

# Unravelling the palimpsest of Hessle Road, Hull

Cyril and Kerry describe how an article in *Geography* gave them a focus for their A level geography 'Changing Places' unit of work in Hull.



Accompanying  
online materials

'... the past is ever-present in the urban landscape, as each place can be regarded as a palimpsest, where layers of history, geography, culture and politics co-exist.' (Marvell and Simm, 2016)

We decided that our 'near place' for the AQA A level unit 'Changing Places' would be the Hessle Road area of Hull, an inner-city area with a proud history, a difficult recent past and in need of rebranding. We thought it was essential to use our near place as a fieldwork opportunity, both to enhance students' understanding of the concepts covered in the introduction to the unit and to begin the process of developing enquiry skills for the students' independent investigation in the summer term. As we began to plan the unit, we received our copy of the Autumn 2016 issue of *Geography*.

'Unravelling the geographical palimpsest through fieldwork: discovering a sense of place' by Alan Marvell and David Simm set us thinking about applying its principles to our local area. Although Hessle Road is hardly Barcelona, the article gave us a focus for our fieldwork and an insight into how we could develop a sense of place in this area of Hull which was once the heart of its fishing industry. Students had access to the article as part of their extended reading programme, both to support their learning and to give them a taste of human geography at university level.

## Preparatory work

This included research on the growth of Hull and Hessle Road with a focus on the exogenous and endogenous factors involved. The concept of place was discussed in class and eventually defined as *location plus meaning*, affected by exogenous and endogenous factors, dynamic and functioning through different types of connectivity. This work allowed the students to explore a variety of issues including sense of community, how communities change and connections within a place. To understand the present of Hessle Road we thought it was important to appreciate its past, so in class we explored community identity through a range of resources, including historical maps and accounts, oral histories, songs, area slang, poetry, events such as trawler disasters and subsequent demands for greater safety at sea, recent newspaper articles (mainly negative) and the work of local community groups (mainly positive). These were all sourced via an internet search of sites dedicated to Hessle Road, and created a sense of its community and meaning for the students. The difficulty was being selective about which resources to use. (See downloads for a selection of the resources we used as stimuli.)

Students arrived in class to the sound of Dave Williams singing the Hessle Road song and images from the past. The lyrics inspired debate about bobbars (dock workers who unloaded the trawlers) clogs, shotgun weddings and the laughter and tears on Hessle Road: a sense of community was building. We balanced this romantic view of the past with data and images highlighting the poverty and other difficulties faced by the working people of Hessle Road, for instance *Ada the Braider* by Brian Hodgins and *Fishy Business* by Mark Walmsley. We added a different layer to the history of the area with the study of Coltman Street (internet ref. 2), an iconic area of Hull and historically a 'good area': census data from the nineteenth century reveals that it was inhabited by doctors, trawler fleet owners, merchants and architects, all with live-in servants. We studied the street specifically with reference to the Reverend Joseph Coltman, who owned the land it was built on, and was in his time the fattest person in England. Later, we compared the piecemeal development of high-class housing in Coltman Street to the gridirons of rapidly erected, high density terraced housing that exploded to its west as new docks and factories appeared and Hull spread westwards. Our historical maps allowed us to plot this urban sprawl; our fieldwork was designed to see how much, if any, of it remained.

Hessle Road has always been an area of contrasts. Census data from 1901 and 1911 helped students to identify household characteristics in more affluent and more deprived parts of the area. Accounts of late 19th and early 20th century poverty emphasized this aspect of what living in the area meant and informed our enquiry into its current character.



Figure 1: A Victorian fountain in Boulevard, in the Hessle Road area of Hull ©Justin Woolliscroft.



**Figure 2:** Students working on their fieldwork in Hessele Road @Cyril Clark.



**Figure 3:** Typical housing that dominated the Hessele Road area in the past © Cyril Clark.

Our introductory work included a comparison of Inner London with inner Hull, and a look at rebranding in Liverpool and areas of London for ideas about how the reputation of our study area might change over time. The London comparison demonstrated the process of gentrification, transforming former working-class houses into expensive and prestigious properties. The transformation of Liverpool's Albert Dock highlighted the potential for similar developments in our study area. We wanted to make students aware that inner cities are complex urban zones and a vital source of study in the concept of changing places.

### Fieldwork

The fieldwork was planned around the palimpsest approach and a strategy of using our 'geographical eyes' to peel back the layers of Hessele Road. Could we identify layers, not only in the built environment, but in what living in the area means for people today?

Secondary data established current socio-economic characteristics. Neighbourhood statistics at Super Output Area level provided data on current levels of deprivation in the area; a wealth of information was obtained from a Neighbourhood Regeneration Appraisal conducted in 2002 (internet ref. 1). The NRA included a social survey which identified how people felt about living in the area and how they wanted the area to change in the future. Of particular interest was a cost-benefit analysis of options for future planning and the selection of a preferred option. Students were able to evaluate how much of this future plan had occurred by 2016.

In the field we identified six sites (selected on a prior visit) to investigate not only different styles of dwelling but also different experiences of conservation, neglect and development. Students sketched and annotated their sketches as we 'taught in the field'. A bipolar quality decay assessment focused attention on the current state of the area.

**Figure 4:** Recent housing development in Hessle Road  
© Cyril Clark.



Highlights for us were the ways in which students dissected the palimpsest in the field. They identified different house styles, changing roof levels, elaborate fountains recalling real pride in the area in a different era, blue plaques on the homes of the rich and famous, statues reflecting the significance of trawling related people and events, iconic refurbishments and conservation, gradual renewal alongside urban decay, and a stretch of low-cost terraced housing that demonstrated the predominant housing style up until the 1970s.

Encouraging students to 'feel' the area, experiencing its sounds and smells and assessing the quality decay index of the buildings and the environment focused their attention on the nature of Hessle Road as a 'near place'. A brief questionnaire focused on what the area means to visitors and people living nearby.

### Follow-up

A follow up programme integrated the primary and secondary data and produced our case study of a near place.

The final question we asked our students was 'Have we stripped back the palimpsest of Hessle Road?' Responses ranged from 'Well it's not Barcelona!' to 'It made us look and made us ask questions. I find myself walking through town and looking and wondering how it came to be like this.'

With any new specification, schemes of work are developed and then refined. We will review and refine our fieldwork activity; but it will adhere to these basic principles – that the best geography is done in the field, and that our task is to open the 'geographical eyes' of our students, teaching them how to think like geographers.

The full fieldwork programme is available from Cyril at [cyril.clark@wyke.ac.uk](mailto:cyril.clark@wyke.ac.uk) if readers are interested.

### Reference

Marvell, A. and Simm, D. (2016) 'Unravelling the geographical palimpsest through fieldwork: Discovering a sense of place', *Geography*, 101, 3, pp. 125-136

### Internet sources (all accessed 13/1/2017)

1. Hull City Council: Newington and St Andrew's area action plan  
[http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/portal/page?\\_pageid=221,574687&\\_dad=portal&\\_schema=PORTAL](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/portal/page?_pageid=221,574687&_dad=portal&_schema=PORTAL) (Hessle Road is Area 5 on the Action Plan map)
2. [www.hullcc.gov.uk/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/HOME/PLANNING/CONSERVATION/CONSERVATION%20AREAS/COLTMAN%20ST%20CACA.PDF](http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/pls/portal/docs/PAGE/HOME/PLANNING/CONSERVATION/CONSERVATION%20AREAS/COLTMAN%20ST%20CACA.PDF)  
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Pictures of the Hessle Road area.
4. [www.hullhistorycentre.org.uk/discover/hull\\_history\\_centre/our\\_collections/sourceguides/lost\\_trawlermen.aspx](http://www.hullhistorycentre.org.uk/discover/hull_history_centre/our_collections/sourceguides/lost_trawlermen.aspx)  
A tragic and moving alphabetical list of Hull-born fishermen and those serving on Hull-registered vessels who were lost at sea from the 1860s up to 2000.
5. [www.hullwebs.co.uk/content/I-20c/city/hessle-rd/index.htm](http://www.hullwebs.co.uk/content/I-20c/city/hessle-rd/index.htm) A history of the Hessle Road area of Hull.
6. [www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5HgjWigw4Y](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P5HgjWigw4Y)  
One man's memories of the people of Hessle Road, with nostalgic photos.

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