

# Prosperity to Poverty—and Back?

## A Portrait of Hull, the UK's Least Prosperous City



DAWN OVER THE HUMBER BRIDGE

“When your train comes to rest in Paragon Station against a row of docile buffers,” runs the Larkin quote, “you alight with an end-of-the-line sense of freedom.”

Hull, ranked as the least prosperous area of the UK, is certainly at the end of the line, a “cul-de-sac” as one local described it on the bank of the Humber, last stop before the cold waters of the North Sea.

It was from these waters that Hull once prospered. The warehouses and customs buildings in the old part of the city have long since been converted to flats and bars. Yet it was on these wharfs that sugar and rum were unloaded from trading ships and a young Wilberforce first learned of the product of slavery.

Not far from the Wilberforce family home, the Arctic Corsair, Hull’s last sidewinder trawler, lies moored in the mud. Now a museum, it once broke records for the landing of cod and haddock. Looking out to sea, scarred by the salt air, it is a monument to a city broken by the collapse of its fishing industry, killed off by the Cod Wars and the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy. The sense of freedom has long gone.

Hull has never really recovered from the loss of its fishing industry, the loss of prosperity from the sea. This industry once guaranteed jobs and income for entire generations. Education did not matter in the fishing neighbourhoods; life came from the trawlers. Prosperity has long since left these communities, which were relocated en masse to sweeping council estates where poverty and deprivation took hold. Decades later and little has



WILBERFORCE DRIVE, HULL



changed. Hull underdelivers significantly on prosperity in six of the seven pillars of the Index, marking a deep-woven pattern of deprivation that extends beyond economic circumstance.

All that is left of fishing is attitudes. In Bransholme, one of Hull's large estates, gardens and homes are protected by razor wire and spikes. School is not out yet, but two young teenage boys squat by the kerb idly throwing stones back and forth. That education does not matter is perpetuated for a third or fourth generation, and it shows. Hull ranks 375th for education. Just 49 percent of Hull teenagers get a GCSE at A\* to C in English and Maths, and 12.5 percent of the adult population have no qualifications. Ambition, never required in the fishing days, remains stubbornly absent. "The one thing you need to know about Hull", says a friend who grew up there, "is it's a poverty of aspiration. For the lucky few, they grow up with the aspiration to leave."

Almost all of Hull is deprived. The more prosperous suburbs like Cottingham, with their different perspective, lie outside the city boundaries. Schools draw only from their immediate area. Children grow up knowing nothing but their estate. There are pensioners who have lived in Hull all their lives and have never travelled the five miles into the city centre. Their response when asked why is, "Well, why would we want to?" Life and ambition do not extend beyond the limits of the estate.

Communities are on the move again as housing regeneration kicks in. Large estates are being bulldozed as families move out, leaving others living in a shuttered wasteland. "The problem is," one City Councillor tells me, "we are fighting against a community destroyed by the collapse of the fishing industry. We will always come bottom of rankings like this until we can get kids to have a different outlook."

Local efforts are being made to turn Hull's trajectory around. Food banks are handing out food with cookery lessons, tackling the poor health and lifestyle that poor education has perpetuated. The City Council has used a large part of the public health budget to subsidise school meals and extend breakfast clubs, making them among the cheapest in the country. Schools, too, are doing much to tackle the poverty of aspiration, trying to inspire kids through careers education, after-school classes on exam skills, and extra tuition, and encouraging those who want to learn a trade to consider self-employment.

Is it working? One headteacher told me that it was an uphill struggle against weak parenting and national exam changes. Parents are not very good at supporting the school's interventions until you tell them exactly what to do. Even then, they are often quick to give in. Changes to exams mean that kids are forced to do a broader range of subjects. In Hull's estates, this just means that children see repeated failure earlier and earlier in their lives. This sense of failure is difficult to overcome.

Nevertheless, despite the challenge, there is cause for optimism. The same head remarked that, after nearly ten years in post,



“finally, our students are seeing that they can be different from their parents.” In the words of a Councillor who represents one of Hull’s estates, “If children grow up believing they can be better, they will be.”

One thing that is uniting the town in a sense of optimism is Hull’s status as the UK City of Culture 2017. Every school, every child is getting involved, and there is a great sense of city-wide introspection as people do not just mourn the loss of what Hull was, but are given licence to think about what Hull is, and what it can and should be. Aspiration is creeping in.

“Hull has always had one eye for rebellion,” explained a local journalist, “even down to our white phone boxes.” We are standing by the remains of Hull’s medieval Beverley Gate, where Charles I was refused entry to the city in 1642, an act of defiance that helped spark the English Civil War. Around us the whole town centre is being dug up and redrawn in preparation for 2017. There are still smears of blue paint everywhere after Spencer



RE-DEVELOPMENT OF THE FRUIT MARKET AREA, HULL

Tunick’s Sea of Hull, the UK’s largest nude installation. Not far away stands the monument to Wilberforce, who achieved one of the greatest rebellions against prevailing thought in history.

Hull’s resurrection would be a fitting 21st-century rebellion. Wilberforce once said that “it is the true duty of every man to promote the happiness of his fellow creatures to the utmost of his power”. There is a great sense that Hull is coming to realise that after decades of unstoppable decline, a more hopeful future is in its gift once again.