



MATTHEW PARRIS | NOTEBOOK

A visit home turns the key on memories of childhood

Matthew Parris Tuesday January 18 2022, 9.00pm, The Times

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When I was three the A1 was called the Great North Road and getting from London to our tiny, freezing stone cottage in Newsham in the Yorkshire North Riding took all day in Dad's little Austin. Aunts in furry coats kept pulling me back to cuddle me in the passenger seat, when I wanted to sit forward and see ahead. Now it's just the A1; the North Riding has been cancelled; the aunts are dead; and in our electric Mitsubishi we sped up a motorway-type road in hours.

It was Saturday and we were on our way to lunch in Yorkshire but not as far north as Newsham, so afterwards we continued, almost to Co Durham, to revisit my toddler haunts. My parents had emigrated to South Africa after the Second World War, but relented and returned with one-year-old me. We were in Newsham for three years before going abroad again. What would I remember now, after 70 years?

Even before entering the village I remembered where my mother's rich friends lived (up a lane, over the brook, and turn right) at Newsham House. Reaching the village (sweet, unchanged except gentrified) I knew where the bus-stop had been, recognised by its location the church where they threw nuts at Christmas, pointed out the doctor's house (his wife being my young mother's friend).

With my partner driving I could direct him up the lane towards the moor; knew where Arch House (now Arch Cottage) would be (on the left) — and there it was, next to my friend Pamela Braithwaite's house. Are Audrey's family still next door? Her nice mum ate orange peel and had a squint. I could see my bedroom, knew where the stairs would be, and saw the fields whither my parents carried the chemical lavatory to empty it. "Up that lane," I said to Julian, "there's a T junction, and Hill Top Farm will face us." And so it did.

On our way north we'd passed Barnsley. Here, aged three, I'd shut a little girl's finger in the door. Her house was on the left going up a hill. The offending door was in the downstairs front room, on the back wall, to the right. Why are these memories — geographical, spatial, topographical — so clear when almost everything else about toddlerhood has gone? As I've argued here before, I'm sure it's about language. Language lays down memory, so before language it's only things like mental maps, which need no words, that can be accessed. And fears. I was afraid that little Barnsley girl's mother would be angry. I didn't care about the little girl. I just wished she'd stop bawling.