Lincolnshire and the East Midlands:
A Historian’s Perspective

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Within the broad perspective of English regions where should we place Lincolnshire? The English Tourist Board says it is in the East Midlands; the Electricity Board says most of it is; the independent television companies seem to think it is in Yorkshire (despite the well known aversion to crossing the Humber), while my impression is that the BBC places it within the East Midlands on a semi-ad hoc basis. Within Lincolnshire only a handful of companies adopt an East Midlands title. The local telephone directories list companies with East Midlands in their names in Lincoln (2), Gainsborough (1), Newark (1), Spalding (2), Stamford (1) and Grantham (3). By way of comparison it should be added that there are more than thirty such companies in Nottingham. But is Lincolnshire really in the East Midlands, and if so what does this mean for the historian? Arguably Lincolnshire had, and has, no obvious regional identity, but this is not the same as suggesting that it has stood alone in the past and that it would continue to do so today if planners did not try to dump northern parts of the county into something called Humberside. Local historians can define their unit of study as a village, a parish or a county, but whichever they chose can be properly understood only in the context of board trends across large areas of the country. But where do we draw these wider boundaries and on what basis?

Today we happily use regional terminology. Parts of the country are loosely described as the north of England, the Midlands, the South, or more specifically the north-west, the west Midlands, the south-west, and so forth. These areas do not necessarily have a common identity in terms of coherence of culture or outlook, or of government and politics, or of farming and industry, let alone any ‘natural’ or topographical affinities. This is no bar to using the terms, partly because we have no obvious intermediary between the county and the nation; no equivalent, for example, of the French regions such as Brittany, Normandy and Burgundy. However loosely regional terminology is used, it implies that individual counties do not exist in isolation, and arguably such an assumption is just as valid in the past. There is no substitute for studying counties in their own right, hence the ongoing Victoria County History volumes, or similar studies such as the History of Lincolnshire series or the recently proposed History of Kent. On the other hand we may find a different perspective on local history if we examine a county’s history within its broader regional links. In what follows, I want merely to make a few brief points about Lincolnshire when seen from this perspective, without trying to give the county what would probably be a false regional identity.

First, what links and connections has Lincolnshire had in the past with adjoining counties, and how does this knowledge help us to understand the evolution and development of the county? To some extent the answer to a question such as this depends on how far back we go in time. If we take the development of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Lindsey, we can find here an example of how sub-divisions of the county imparted a different regional context to its various parts. Lindsey’s current boundaries are probably those established in 678, but political dominance passed between Mercia and Northumbria. In the longer term Lincolnshire evolved as three separate administrative areas, Holland, Kesteven and Lindsey, each with a particular sense of place and context. Because of its varied background, treating Lincolnshire as a single county for a discussion of this type, is itself open to question. Such notable local historians as W. G. Hoskins and Joan Thirk have, in writing about the East Midlands, both excluded the fenland areas as having more in common with neighbouring East Anglia.

In a formal sense we can identify two major links between Lincolnshire and surrounding areas, and a number of lesser connections. The nearest the East Midlands has ever come to being a region for government and administration purposes was with the setting up of the Danegeld at the end of the ninth century. This area was roughly contiguous with the counties of Derbyshire, Leicestershire, Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire and Rutland, and was administered through the five boroughs of Nottingham, Derby, Lincoln, Leicester and Stamford. But the Danelaw lasted for only a brief period, and there was really nothing like it again until after World War Two, when Lincolnshire was joined with 35 other counties in the Treasury’s post-1946 standard regions with Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Northamptonshire and Rutland. These links, however, are of such recent and in many ways passing interest – especially since the abandonment of regional planning in 1979 – to make them of little interest to our theme.

Another formal link incorporating Lincolnshire within a larger physical area has been the diocese. Lincoln was one of England’s major towns at the time of the Norman Conquest, and its position was enhanced when in 1072-3 Bishop Remigius moved his cathedral to the town from Dorchester in Oxfordshire. Work began on building the Cathedral, which on building the Cathedral, which on the heart of the largest English diocese, stretching over nine and a half counties of eastern and midland England. With the strengthening of episcopal government during the medieval centuries, Lincoln became the centre of an elaborate administrative machinery, and the bishop spent much of his time moving through and administering his vast jurisdiction. After the Reformation the power of the church gradually declined, but the vast diocese brought Lincolnshire into a much wider regional context until it was gradually broken up in the sixteenth century.

The Danelaw and the diocese were formal links with boundaries around them, but connections of this sort were not necessarily a key to regional identity. Part of the problem is that regions may not remain fixed through time, and the relationship between areas, whether counties or smaller units, is always likely to change according to the nature and function of the wider links. One informal connection of this kind which brought Lincolnshire within a wider perspective was trade. As long ago as the eleventh century lead, wool and other commodities were carried from the Peak District to Boston, in return for grain and other goods. Much of it passed along the waterway network, although in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries wool for Boston was also carried by river to Newark, and then across country in carts. Arguably the barometer of Lincolnshire’s medieval prosperity was the state of the Foss Dyke, linking the county to the River Trent and beyond. Once it silted up around 1350 Derbyshire wool was diverted south through London and Southampton. The Foss Dyke was not fully restored until the seventeenth century, with which it had repercussions for Lincolnshire trade. However, the poor state of water communications did not prevent the development of the Wollaton coal mines near Nottingham, which were at least partly exploited with sales of coal into Lincolnshire in mind. By 1615 the Willoughby family was selling Wollaton coal in a number of Lincolnshire towns including Grantham, Lincoln, Boston and Gainsborough. The returning vessels often carried grain.
Trading links were strengthened by the restoration of the Foss Dyke in the eighteenth century. In 1755 large quantities of corn were sent from Lincolnshire along the Foss Dyke, the Trent and the Derwent to help relieve the perennial grain shortage in Derbyshire, particularly in mining villages in the north of the county. Improved communications, notably the building of canals in the second half of the eighteenth century, rejuvenated Lincolnshire’s agriculture, while the Foss Dyke carried a considerable tonnage of coal into Lincolnshire both from the Trent valley and south Yorkshire.

In many ways the canal era between the 1760s and the 1830s was the heyday of regional communications, largely because the waterways system was already bringing only limited improvement to inter-regional trade. Lincolnshire farmers saw a market for their goods in adjoining counties and, via the canal network, into Lancashire and beyond. These links began to look rather limited when the railway arrived from the 1840s and transformed the whole pattern of local and regional communications. In this case Lincolnshire benefited from the opening up of the London grain market to its farmers. Railways reduced the waterborne carriage of coal and grain, and put some canals out of business.

The railway also offers a further means of testing regional links. Unlike canals, railways were relatively impervious to physical constraints. Consequently the lines out of Lincolnshire provide a significant indication of the county’s regional focus. What we find is strong historic links, which continue to the present day, between north Lincolnshire and south Yorkshire. The first line in the north of the county was the extension of the Manchester-Sheffield route, which reached Grimsby in 1848. In so doing it not only revitalised the ailing port, but helped to turn Clee into the modern resort of Cleethorpes. Excursions were already running from Nottingham to Grimsby in 1850, only two years after Grimsby was connected to the main line leaving tourists to walk the two miles to Clee. The earliest lines from Lincoln and Grantham, by contrast, were both to Nottingham, and it was the southern Lincolnshire coastline which came to be associated with the excursion trade from Leicester and Nottingham. Skegness, described in 1866 as ‘a retired watering place...free from bustle’, was transformed by being linked to the railway in 1874. On Ascot Bank Holiday no fewer than 1,000 trippers arrived for—in many cases—their first glimpse of the sea. The Skegness-Nottingham link was so strong that depression in the textile trades in the mid-1880s halved the number of visitors to the resort. The Nottingham Co-operative Society had branches in Skegness, and the Nottingham Evening Post had a Skegness edition.

These examples of regional links are offered merely to suggest a flavour of the interchange of people and goods which has taken place down the centuries. There were many others, and it would take a separate article to tackle the great variety of ways in which the county’s relationships to the wider region changed and developed through time. I have not, for example, discussed the changing roles of markets and fairs, or the farming links between the Lincolnshire fens and adjoining parts of East Anglia, and with some subjects there are questions we can pose but not answer with any satisfaction. In the ‘flight from the land’ during the agricultural depression of the late nineteenth century thousands of agricultural workers left Lincolnshire to begin a new life elsewhere. Many went abroad, while in England enclaves have been located in Hull, Middlesbrough, and other urban centres, but what we do not know is whether there was any regional pattern to this movement. Did migrants make for the industrialised parts of the east midlands or south Yorkshire? Did they simply follow the railway line, or did they go further afield? We currently have few answers to these questions, but the regionality of such links is worth investigating, especially given the likely wish of migrants to be able to return home at least occasionally, although distance was less of a problem in the age of the railway.

So far, I have argued that in all sorts of ways Lincolnshire in the past has to be seen within a regional context, although the strength or otherwise of the links varies according to the subject matter. A second way of employing the regional context is to raise comparative questions about change and development across time. Historians of particular communities have great difficulty avoiding the impulse to see their chosen place in the best possible light; after all, few of us have much taste for the history of failure. With Lincolnshire this is not a problem in the medieval period when the county was populous and wealthy and relatively more developed than surrounding areas. In 1086 Lincolnshire had more people, and more flourishing towns, than neighbouring counties in the east midlands, Lincoln was a great cathedral town, and Boston was the premier English port outside London, at the heart of the great Continental wool trade.

In later periods the situation changed. Neil Wright’s book in the History of Lincolnshire series, Lincolnshire Towns and Industry 1700-1914, specifically looks at ‘Lincolnshire’s role in the industrial revolution’. It is a perfectly valid topic, but the subject is not one which automatically springs to mind in the context of Lincolnshire. Canals and railways reached Lincolnshire later than in neighbours; industrial development, such as it was, did not really take off until the 1840s and beyond. Indeed, all the evidence points to how slowly Lincolnshire adapted to industrialisation. Lincoln in the 1770s was described as having ‘little trade in proportion to the size of the place, and no other manufacture than a small one of cabbles’; Thomas Stone, reporting on the county for the Board of Agriculture in 1794, noted that opportunities for diversification had been wasted, and few a few minor textile interests had survived; and Arthur Young could not improve on this verdict when he prepared a further report on the county in 1813, dismissing Lincolnshire’s industrial interests in only a couple of pages out of more than 500. Young noted a ship being built at Gainsborough, occasional evidence of linen manufacture, and some woolen cloth production in the vicinity of Louth. Yet, only a few miles to the west, Sheffield, Nottingham and Leicester were at the heart of the Industrial Revolution. Can we explain this diversity within a regional context?

There is one obvious difference between Lincolnshire and adjacent counties to the west, the lack of workable mineral deposits. With the exception of iron ore, which was discovered in the Jurassic Scunthorpe area in the 1840s, and which Arthur Young could not enjoy the benefits of the natural resources most in demand in the course of the industrial revolution. This was a disadvantage, but it does not explain why the county had so little textile manufacturing. Possibly the rise of the cotton industry in the Industrial Revolution put Lincolnshire’s wool producers at something of a disadvantage, and their efforts to preserve their industry collapsed once steam power and mechanisation were applied to the West Riding wool textile industry. But was the failure more than this? Was it that Lincolnshire with its economy based on agriculture, and its rather scattered population, lacked the environment in which textile production could flourish? Could it also have been that little attempt was made to provide work for women, and that cottages were deliberately small to prevent families from taking on secondary employments? If so, we may be looking at genuine hostility towards industrial development. Whatever the case the failure to promote textile manufacture left an industrial void in the county which did not begin to be filled until agricultural engineering began on a significant scale in the 1840s, an industry predominantly associated with Lincoln, Gainsborough and Grantham. By no stretch of any imagination was Lincolnshire in the forefront of the industrial revolution as currently understood. As such, the county presents a striking paradox—the county of wool and overseas trade in the early medieval period, was relatively untouched by the advance of industry until the mid-nineteenth century.
Whatever the reason for the pattern of development in Lincolnshire, when viewed from a regional perspective the county generally lagged behind in the great changes of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. With both canals and railways Lincolnshire was late developing local and national links. The River Witham was improved during the 1760s but it was not until the opening of the Slea navigation in 1794 and the Horncastle navigation in 1802 – linking Seafor and Horncastle respectively to the river – that trade in the county received a real boost from waterway improvements. A similar lag effect was apparent with the railway. By 1840 Lincolnshire was surrounded by railways but none came closer than Nottingham or Hull, and the county did not have any lines until the opening of the Lincoln – Stamford route in 1846. Admittedly the next four years saw the county incorporated into the growing national network, but the late start was significant, and the concentration of lines in Lincolnshire was never as great as in adjoining counties to the west. As with water and rail, so with roads. The choice of route for the M1 in the 1950s and 1960s was a clear indication of Lincolnshire’s standing on the periphery in development terms, and the absence of any motorway in the county until recently is further evidence of its status.

Urban growth is another indicator of the pace of change. While some of the county’s towns have become quite substantial, among them Lincoln, Grimsby, Scunthorpe, Gainsborough and Grantham, by no stretch of the imagination can it be described as urbanised. Indeed, for many of the smaller market towns, improved communications and the pull of their larger neighbours, had a long-term undermining effect. Figures 1 and 2, showing the major settlements in the East Midlands in 1750 and 1901, give a striking visual impression of how populous the urban-industrial core running from south Yorkshire through Derbyshire, Nottinghamshire and Leicestershire had become by 1901, by comparison with what had happened in Lincolnshire. It we take Lincolnshire in isolation the picture of growth is impressive, but it is when the county is placed within the regional context that a rather different picture emerges.

In recent years historians have become increasingly aware of the regional diversity of the long process of industrialisation. The importance of south Lancashire, south Wales, the west Midlands and the West Riding of Yorkshire is not denied, but we can perhaps talk of deindustrialisation in southern England, and large swathes of the country did not really industrialise until well into the nineteenth century. Why there should have been these local differences remains under investigation, but set within an East Midlands context, Lincolnshire’s comparative industrial development comes more clearly into focus than when it is viewed alone.

If Lincolnshire is today in the East Midlands merely for the convenience of the English Tourist Board, the historian is still entitled to ask whether regional considerations were significant in the past. I have suggested two ways in which the regional context is important for our understanding of the past: the administrative boundaries which transcended county boundaries; and the measurement of comparative change across time. Neither of these subject areas is in any sense all-embracing, and regional links will vary across time and according to subject matter. It may remain a matter for debate as to whether Lincolnshire should be regarded as part of the East Midlands for present day purposes, and we may wish to conclude that the county has never had long standing links with other areas which justify assigning it to any particular region, in other words that it has no natural regional identity. However, we can still conclude that there are advantages to be gained from viewing the county – for some purposes – within a regional context. By employing such a context we can hope to find how far Lincolnshire was linked with its neighbours through time, and also give ourselves a clearer indication of changes in its relative status.

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Fig. 1 Major settlements in the East Midlands, 1750.

Fig. 2 Major settlements in the East Midlands, 1901.

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1. This is a revised version of a lecture delivered to the Annual Meeting of the Lincoln Record Society at Lincoln on 6 October 1990.
2. Bruce Eagles, 'Lindsey', in Steven Bassett, ed., The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms (Leicester, 1989), pp.202-12; Charles Phythian-Adams has recently made some very interesting suggestions (although not in the context of Lincolnshire) about how it is through the settlement history of individual areas that we can often best understand their later regional affiliations: 'Local history and national history: the quest for the peoples of England', Rural History, 2 (1991), 1-23.
17. The debate is briefly summarised in Beckett and Heath, 'When was the Industrial Revolution', and tackled in greater depth in P. Hudson, ed., Regions and Industries: A Perspective on the Industrial Revolution in Britain (Cambridge, 1989).