

books Paul Barker

Telling the tale of 'twin' in north

This is a tale of two Hampsteads. There's the NW3 we all know, here in North London. But there's also an upstart north-country rival: Hebden Bridge, which is now coming to have the reputation of "Hampstead of the north" located deep in the West Yorkshire Pennines. I grew up in the Yorkshire version, and now live across the Heath from the original.

The comparison of how the two areas have changed over time intrigues me.

Both NW3 and Hebden Bridge have been drastically reshaped over the years by gentrification. This process is among the most powerful forces driving the way we live now. Geographers have a new, jargon name for the rural variant, of which Hebden Bridge is the prime example. They call it 'greentrification'. My book, *Hebden Bridge: A Sense of Belonging*, explores this crucial social upheaval.

But take NW3 first. If you went to Tate Britain's just-closed Pre-Raphaelite exhibition, you may have seen Ford Madox Brown's famous *Hampstead* picture, titled *Work*.

Mid-19th century Heath Street was an apt place to portray a cross-section of Victorian society; all busy with symbolic activities.

Middle class ladies walk by as navvies dig drains, unemployed haymakers seek jobs, and bereft orphan children huddle together. Meanwhile, Thomas Carlyle and a philosopher friend stand by contemplating the moral value of labour.

This was Hampstead then, but the village became an early instance of gentrification. To scrub out the taints of idleness and squalor, a workhouse was built at New End, and a public bathhouse and laundry on Flask Walk.

The times marched on. The workhouse became a hospital and, in the 1960s, apartments. The baths were revamped into smart dwellings.

I knew a sociologist who, born in Hampstead in the 1920s, could still claim that the back street of his birth was authentically working class. Little chance now.

The term 'gentrification' was invented by Ruth Glass, a University College academic, in 1964. It was her slightly odd label for the way working class homes were 'going middle class'. In north London the tide of gentrification had already swelled beyond NW3. Notting Hill and Islington beckoned.

It wasn't confined to Hampstead village. A sunny corner of Chalk



■ Paul Barker in Hebden Bridge

Farm was rebranded 'Primrose Hill'. In the 1960s Alan Bennett wrote a little sketch, called *Streets Ahead*, about Nigel and Jane Knocker-Threw, making gentle fun of his NW1 neighbours, Jonathan and Rachel Miller.

The first outside arrivals in London's down-on-their-luck working class terraces were theatre people, artists and architects. Students slotted in somewhere. Writers and journalists came next. After them, teachers and junior lecturers, an adventurous lawyer or two, maybe a publisher. Eventually, the senior civil servants, perhaps even a financial whizz-kid's family.

And 'greentrification'? How did Hebden Bridge come to be called the Hampstead of the north?

When I went to school there this was a busy little textile town, or large village, tucked into a narrow valley below heather-clad moors. Brontë country, really. The supposed site of Wuthering Heights was a Sunday afternoon's walk away. Hebden Bridge was a strongly working class epitome of the old "Co-op and chapel" culture.

But the mills closed, the local Co-op went bust, the chapels were felled. By the mid-1960s there was dereliction and numerous houses standing empty. Property was worth almost nothing.

Then 'greentrification' clicked in. With no mill smoke to screen them, the beauties of hills, woodland and moors shone out. Rain washed away the ingrained soot. Enterprising art school students from Manchester founded squats. Lecturers moved in from the nearby universities and polys. One hilltop hamlet became known as Granada Village because so many TV people commuted in. Now it is staff from the BBC's new northern base in Salford. House prices rose accordingly.

A high proportion of the adults are graduates. There are numerous professional writers and

photographers. That's one reason why floods in Hebden Bridge last summer got such coverage in the national press.

Arts and crafts flourish. Chapel-going is replaced by a devotion to ecological radicalism. Hebden Bridge is sometimes described as "achingly trendy".

Instead of textiles, Hebden Bridge now manufactures lifestyles.

The Hampstead of the north? Some might disagree but both places sell *Fired Earth* paints, after all. Who could wish for more?

■ Hebden Bridge: *A Sense of Belonging* is published by Frances Lincoln, £16.99. Social historian Paul Barker talks about his book on Hebden Bridge at Camden's Highgate branch library at 7.30pm on Thursday, January 31.