

HUGUENOTS IN YORKSHIRE

Although I was born in North London with Huguenot ancestral roots in Spitalfields and Bethnal Green, I have now retired to West Yorkshire, near the little market town of Wetherby which is situated between Leeds and Harrogate. I was therefore somewhat intrigued to find that Wetherby boasts a “Huguenot Arch” which is alleged to have been constructed near houses built by the descendants of Huguenots. Huguenots in Yorkshire? Didn’t they all settle in South East and Eastern England across from the nearby French and Flanders coasts where they fled from? I thought this might be worth looking into.

The Huguenot Arch in Wetherby is commemorated by a blue plaque placed by the Wetherby Civic Society, which says “This arch was originally over a passageway between two houses at West End (now Westgate) near the present library. Local tradition says that they were probably built by the descendants of Huguenot (Protestant) refugees from France”.

The arch itself was moved from its original site and repositioned in Wetherby’s Garden of Rest. The keystone of the arch has an inscription in French which reads “Aimez votre prochain comme vous-même dit L’Evangéliste” (“Love your neighbour as yourself – says the Evangelist”). The keystone to the arch had been laid on the 19th of January 1827.



No other information about how or when (or even if) Huguenots came to Wetherby seems to be available. Situated near both the Yorkshire Dales and the North York Moors, Wetherby would no doubt have traded in wool and wool products, which may well have attracted the weaving skills of Huguenots. But why Huguenots may have chosen to move to Yorkshire seemed to me to be a question worth pursuing.

My only source of information is the web and despite lengthy but decidedly amateur research I have found no detailed report of the presence of Huguenots in Yorkshire. This would at least seem to indicate that for the Huguenot diaspora Yorkshire was not a major destination. But there definitely were Huguenots in Yorkshire and what I did manage to find gives small a small snapshot of their presence here.

It is well known that most Huguenot refugees settled in South East England, close to where they would have arrived from France and close to urban centres where they could practice their various industrial skills, in particular weaving. Others, in particular those coming from Walloon areas, found employment in East Anglia and Lincolnshire where their ditching skills could be put to good use in reclaiming marshland. But in those days Yorkshire was still a fair distance to travel from the South and East of England.

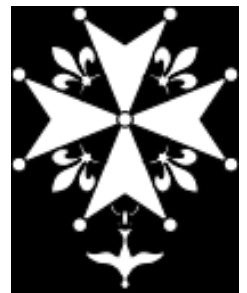
One clue to answering this question lies in the fact that there had always been strong trading links between the Yorkshire coastal ports and those of the Low Countries. Wool was a major export from Yorkshire while fine lace products were imported. The Yorkshire town of Ripon began to produce lower quality lace around the 16th century using bobbins, a method introduced into England by early Huguenot refugees. Many Flemish wool weavers had already moved to England in the 14th

century and they were followed in the 16th century by Huguenot weavers fleeing persecution. Many Yorkshire towns, such as Halifax, Huddersfield, Wakefield, Dewsbury and Leeds were well established wool weaving and trading centres, so it was inevitable that some Huguenot weavers would find their way there.

The boundaries of Yorkshire have shifted over the years, with some parts now no longer part of the county. But from a historical point of view they can still be considered as part of Yorkshire. Two such examples are the small Saddleworth towns of Dobcross and Delph, which were originally part of West Yorkshire but now part of Greater Manchester. As early as 1572 members of the French Huguenot Mallalieu family fled to England and soon after moved north to Delph. As weavers they found the woollen cloth producing area of the Pennines very attractive and began working on hand-loomed at home. In 1856 the Mallalieu built a factory in Delph and also expanded their weaving interests into Dobcross. The company still exists today.

Weaving was not the only skill the Huguenot refugees brought with them. Many were experts in working with fine metals such as silver, while others had mastered the difficult art of glassware production. But Huguenot glassmakers arriving in 16th century England found that a special licence was required to produce glass and few such licences were granted. Some Huguenots therefore decided to pursue their trade illegally. In the isolated Yorkshire village of Ryedale, far from any centres of authority and with local availability of sand, lime and wood, they built glass furnaces in the style of those found in Northern France and began production of glass products. Evidence of this activity can be seen at the Ryedale Folk Museum, while other remains have been found in close by villages of Rosedale, Hutton-le-Hole and Farndale. This black market industry eventually came to an end in the 17th century, perhaps through a crackdown by official glass producers or possibly by a ban by James 1st on the burning of timber.

The Huguenot Cross, originally a religious symbol of the French evangelical reformed church, later became an emblem worn by many Huguenot refugees to identify with their origins and to confirm their faith. It takes the form of a four-armed Maltese Cross interspersed with fleur-de-lys, a stylised lily symbol particularly noted in French heraldry. In Golcar, a village in the Colne Valley near Huddersfield in West Yorkshire, stands an old pub called the Golcar Lily, which has a lily as its emblem. Various theories exist about why the lily is an important symbol in this area but the most widely accepted is that a number of Huguenot families established weaving businesses in the Colne Valley which reminded them of their homelands. They found abundant raw materials and local markets for their textiles and tapestries. The lily emblem later became synonymous with the area.



It has been disappointing not to have found more information about the presence of Huguenots in Yorkshire. It seems likely they were here in much smaller numbers than in the South East and may well have been more of Walloon origin than directly French. The weaving of wool seems to have been their main occupation, while silk weaving does not appear to have been significant part of Huguenot life in Yorkshire, unlike its prevalence in London and later in North West towns such as Macclesfield. As with all Huguenot families, they were gradually absorbed and integrated into British society, leaving at most just Anglicised versions of their surnames.

I fully understand that this research is short on content and possibly inaccurate in places. I would welcome comments from anyone that may have further information.

Charles Baker
March 2021

Sources: Wetherby Civic Society, Yorkshire Post, York Press, Mallalieu website, Golcar Lily website, Kirklees Cousins website