

50 GREAT THINGS

*to Come Out
of the*

MIDLANDS

ROBERT SHORE

Robert Shore

**Fifty Great Things to
Come Out of the Midlands**

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Celebrate the heart of Britain in this fun and informative mini-ebook. Rugby, Walkers Crisps, Conkers. These are just a handful of the many great things to have come out of the Midlands. In this celebratory list, journalist and loyal Midlander Robert Shore counts down fifty of the best gifts the Midlands has given the world. Knowledge no Midlander – nay, Brit! – should be without. From the author of *Bang in the Middle*.

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Fifty Great Things to Come Out of the Midlands
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Fifty Great Things to Come Out of The Midlands

Everyone knows what they think about the North and South of England; the clichés abound. But what about that big, anonymous stretch of land in between: the Midlands? Despite being home to a vast swathe of the English population, it's a region that has neither identity nor purpose. Or that's how it can sometimes *seem*, anyway. But, as the following list reveals, quietly, without fanfare, the Midlands has been the source of almost everything that is good about English – and, indeed, world – culture and history.

Here, in order of ascending stupendousness, are my top fifty things to come out of the Midlands:

50) Watchmen

Americans may have created Superman and Batman, but it was a Midlander who reinvented the superhero genre for the post-Cold War era. Alan Moore's *Watchmen* even made *Time* magazine's top 100 novels of all time in 2005 – the only graphic novel to do so. Despite his success, Moore continues to live in his native Northampton. When he was invited to appear in *The Simpsons* in 2007, a producer had to fly from LA to the Midlands to record his part. Rorschach, Doctor Manhattan, Silk Spectre – secretly, behind those masks and disguises, they're all Midlanders.

49) Gravity

Midlanders are very grounded people, so it should come as little surprise that it was a Midlander who first discovered gravity. Former Grantham schoolboy Sir Isaac Newton first hypothesised the inverse-square law of universal gravitation in his 1687 page-turner *Philosophiæ Naturalis Principia Mathematica*. As the noted versifier Alexander Pope wrote: 'Nature and nature's laws lay hid in night; / God said "Let Newton be" and all was light.' The Royal Society recently named humble Midlander Newton as the most influential scientist of all time (Einstein came second). Beat that, smarty-pants London!

48) The Sistine Chapel

Did you know that the Midlands is home to what archaeologists have recently dubbed 'the Sistine Chapel of the Ice Age'? Creswell Crags, an unassuming-looking limestone gorge on the Nottinghamshire-Derbyshire border, contains the most extensive cache of prehistoric bas-reliefs anywhere in the world. The subject matter of the engraved images – created by modifying the natural limestone topography of the caves – includes animals as well as what appear to be the earliest human nudes in the history of British art. That's right: Ice Age Midlanders invented Britart.

47) Mercians

The recent recovery of the Staffordshire Hoard from a field in Hammerwich has provided a useful reminder that Mercia (the Anglo-Saxon antecedent of the modern Midlands) was politically, culturally and militarily far superior to Northumbria (precursor of the modern North) and Wessex (the South). Mercian pre-eminence was most visibly set forth in the great earthwork that King Offa had built from the Bristol Channel to the river Dee. 'Offa's Dyke' is quite simply one of the wonders of the medieval world.

46) Christmas

Everyone knows that Santa Claus, aka Father Christmas, aka Kris Kringle, was born in Leicester.* But that's not the only, or even the main, reason why the festive season is so quintessentially Midland. Think about it – how do you know each year when it's Christmas (or Xmas) again? It's when you first hear Walsall boy Noddy Holder screaming 'It's Chriiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiistmaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaas!' at the climax of Slade's festive evergreen 'Merry Xmas Everyone, of course.

* That is to say, he's as likely to have been born in Leicester as anywhere else. He doesn't really exist, you know.

45) Jonathan Agnew

He may have been born in Cheshire (i.e. in the North) but few have done more to promote the splendours of the Midland landscape than Jonathan Agnew, who has fearlessly used his platform as England's leading cricket broadcaster to promote the beauties of the Vale of Belvoir in the East Midlands. Not only a great commentator (he was responsible for rendering Brian Johnston helpless on air with his famous Ian Botham 'leg over' line), Aggers, as regular listeners to *Test Match Special* know him, was a fine bowler in his day too – he played for Leicestershire, naturally. It's not his fault we lost the Ashes.

44) A Sense of Centredness

In the little village of Meriden, situated on the outskirts of Coventry, a sandstone pillar carries the following announcement: 'This ancient wayside cross has stood in the village for some 500 years and by tradition it marks the Centre of England.' The Ordnance Survey doesn't agree – it thinks the geographical heart of the country is eighteen miles away, at Fenny Drayton in Leicestershire; the Midland Oak in Leamington Spa likewise stakes a plausible claim to standing at the centre of England. But however you calculate it, England's heart is somewhere around here. If you want to feel really centred, this is where you need to be.

43) Walkers Crisps

Where is Leicester, and what is Leicester all about? Well, it's in the East Midlands (and where exactly is the East Midlands?) and about 11 million bags of crisps are produced in the Walkers factory there every day, so you could say it's all about deep-fried slices of potato. Mansfield exile Henry Walker first set up shop there in the 1880s, but his business only diversified into crisp production in 1948. It was a shrewd move – Walkers currently holds around 50 per cent of the British crisp market.

42) America

The idea of the USA was first cooked up in Scrooby in North Nottinghamshire by a group of religious Separatists who would eventually set sail for America on the *Mayflower*. The Pilgrim Fathers have bequeathed several important legacies to the modern US, beginning with the 'Mayflower Compact'. As President John Quincy Adams would later claim, the Compact was the foundation stone of the 1787 US Constitution, perhaps the most influential document ever enacted in the name of 'the people'. You could say, then, that those first persecution-fleeing Midlanders invented the concept of the Land of the Free.

41) Spaghetti Junction

As we just discovered, in the early modern period the Midlands taught America to be the Land of the Free. Today, the region can lay claim to the hardly less exalted title of the Land of the Free-Flowing Traffic Interchange. Opened to great public fanfare in 1972, Spaghetti Junction in Birmingham links three different motorways and features not a single set of traffic lights. Clever stuff, and the very quintessence of motoring freedom. Of course, some people say that Spag Junc is really just a big car park trying to pass itself off as a motorway junction, but we won't give such dissident voices publicity here.

40) Roundabouts

While we're on the subject of free-flowing traffic, let's consider Midlanders' supremacy when it comes to roundabouts. These marvellous circular traffic intersections didn't originate in the Midlands but Telford in Shropshire is the centripetal heart of twenty-first-century England, boasting the highest density of roundabouts per capita of population. Motorists have been known to use up a whole tank's worth of petrol driving from one end of Telford to the other: it's only a few miles, but the roundabouts are addictive. *Other Midland roundabout towns of note:* too many to list.

39) The Great Reform Act

Shortly after the current Coalition Government assumed power, Nick Clegg promised the 'biggest shake-up of our democracy since 1832'. Little Nicky has delivered nothing of the sort, of course, but it was good of him to remind us all of a *genuinely* defining event in British politics: the 1832 Great Reform Act, which laid the foundations of our modern electoral system. The foremost

public campaigner was the visionary Brum-based economist Thomas Attwood, who founded the Birmingham Political Union (BPU) and played a crucial role in securing the reform of the franchise in the 1830s. As Lord Durham declared: ‘the country owed Reform to Birmingham, and its salvation from revolution.’

38) Arthur Seaton

Nottingham novelist Alan Sillitoe created the ultimate modern Midland folk hero when he penned his classic Angry Young Man novel *Saturday Night and Sunday Morning* (1958). Anti-hero Arthur Seaton is a fount of thrillingly rebellious quotations. Sheffield musical darlings Arctic Monkeys adopted one of Seaton’s most resonant phrases for the title of their album *Whatever People Say I Am, That’s What I’m Not*, while Manc miserabilist Morrissey drew on the novel for his finest lyric, ‘There Is A Light That Never Goes Out’. Which neatly illustrates a general truth: whenever (if ever) you think of something good about the North, it’s usually the Midlands you’re really thinking about.

37) Gary Lineker

All Midlanders are nice people – that’s a scientifically proven fact – but that doesn’t stop them being high achievers. The sporting world’s Mr Nice, Gary Lineker, is a Leicester lad and was noted throughout his footballing career for his commitment to fair play: he was never even booked, never mind sent off. That didn’t stop him from becoming England’s second-highest all-time goalscorer on the international stage, of course. The Match of the Day host isn’t above poking fun at himself either: since 1995 he’s played an arch-villain in advertising campaigns for Walkers Crisps – who are also from Leicester.

36) Rebecca Adlington

Midlanders are also modest, almost to a fault – it’s one of the main reasons the splendours and accomplishments of the region are such a well-kept secret. Can you think of a more self-deprecating sporting over-achiever than Mansfield-born swimmer Rebecca Adlington, who, on *I’m A Celebrity*, was (I’m quoting) ‘so starstruck by Westlife singer and eventual victor, Kian Egan, she blushed heavily and couldn’t look him in the eye’? And she wept about her self-image too. *She’s England’s most decorated female Olympian ever, for heaven’s sake!* And a national treasure.

35) Proper Dialect

Some people think only Northerners do proper dialect. Not true. In fact, in terms of local lingo, Yorkshire is positively impoverished compared to the regional riches of Nottinghamshire. ‘Shift yersen’ (Get out of my way), ‘Ayer masht?’ (Have you made a cup of tea?), ‘Ittle norrocha’ (You won’t feel any pain) and ‘Ittim weeya poss’ (Hit him with your purse) are a few of the phrases you need to master before weekending in Mansfield. As for the West Midlands, visitors would be well advised to get their tongues around the following bit of Yamyam-Yowyow dialogue before setting off: ‘Yow all right, bab?’ ‘Yam. Bostin!’

34) The Major Oak

You haven’t lived until you’ve stood beneath the thousand-year-old, 52-foot-high Major Oak in Sherwood Forest – history, mystery and majesty all rolled together in one great eye-filling spectacle. (Sort of.) This is where Robin Hood, Alan-a-Dale, Friar Tuck and the other Merry Men would conceal themselves to evade the attentions of the wicked Sheriff of Nottingham. ‘Oodie and Maid Marian tied the knot a few minutes down the road in St Mary’s Church, Edwinstowe. They hold a festival here every August in celebration of the great Man in Tights: ‘For he was a good outlaw,/ And did poor men much good.’ How very Midland.

33) The Olympics

The Midlands didn’t get much of a look-in with the 2012 Olympics, despite the fact that Becky Adlington was born here and – perhaps even more significantly – the modern Games were essentially invented here. Baron Pierre de Coubertin, the French aristocrat who founded the International Olympic Committee, admitted as much: ‘It was to [Thomas] Arnold that we turned, more or less

consciously, for inspiration.’ Arnold was the headmaster of Rugby School – just down the road from Coventry – which in the nineteenth century pioneered the use of sport in education. Coubertin’s other big influence was the Wenlock Olympian Games in Shropshire – also in the Midlands, of course. It’s no coincidence that one of the 2012 Olympic mascots was called Wenlock.

32) Rugby

It was also at Rugby School that the sport of rugby – there’s a clue in the name – was born after some knucklehead who was supposed to be playing football got confused, picked up the ball and started running with it. Rather than telling the poor chap he’d got the rules wrong, his pals played along and in the process invented a new sport. (Something like that, anyway.) Now that’s the classic Midland spirit of innovation for you.

31) Bob Dylan

Not the American Bob Dylan, obviously – although he is a Midlander in US terms, hailing as he does from the central ‘flyover state’ of Minnesota – but rather the ‘East Midlands Bob Dylan’ (© *Daily Telegraph*), aka Jake Bugg. Some people – Scousers and Mancunians, mostly – think all great pop comes from Liverpool and Manchester, but actually the Midlands has launched all of the most important movements in modern music. Street poet Bugg is the natural heir to fellow Nottingham anti-establishment phrase-maker Arthur Seaton (see point 40 above).

30) The Sally Army

The East Midlands has been home to a long line of spiritual radicals, not the least influential of whom was William Booth, founder of the Salvation Army. Booth was a notable equal-opportunities employer, an idea to which Booth gave memorable verbal form when he exclaimed: ‘My best men are women!’ Indeed, Booth’s heady strain of Midland eccentricity was his greatest spiritual weapon: one survey estimated that on a particular weeknight the Salvation Army attracted 17,000 worshippers while the Church of England got only 11,000 through its doors.

29) Motörhead

The distinctively doomy sound of heavy metal was born in blood and anguish in a sheet metal factory in the West Midlands on the day that fifteen-year-old Tony Iommi – future guitarist with Black Sabbath – lost the tips of two fingers on his right hand in a gruesome industrial accident; but that’s a story for another day. Lemmy, the iconic hard-living Motörhead frontman, was likewise born in the West Midlands, amid the slagheaps of Stoke-on-Trent. In fact, most of the great hard rock musicians were born around here. No wonder the Download Festival – ‘Monsters of Rock’ as was – is held annually in the Midlands.

28) Conkers

The Olympics, rugby ... most of the major sports and global sporting events originated in the Midlands. The region is also home to the World Conker Championships, which were established in 1965, when they were played out to a thrilling climax on the horse chestnut tree-shaded village green of Ashton in Northamptonshire. Since then, the competition has grown in scale and importance to such an extent that it’s had to be relocated to a larger venue, where one Sunday in early October gladiators mount a series of white podiums to do battle armed only with a nut and a bit of string.

27) Stilton

The distinctive blue-veined cheese may take its name from a village in Cambridgeshire, where it was marketed in the eighteenth century as a local speciality to travellers on the Great North Road, but it has never actually been produced there. Rather, legend has it that it was developed in lovely Melton Mowbray, the self-styled ‘Rural Capital of Food’. Stilton is a strictly Midland phenomenon – by law it can only be produced in Leicestershire, Derbyshire or Nottinghamshire using local cow’s milk.

26) The Industrial Revolution

Britain entered the eighteenth century an agricultural nation and left it the world’s foremost industrial power – almost entirely thanks to Midlanders. Abraham Darby’s iron-smelting experiments at Coalbrookdale in Shropshire laid the foundations of the Industrial Revolution. But even more

influential were the members of the Lunar Society, assorted Midland entrepreneurs, enthusiasts and inventors (including the great engineering duo of Matthew Boulton and James Watt) who gathered every month at locations around Birmingham to discuss their latest ideas and innovations. The result, as travel writer Arthur Young pointed out in 1791, was that Birmingham became ‘the first manufacturing town in the world’.

25) The Phrase ‘Painting the Town Red’

The origins of this expression are regularly traced to an incident that took place in the Leicestershire hunting mecca of Melton Mowbray on 6 April 1837, when the Marquess of Waterford and his hunting pals – high on pork pie, a local favourite of the horse-and-hound fraternity – went on a ‘spree’, daubing the buildings on the high street with red paint. To this day, the Midlands remains the best place to paint the town red, of course – Stoke-on-Trent and Northampton are much more thrilling nightspots than murky old Manchester or larky little Liverpool.

24) Marmite

It was a German scientist, Justus von Liebig, who first hit on the idea of concentrating, bottling and eating brewer’s yeast, but it took Midlanders to turn the dark, savoury paste into a worldwide phenomenon: the Marmite Food Extract Company was established in the great Midland brewing town of Burton-upon-Trent in Staffordshire in 1902 – the local Bass brewery provided the yeast. *Catchphrase*: ‘You either love it or hate it.’ *Little-known fact*: all Midlanders love it. *Related tourist attraction*: the magnificent Marmite Monument – or ‘Monumite’ – in Burton-on-Trent. It’s the Midland equivalent of the Angel of the North.

23) Lampy the Gnome

Lovely Lamport Hall in Northamptonshire contains portraits by Van Dyck and Lely. And that’s not all. There’s also little ‘Lampy’, reputedly the oldest surviving garden gnome in the world. He was imported from Germany in the 1840s by Sir Charles Isham, who is said to have been an ‘eccentric spiritualist’. Apparently Sir Charles’s daughters hated gnomes and later banished his collection. Lampy was secreted in a crevice, however, and survived the purge.

22) Mass Tourism

Leicester cabinetmaker Thomas Cook effectively invented mass tourism in the 1840s when he arranged for some 540 temperance activists to be carried by train to a rally in nearby Loughborough. This short anti-booze cruise was just the beginning: by the 1850s, Cook’s travel agency was transporting visitors in their thousands across the Channel to gawp at the splendours of the Paris Exhibition; by the 1880s it had its own fleet of steamers on the Nile. Note that there is very little tourism, never mind mass tourism, to the Midlands.

21) Jet Propulsion

It’s ironic that Coventry-born engineering genius Sir Frank Whittle, whose pioneering work would carry air travel to ever greater heights, was initially refused a place in the Royal Air Force on the grounds that he wasn’t tall enough. But little Whittle did not give in. Oh no. Early on in his career he realised that, to enable them to travel further and faster, aircraft would need to fly at greater altitudes to reduce air resistance. So he set about developing an engine capable of carrying air travel beyond the sound barrier, earning himself the title of the ‘father of jet propulsion’ in the process.

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