkshire dialect is changing, but perhaps too quickly for its own good. If we could transport ourselves back 100 years to the streets of Pudsey or Barnsley or the villages of the Dales, most of us would have difficulty understanding what people were saying and, of course, they would have trouble making sense of what came out of our mouths. Since the late 19th century, Yorkshire dialect has been continually diluted to a point where, today, it is in danger of dying out, to be remembered only in books. Why? Language experts point to the combined forces of education, mass media, mobility and the importance attached to Standard English as a means of ‘getting on’ in life. There is nothing new or unique to Yorkshire about this. “Modern education is making havoc with provincial dialects,” wrote one commentator – and that was in 1906.

But it’s not a lost cause. Real Yorkshire dialect is still quite widely understood and cherished. There are still fluent speakers – and many more partial users – and there is even a society dedicated to promoting it: the

Yorkshire Dialect Society. For many decades, turning on the radio or television meant hearing Standard or ‘BBC’ English but now regional accents at least are heard more and their speakers less likely to be considered comic curiosities.

## Origins and history

Celtic is the earliest language known in Britain – dating from around 500BC – and elements survive as modern Welsh and Gaelic. Some of it was carried into Yorkshire dialect too. The names of the rivers *Calder* and *Nidd* and of *Penyghent*, and occasional words like *brock* (meaning badger), are still with us. Most significantly the Celts devised a system of counting or scoring sheep that survived until well into the 19th century. The words used varied from dale to dale; in Wensleydale *yan, tean, tither, mither, pip* were 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 to farmers for 2000 years.

But most of the distinctive Yorkshire words originated from peoples who came after the Celts. When the Romans left Britain around 400AD, a vacuum was created and then filled by waves of new settlers. Among these were the Angles from northern Germany, who settled in northern and central England, forming two kingdoms: Northumbria in the far North-east and Mercia in the Midlands. The language of these two groups diverged and Mercian dialect influenced southern and western Yorkshire and Northumbrian dialect dominated to the east and north. The boundary was broadly along the line of the River Wharfe and continues to this day. To the south developed the West Riding dialect, while to the north the North and East Riding dialects took shape. The Angles therefore laid the first proper foundations of Yorkshire dialect, giving it its Germanic character.

Typical of this connection is the Yorkshire dialect word *sam*, to gather up. This comes from the Old English *samnian* and is reflected in the modern German word *sammeln*. With the Saxons in southern and western England (they were another tribe from

Germany), the Angles developed in the widest sense what is now identified as Old English.

The other main influence on Yorkshire language came in the shape of the Vikings. From the ninth century onwards, Danes and Norsemen invaded the area, the Danes conquering York and the Norsemen coming in from the north. Under the subsequent rule of the Vikings, the county of York was divided into three *thirdings*, or *ridings*, administered from York in the centre. Viking influence can still be seen in the placenames of *Muker, Gunnerside* and *Thwaite* in Swaledale. They added other words too – such as *addle* (to earn), *laik* (to play) and *teem* (to pour) – but always mainly in the eastern and northern parts of Yorkshire, helping to further separate the North and East Riding dialects from the West Riding dialect.

The next ‘overhaul’ of English came with the Normans. After 1066, their Old French became interwoven with Old English leading to Middle English, used by Geoffrey Chaucer in his *Canterbury Tales*. The Normans had less impact on Yorkshire than other areas but *urchin* (hedgehog), *buffit* (small stool) and *fent* (piece of cloth) are all from Norman French and still exist in Yorkshire dialect.

With the spread of education, Middle English began to be written down, and usually in a standardised form, a sort of early ‘BBC’ English. It wasn’t until the 19th century that Yorkshire dialect began to be recorded as a written language. By then, it had already begun to decline.

The Yorkshire Ridings lasted 1000 years, until 1974 when they were demolished to make way for West Yorkshire, North Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Humberside and Cleveland. Parts of the county were lost or ‘handed back’ to neighbouring counties. History and identity were all swept away in the name of convenience. In 1996, after a prolonged outcry, the East Riding was re-instigated and parts of Cleveland were given ‘honorary’ Yorkshire status.

## Key features of Yorkshire dialect

If the main features of Yorkshire dialect had to be summed up, they might be as follows

☼ The West Riding dialect stands slightly apart from its cousins in the North and East Ridings. It is the easiest for outsiders to understand and is the version usually adopted by those trying to imitate a Yorkshire accent. To listen to it, however, West Riding is quite harsh in sound, perhaps reflecting the hard industrial lives often led by its speakers. The North and East dialects include an additional hint of Geordie and sound softer than West Riding dialect. They contain greater elements of Scandinavian and the East Riding dialect is perhaps the hardest for outsiders to penetrate. Even within Ridings, however, there is considerable variation in sounds and spellings over quite short distances. In the Dales, for example, there are significant differences from one dale to another.

☼ Yorkshire dialect retains many old words since discarded from Standard English, as in *sher's starved* (she's cold), or 'updated' as in *ah telled Fadder* (I told Father). It is quite Germanic and Scandinavian with some words reflecting those languages.

☼ Vowel sounds tend to be either shorter than Standard English, as in *bath* or *brass*, or broader, as in *abaht* (about) or *'eead* (head).

☼ Consonants tend to be pronounced more emphatically but both spoken and written forms tend to drop the *h* at the start of words and the *g* at the end, as in *is 'Arry courtin'?*

☼ *The*, and the letter *t* in general, is often replaced by the much imitated glottal stop, where the standard *t* sound is either half pronounced (on the bed is written *on t'bed*, and pronounced somewhere between *ont bed* and *on bed*) or seemingly dropped altogether, as in *ge'i'e'en* (get it eaten). In this way, written dialect (which tends to be highly phonetic, ie follows the way words actually sound) can be a sea of apostrophes.

☼ Words are often run together, as in *lerrergerritersen*, or let her get it herself.

☼ Singular verbs are often used where plurals would be used in Standard English, as in *t'days is getting brighter*. In a way that similarly implies sloppy grammar but is really just the way the dialect is, *them* is often used in place of *those*, as in *them cakes*, and

sentences can be an obstacle course of double negatives, as in *wi dooant want nowt to do wi' nooab'dy* (we don't want anything to do with anyone).

☼ Yorkshire dialect preserves the ancient distinction between *you* as a subject and *you* as an object in a sentence. Once we might all have said *thou kissed her* and *she kissed thee*. Modern English has discarded the distinction but in dialect *tha* or *thoo* tend to be used as the subject and *thee* as the object.

☼ Reflexive verbs are more common than in Standard English. In Yorkshire, you don't sit down, you sit yourself down, as in *ah'll sit missen dahn*.

## Sample words and phrases

The following give something of a flavour of dialect

☼ *Wi 'ad ter wesh wersens i' cowl watter* We had to wash in cold water (West Riding)

☼ *Yan o' them lasses is reet bonny* One of those girls is very pretty (North Riding)

☼ *Listen at bairn roaring!* Listen to the baby crying!

☼ *Wi s'll 'appen stay while Munda* We'll perhaps stay until Monday

☼ *Tak nooa gaum on it* Take no notice (West Riding)

☼ *Allus at t'last push up* Always at the last minute

☼ *Ah'm bahn ter side them pots* I'm going to clear away the dishes (West Riding)

☼ *Thamunsupupanshurrup* You must drink up and be quiet (West Riding)

☼ *Off-come-un* Someone from outside Yorkshire

Yorkshire people are, of course, traditionally renowned for not suffering fools gladly. Interestingly, there are a huge number of ways to call someone a fool in Yorkshire dialect, including

*barm-pot, blether-'eead, bladder-head, buffel-'eead, cawf-'eead, clart-'eead, dooad, doylem, dummie-'eead, feckless, feeal/fooil, fond-'eead, gaumless, fleerer, gauve-Andrew, gawby, gawk, gawp-'eead, gommeril, leetgeen, lobcock, lump-yed, maddling, numb-yed, nuppit, stoddy, wossack*

It is easy to insult someone in dialect! Similarly, there are understandably many expressive phrases to use

in conversations about Yorkshire weather, including *backendish* (autumnal), *coming on* (starting to rain), *harr* (mist), *mizzle* (misty drizzle), *puckly* (dull, East Riding), *rawky* (raw and misty), *snizy* (bitingly cold and damp, North Riding), *thin* (cold), *thunner pash* (downpour, North Riding), *tipplin' dahn* (raining hard), *white ovver* (covering of snow), *wuthering* (blustery)

And there is a whole ladder of expressions to use in response to the question *Nah then?* (How are you?)

*grand* (really well), *nicely* (quite well), *nobbut middlin* (only average), *fair ter middlin* (not at my best), *nobbut dowly* (miserable, poorly), *taken badly* (ill), *goin' dahn t'Nick* (going to die)

## Yorkshire in films and on TV

Many films and TV programmes feign Yorkshire dialect or accents rather badly but the following are said to be reasonably good representations

☼ *Kes*, filmed around Barnsley

☼ *Billy Liar*, filmed in Bradford

☼ *The Full Monty*, featuring Sheffield

☼ *All Creatures Great and Small*, filmed in the Dales

☼ *Last of the Summer Wine*, filmed in Holmfirth

*Emmerdale*, *Heartbeat* and *Monty Python* sketches are not said to be good representations

## Further information

☼ *Basic Broad Yorkshire* and *The Yorkshire Dictionary of Dialect, Tradition and Folklore*, both by Dr Arnold Kellett

☼ *Yorkshire Words Today* by Yorkshire Dialect Society

☼ *The Yorkshireman's Dictionary* by Peter Wright

☼ Yorkshire Dialect Society  
[www.yorkshiredialectsociety.org.uk](http://www.yorkshiredialectsociety.org.uk)

☼ East Riding Dialect Society  
[www.yorkshiredialect.com/east\\_riding\\_dialect\\_society.htm](http://www.yorkshiredialect.com/east_riding_dialect_society.htm)

☼ Yorkshire Dialect Website [www.yorkshiredialect.com](http://www.yorkshiredialect.com)

☼ Yorkshire Ridings Society [www.yorkshiridings.org](http://www.yorkshiridings.org)

☼ Yorkshire Genuki [www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/YKS](http://www.genuki.org.uk/big/eng/YKS)

☼ Silsden town website  
[www.silsden.net/yorkshiredialect/dictionary.htm](http://www.silsden.net/yorkshiredialect/dictionary.htm)

☼ Yorkshire Dialect Verse [www.yorkshire-dialect.org](http://www.yorkshire-dialect.org)