There's Still Brass in Yorkshire

by Richard Lathe

From brass to sheep scores, reminders of the county's Celtic past

Rolling hills bright with bracken and heather. Smoke drifts from stone-faced chimneys in the valleys. Sheep roam, the curlews call. The air has a sharpness. Could be anywhere, but it's not quite like anyplace else. This is Yorkshire, and there's brass in those hills.

Nothing is more evocative of Yorkshire's down-to-earth rawness than the saying 'where there's muck there's brass'. Incomprehensible to most native English-speakers, but it speaks loudly of history, for Brass is a most unusual word.

Yorkshire terms mostly have a germanic or nordic stem. Tarn, beck, gill and fell all come from across the north sea; *thorpe,* a hamlet, *garth*, 'an enclosure', *wic* (*wick*), 'a dwelling', *thwaite*, 'a clearing', *laithe*, 'a barn', and the ubiquitous suffix *-by*, 'village', are relics of Saxon, Viking and Danish settlers.

Even the word 'dale' is germanic. *Tal* or *Thal* means valley - as in the Neander river, known for its buried skeleton of Neanderthal man.

But 'brass' is an exception. It is not germanic or nordic. One modern dictionary says it came from Old English *braes*, but this is incorrect, for in OE brass was *maestling*, giving *messing* in modern germanic and nordic languages. And it's not latin or romance either.

The word *brass* appears to have a Celtic origin, being related to the Welsh word *pres*, meaning both money and brass. P to B substitutions are not unusual, english 'block' is *plocyn* in Welsh. The relationship between W *pres* and E *brass* is accurately paralleled by W *pel* and E *ball.*

Moreover, the Romans attributed the metallurgic discovery of brass to the Celts of Gaul. Masters of metalwork, they first stirred molten copper with zinc to produce a shining golden amalgam more brilliant than either bronze or pewter, copper mixed with lead or tin.

Writing of Britain, Julius Caesar remarked that the land was well-peopled, the houses styled as in Gaul, and the money brass. The metal is still used for high denominations like our £1 coin and the new US 'golden dollar'; the old twelve-sided thrupenny bit was also brass.

The fact that the word brass is Celtic should not be a surprise. Two thousand years ago all Yorkshire was Celtic. Typical artefacts have been unearthed all over the county, traces of

their small oblong fields can still be seen in the Dales, most notably above Grassington.

The names of the major rivers predominantly stem from an early Celtic language - Aire, Cover, Don, Dove, Nidd, Sheaf, Tees, Ure, Went and Wharfe.

The name of the county town also has a Celtic origin. Though York now stands on the Ouse, the river formerly bore the name Ure, Eur or Yore all the way from source to confluence with the Humber. Upstream Wensleydale used to be known as Yoredale -- just as Rievaulx Abbery stands by the river Rye, the famous Jervaulx Abbey is "Jer-Vallix" from the Yore valley.

And in Latin this gave Eburacum -- Eboracum is a later variant. The viking name Jorvik has the same origin, with *vik* most likely meaning 'beaching-place'.

What *ure* originally meant is not known exactly, perhaps 'powerful' or even 'heather', but the Roman *isura* is also seen in river names of old Gaul.

Brass is not alone in surviving in current language. Many relics of the Celtic language have slipped into colloquial English - like 'lad' and 'lass' (*llanc, llances;* Welsh).

But even until recently the language was not just a few isolated words, far from it. Until at least the 1870s a distinctive counting system, the 'scores', was used in Yorkshire to count sheep, cattle, stitches, or in children's games. Many variants are known, such as Wensleydale *yan tean tither mither pip*, and Swaledale *yahn tayhn tether mether mimp*.

As J.R. Witty pointed out in 1927, the scores most likely have a Celtic origin -- 100 miles west one still hears *un, dau, tair, pedair, pimp* in the Welsh valleys.

How did this strong Celtic influence survive? Some have argued for linguistic survival from the time when Britons lived in the region, but others have suggested that scores were imported from Wales, possibly following cattle drovers and itinerant workers. But a third possibility is suggested by close links between Yorkshire and Brittany. To address this we must look to Yorkshire's history.

Yorkshire was turned over like a ploughed field by wave upon wave of settlers from abroad. And these settlements were seldom peaceful.

The Roman empire subdued the Celtic-speaking Brigantes, sugjugating their strongholds on Ingleborough, at Almondbury Hill near Huddersfield, and at Stanwick by Richmond.

When the empire collapsed, the old Celtic kingdoms flourished, like spring flowers after the winter snow. One was at Loidis (Leeds) - hence the Old Leodensian rugby team. To the east was Elmet, persisting in names like Sherburn in Elmet - Sherburn

(Celtic) is 'clear water'. In the Dales, Craven is thought to have been centred on Skipton.

Latin is thought to have survived in official business, but the Yorkshire language was a P-Celtic dialect related to Welsh. Q-Celtic is the Irish and Scots form. A mnemonic -- P is for 'practical', describing the Welsh who are hardy, prudent and down-to earth, while Q is 'quixotic' -- the Scots and Irish who are melancholic, hard-living and fiery.

But the terms relate to a specific letter substitution. The letter P of Welsh is replaced, in Gaelic Q-Celtic, by C or K, pronounced 'Q'. Welsh *map,* meaning 'son', becomes *mac* in Gaelic. *Pen*, 'head', gives Gaelic *ceann.*

So *Pen-y-Ghent*, the famous Yorkshire hill, is P-Celtic. It means 'windy summit' (*gwynt*, Welsh, is 'wind'). Pen hill by Wensleydale and Pendle hill just over the border in Lancashire have the same origin.

Then after more than a century of peace, the east coast saw a influx of continental settlers hungry for rich agricultural land. The Saxons. That they arrived at all attests to their boat-building skills. In the North, they were first repelled, but a decisive battle fought at Catterick, near Richmond, in around 570 AD, was a catastrophic defeat for the Celtic alliance.

While the Saxon tongue prevailed on the plains, there is no doubt that Celtic was still spoken in the uplands, for the Saxons called the Celts 'foreigners' or *weala*, as in the coutry Wales, so naming villages like Walburn in Swaledale and Walden in Wensleydale. A village called Wales is found close to Sheffield.

Cultural traffic continued unabated, each century bringing new incomers. York fell to the Danes in the 9th Century, only to be taken again by the Scandinavian Vikings in the 10th.

Then, in the 11th Century, Yorkshire was decimated from a very different quarter.

1066 famously saw the conquest of England by William and the Norsemen of France. This was not to everyone's liking; three years later the peoples of the North rebelled. A coalition of Yorkshiremen, Northumbrians and Danes planned an invasion of the South.

William's response was severe - French troops laid waste the land: the vale of York and the major valleys of the Dales were devastated. The warriors may have escaped, but William revenged himself on the peasants - destroying the homesteads and crops, butchering the population and their livestock.

What William left unfinished, starvation completed. More than 100,000 people died of hunger. The Domesday book records that the upper reaches of the Dales were almost entirely depopulated.

This might have put paid to Celtic Yorkshire, but for a twist of fate. Control of Yorkshire was handed to Alan of Brittany, his Earldom centred on the strategically-important Richmond. The Normans spoke old French, the town is named after their fortification - *Riche-Mont*, or 'strong hill'. Richmonds' Frenchgate recalls the foreign presence, Belle-Isle the major island off Brittany. The Belle-Isle suburb of Leeds has the same origin.

But the rank and file of Alan's men were Bretons. Records do not say whether Breton troops participated in the wasting of Yorkshire, but it seems likely - given that Yorkshire came under Alan of Brittany's control, and a third of William's foot-soldiers at Hastings were from Brittany.

This is a crucial point, because Breton is also a P-Celtic language similar to Welsh. If Breton soldiers took part in the reprisals, natural kindred spirit between the troops of Brittany and their Yorkshire cousins could have averted slaughter. If this is so, the persistence of Celtic could owe a strange favour to the men of western France.

And some settled - Giggleswick near Settle is the dwelling (*wic*) of Giggal, from the 7th Century Breton King *Iudicael.*

Though part of a greater England, the link with Brittany lasted for hundreds of years. It was not all plain-sailing: England and France were often at war, leaving Yorkshire, a dominion of both, in a difficult position. Yorkshire only lost its foreign allegiance in medieval times. And this too preserved the separate identity of the county.

The quiet hills and dales of Yorkshire conceal a turbulent and often bloody history. Yorkshire is a hotch-potch conglomerate of peoples and cultures. Celts and Romans. Angles, Saxons, Danes and Vikings. Normans and Bretons. In recent years, emigrés from different continents.

Today, from the traditional brass bands to modern brasseries, the origins stay the same - be it mixed culture, malted barley, or molten metal - well before 'money' the Celtic word *brass* was 'a stirring up'.