

# Obstacles to a sustainable food system transformation: Insights from the north of England

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# Food Systems

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The Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations ([FAO, 2022](#)) estimate that approximately one-third of all greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions come from the agri-food system.

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The 'global food system' is now associated with a wide range of interconnected problems linked with climate change, biodiversity loss and diet related ill health (Rockström et al., 2020).

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This has led to widespread calls for a food system transformation across the academic and policy landscape (Rockström et al., 2020; Lever and Sonnino, 2022; Lamine and Marsden, 2023).

# Food Systems

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Despite the emergence of numerous sustainable food system interventions in recent decades (e.g., organic food, alternative food networks, local food, farm shops) there has been no food system transformation to speak of.

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Most contemporary accounts link the issues involved to post world war two developments in science and technology that stabilized the global food system but also created a new range of environmental problems (Lamine and Marsden, 2023; Lever, 2024)

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Looking at **Berlin**, Baur (2023) argues that the barriers to a sustainable food system transformation are much more deeply embedded in long-term processes than contemporary accounts suggest.

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Baur, N. (2023) *Long-Term Processes as Obstacles Against the Fourth Ecological Transformation. Ecological Sustainability and the Spatial Arrangements of Food Markets*, Historical Social Research/, Vol. 48, No. 1, Special Issue: Long-Term Processes in Human History, pp. 105-145

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Starting from a theoretical position that emphasises how food *'is produced, distributed, and consumed in global commodity chains... ..complex chains of interdependence'* – what Elias referred to as figurations, Baur (2023, 112) explores why a sustainable transformation is proving so difficult to achieve.

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While debates on climate change have emphasised the role of infrastructures in coordinating such chains of interdependence, she argues that these studies do not give enough attention to the **material** and **spatial** aspects of infrastructures.

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She argues further that these omissions can be remedied by fusing **classical figurational sociological insights** with more recent insights from the **refiguration of space** literature, which stresses both the role of **space** and **materiality** in upholding chains of interdependence.



## Reconfiguring local food governance in an age of austerity: towards a place-based approach?

John Lever <sup>a</sup>  , Roberta Sonnino <sup>b</sup>  , Fiona Cheetham <sup>c</sup> 

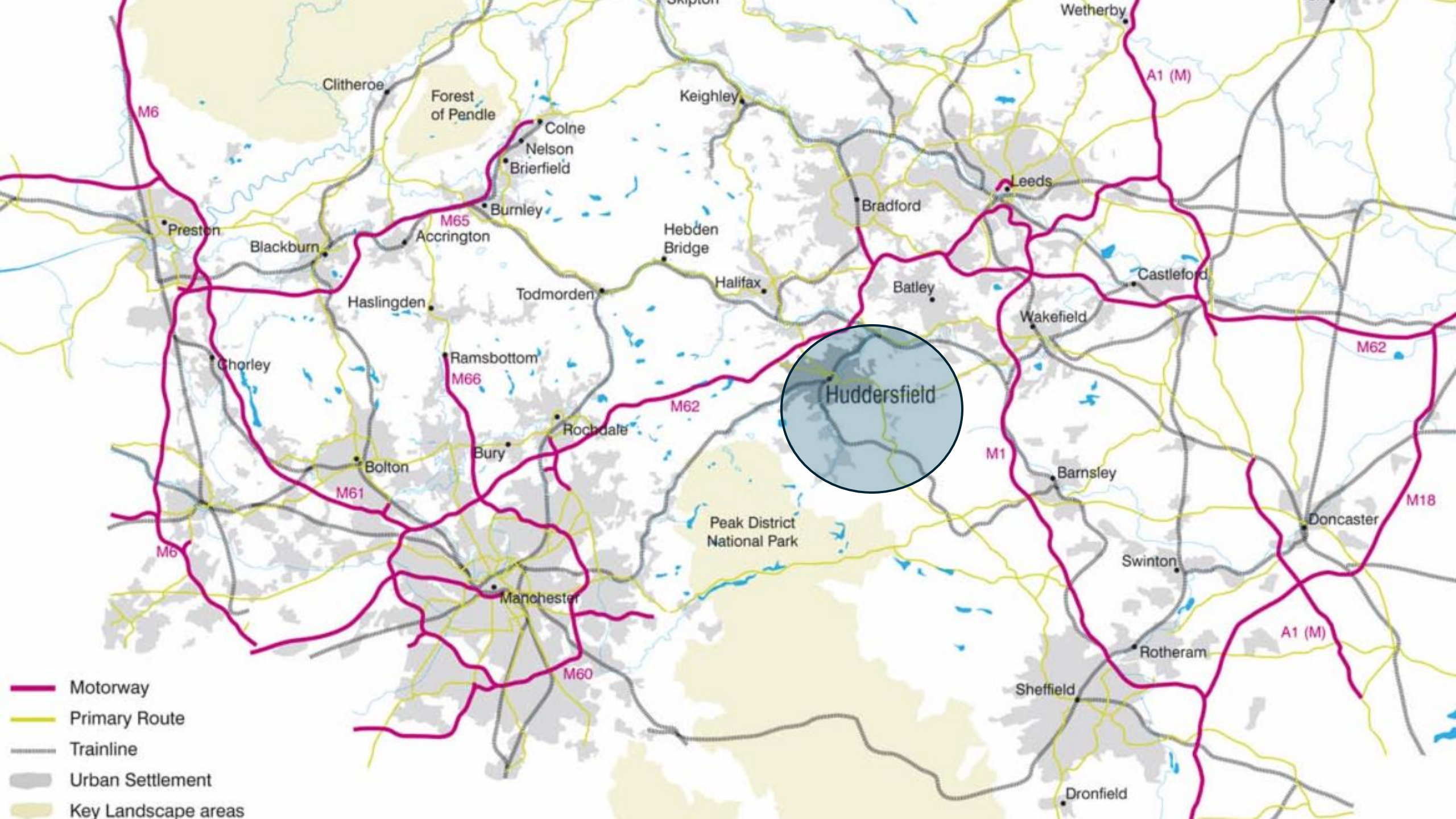
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### Abstract

In this paper we examine the dynamic nature of local food governance by considering the potential for (and barriers to) developing a more robust approach that can enhance the socio-ecological resilience of the food system. Fusing insights from Eliasian sociology with the literature on local food governance, we focus on a region of northern England to explore understandings of “local food” and the problems local food actors encounter while working within and across the territorial boundaries of “the local”. This is underpinned by an examination of the pressures local governments face as a result of financial austerity and competing neoliberal policy priorities that, we argue, undermine attempts to create synergies between diverse food system actors. We conclude by outlining the potential for developing a more relational approach to (and understanding of) place-based food governance.



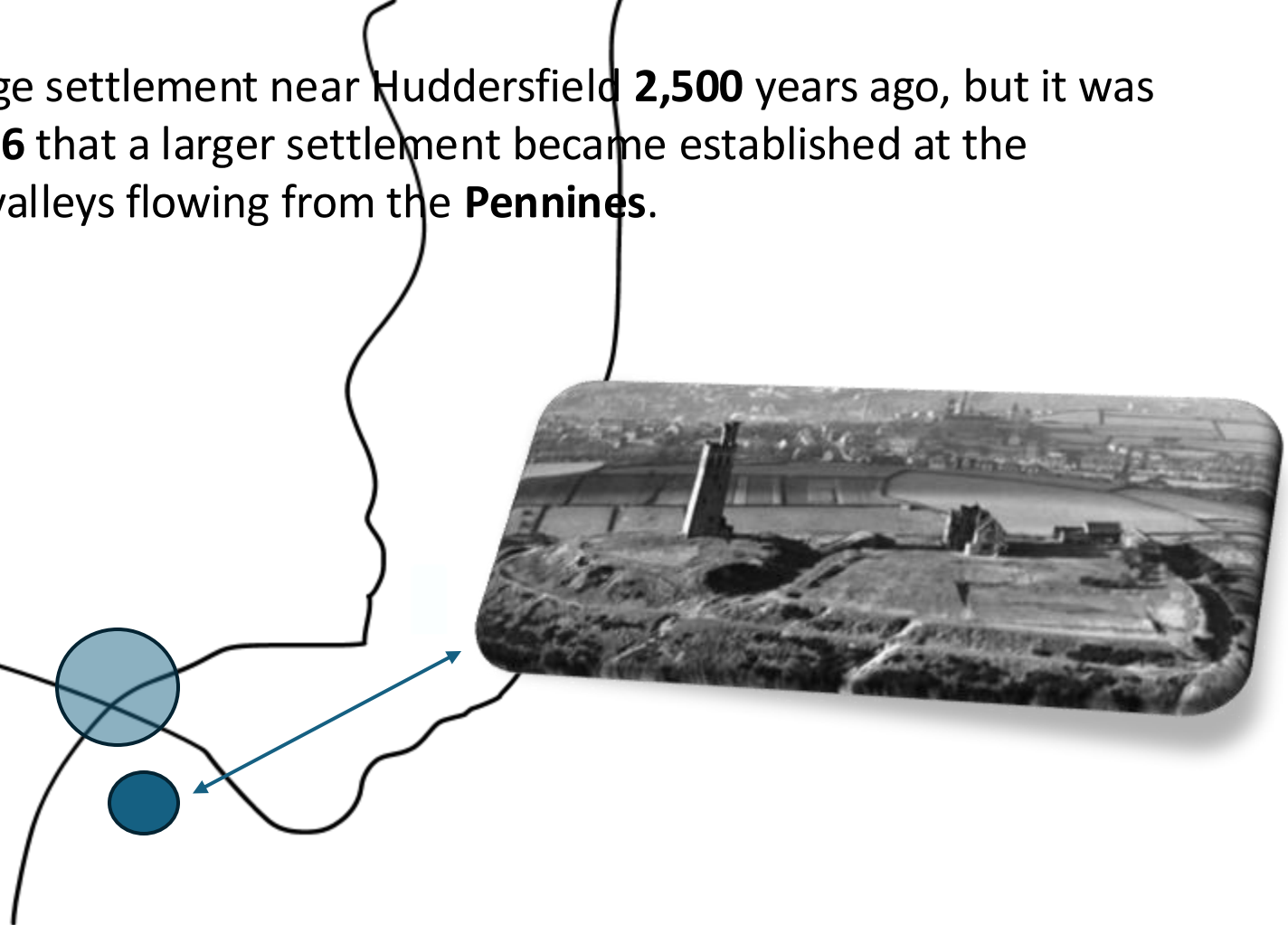


- After the emergence of settled agriculture during the second ecological transformation around **10,000 years ago** (De Vries and Goudsblom, 2001), markets became the focal point of regional towns alongside centres of religious and political power (Thurstain-Goodwin and Batty, 2001).
- Archaeological evidence locates an Iron Age settlement near Huddersfield **2,500** years ago, but it was not until after the Norman invasion in **1066** that a larger settlement became established at the confluence of the **Colne** and **Holme** river valleys flowing from the **Pennines**.

### *The Pennine Hills*

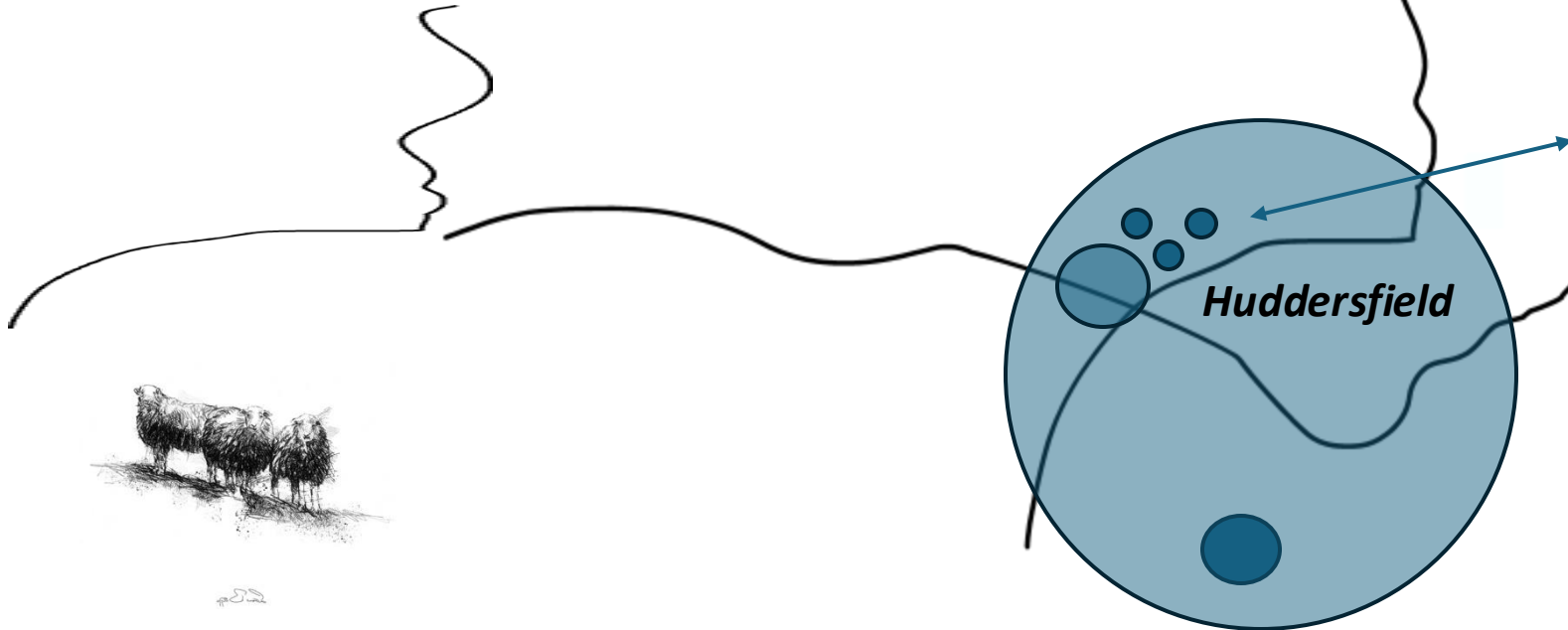


© 2002



- After King Charles II granted the upper classes a **charter** to hold weekly markets in **1671**, Huddersfield began to expand as a center for trade (Ahmed and Riley, 2019). Initially, a **general market** was held in the town before **several specialist food markets** emerged nearby.
- By the late **1770s**, a **corn** market had been established for trading **grain**, and **stables, warehouses, inns** and other **infrastructure** had emerged alongside a **pig** market and **cattle** market in the *Shambles*, also referred to locally as the **Beast Market**.

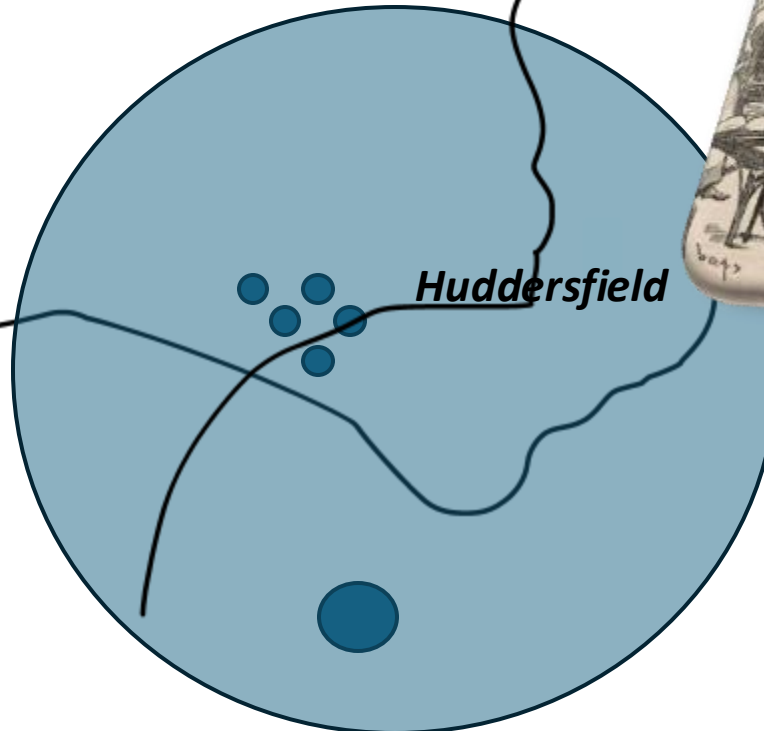
*The Pennine Hills*



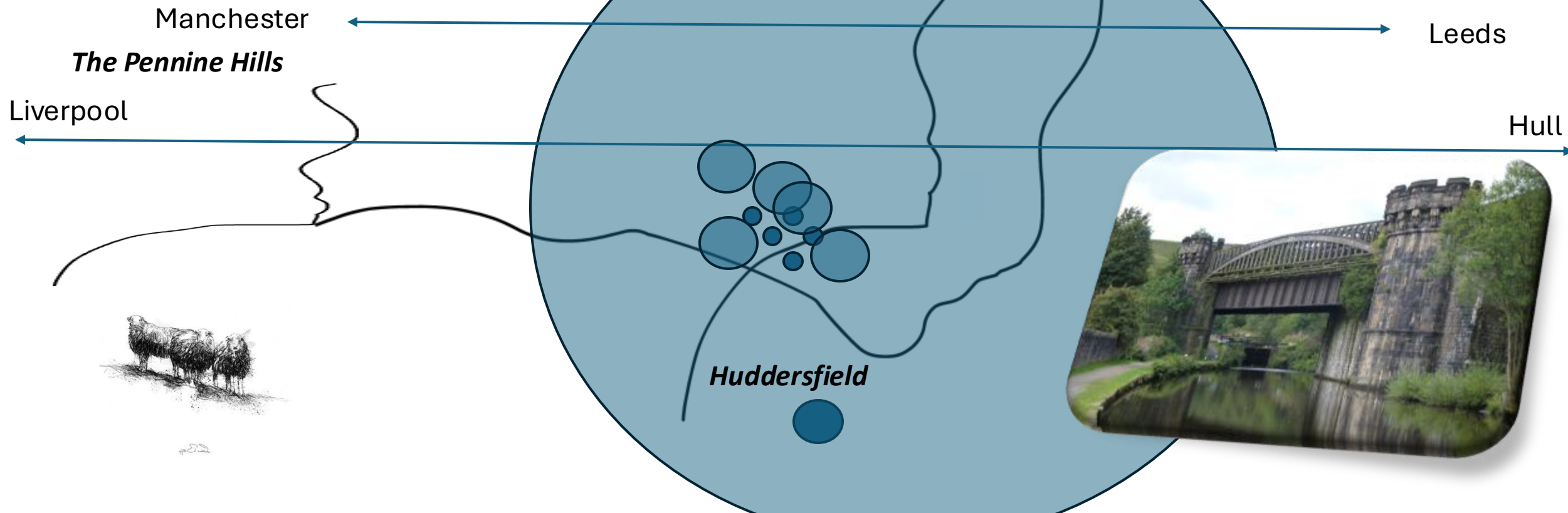


- Records from the **1800s** show that livestock (**sheep** and **cattle**) were widely reared on small farms to feed the local population, while **oats, wheat, barley, potatoes** and **turnips** were also grown (Vincent, 2023).
- In **1800** the population of the town was around **16,000** but with new roads and thoroughfares facilitating access, the town and its markets continued to expand (Gordon and Minter, 2002) and by **1900** the population had grown to around **100,000**.

*The Pennine Hills*



- During the second ecological transformation in the **19<sup>th</sup> century** (De Vries and Goudsblom, 2001), rapid technological change led to **large scale land enclosures** and **small farms** gave way to larger farms, supplying **milk, eggs, and meat** to feed the growing industrial population (Vincent, 2023).
- Farms has always produced **cloth** alongside **food** in a **dual economy** (Defoe, 1774) and during the industrial revolution the textile industry grew rapidly. Access to **international** markets expanded through the growth of **canals** to **Hull** and **Liverpool** and later through the opening of the **railway** in **1846** (Gordon and Minter 2010).





- **Markets** have always been central to the town and during the 19<sup>th</sup> century a more diverse range of retailers and greengrocers emerged in and around a new **central market** building.
- After the **Corn Laws** were repealed in **1846**, cheap imported meat became more widely available for the working classes through the expansion of international commodity chains.
- The local tradition of selling meat openly also began to decline as a new modern slaughterhouse opened less than 500 meters from the **beast market** as pressures from the **civilized middle classes** increased (**Elias, 1939**).
- Many regional stores and local grocery chains also emerged and until the middle part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the UK's retail landscape was controlled by regional food manufactures and family-owned local retailers (Wrigley, 1987).

Despite the growth of international commodity chains, at the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the town was still largely served by local food producers and retailers and a thriving central market place...



By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century...

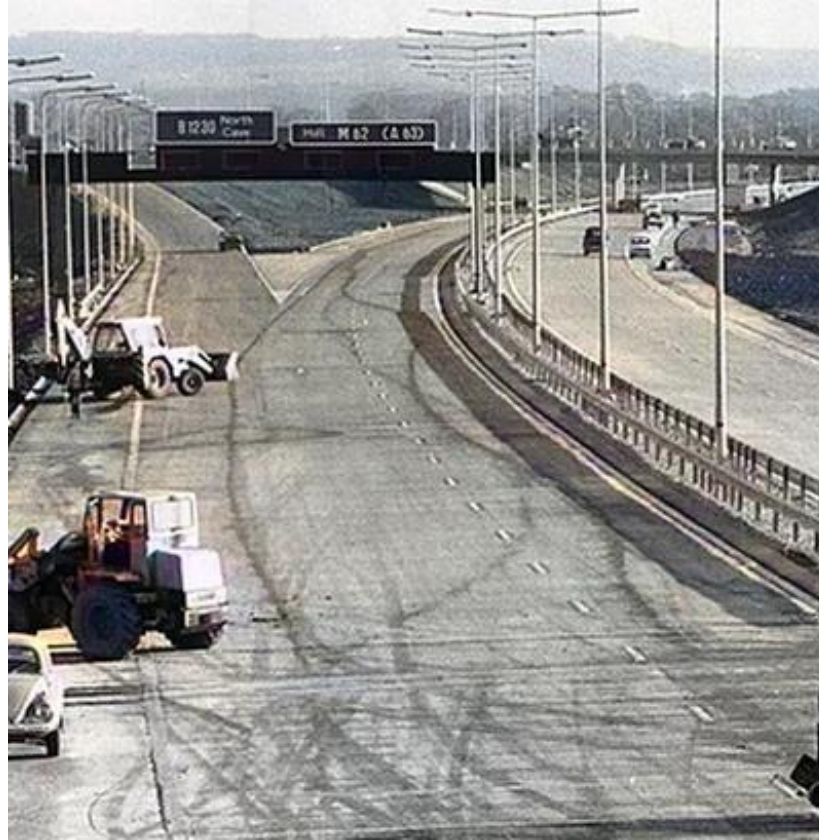




‘Modern development has not been kind to Huddersfield. Before the Ring Road was completed all traffic from Leeds and Manchester passed close to the town centre’. URBED (Urbanism, Environment and Design) Ltd



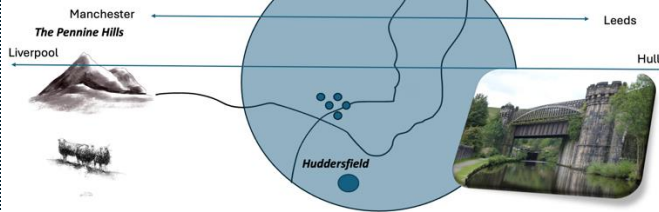
A62



M62



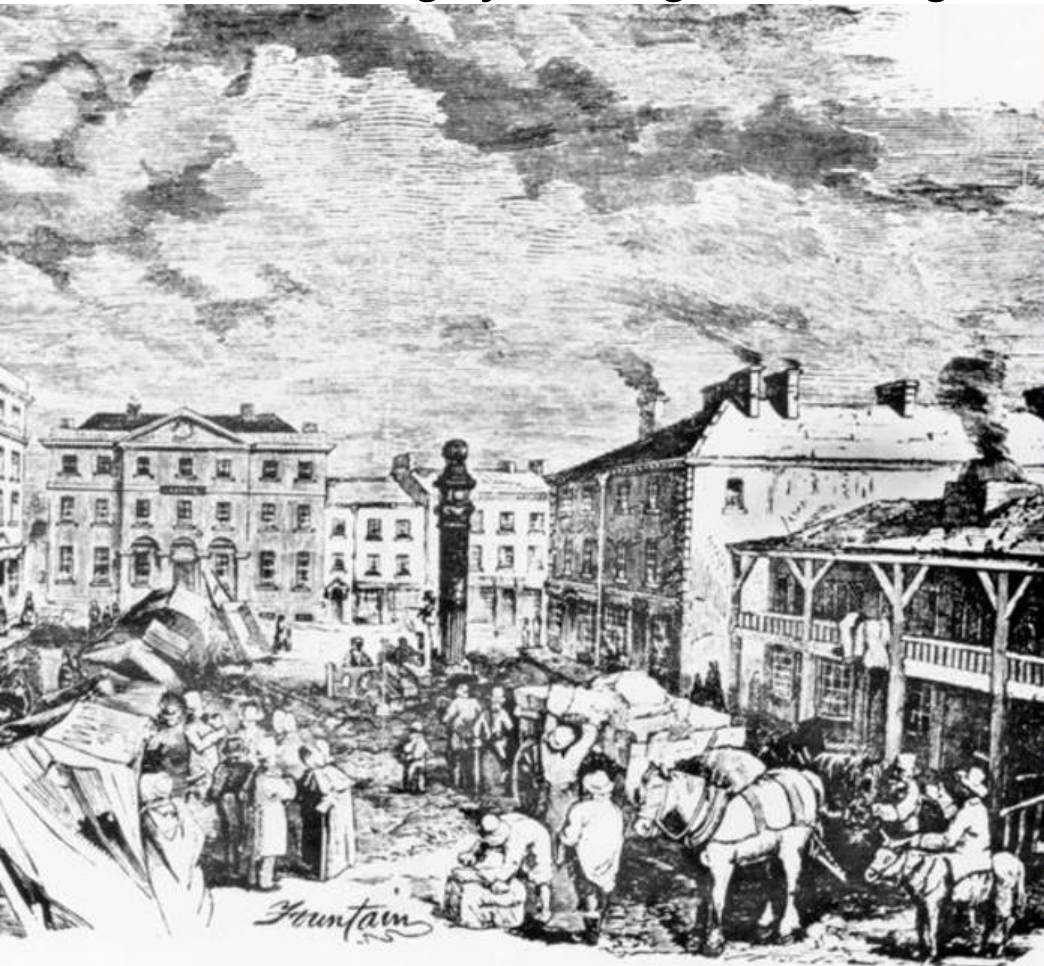
- As England industrialised during the second ecological transformation in the 19<sup>th</sup> century (De Vries and Goudsblom, 2001), rapid technological change led to large scale enclosures and small farms gave away to larger farms, supplying, milk, eggs, and meat to the industrial populations (Vincent, 2023)
- Farms has always made cloth and during the Industrial revolution Huddersfield's textile industry expanded rapidly. Huddersfield's merchants gained access to **international** textile markets through the growth of canals to **Hull and Liverpool**. And after the opening of the railway in **1846**, the town sat next to **Manchester and Leeds** at the heart of the textile trade in the north of England (Gordon and Minter 2010).



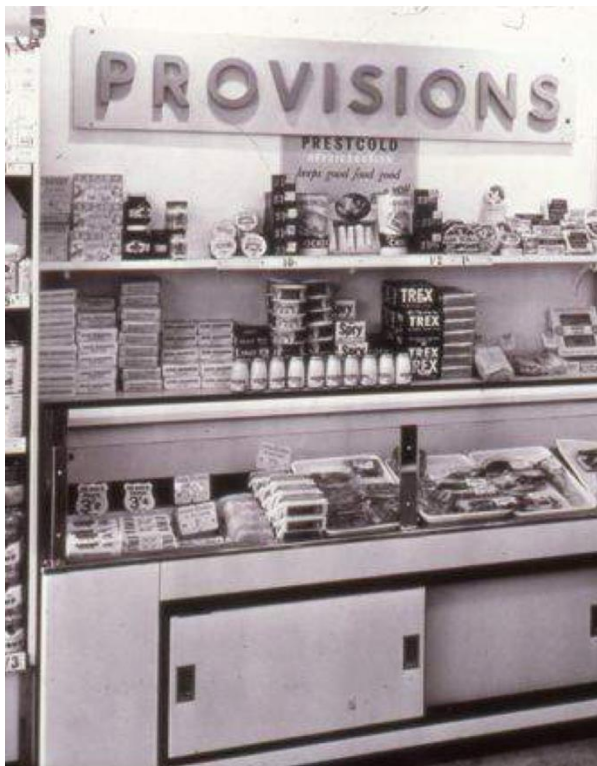
Just as new railways and canals connected Huddersfield to national and international markets in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, so the new motorway and ring road extended international food commodity chains and interdependency networks during the late 20<sup>th</sup> century...



- As old trade routes were bypassed by the ring road and the new market failed to become established as a community hub for local people (Ahmed and Riley, 2019) supermarkets grew in number and local retailers vanished.
- In the 1950s local farmers had literally thousands of local shops and retailer customers (Wrigley, 1987) but a local farmer we interviewed argued that anything resembling a regional food economy effectively *'ended with the coming of the ring road, things were never the same again.'*



- In 1950 independent retailers had a combined market share of just less than 80% of UK grocery sales.
- By 1984 such retailers had a market share of less than 30% and a group of five retail corporations had a rapidly growing market share (Wrigley (1987))
- In 1987, Tesco acquired the Yorkshire-based supermarket chain Hillards with stores in Huddersfield and elsewhere in a hostile takeover worth £220 million, which coincided with a further phase of supermarket expansion (**Hillards Archive, University of York**)



## Hillards hits at City after Tesco triumph

By David Green

HILLARDS chairman Peter Hartley yesterday launched a vitriolic attack on City institutions which sided with Tesco in its triumphant £197 million fight for the northern supermarket group.

After Tesco's announcement that its offer had gone unconditional, he said he was disgusted with the attitude of certain large institutional shareholders who had sold their shares at enormous profits.

Singling out the Prudential Mr Hartley said: "Under its investment chief Mr Newmarsh the Pru accepted the offer for reasons of 'commercial logic.'

"This is another example of the selfish and irresponsible attitude adopted by City financiers who put money before jobs.

Mick Newmarsh refused to comment on the criticism, but confirmed the Prudential had assented its holding of about 4 p.c. to the Tesco offer.

Tesco's bid, launched early in March, was bitterly contested by Hillards, an old family company now in its 101st year.

With family directors holding

about 26 p.c. of the equity the supermarket giant knew from the start that it would have a difficult battle.

This led to an increased offer which on Tesco's price last night valued Hillards shares at 400p. Before the bid Hillards stood at 222p. Last night the shares closed 27p up at 392p.

When the bid closed purchases and acceptances totalled 56.6 p.c.

Tesco's chairman Ian MacLaurin said that he and his team would be at Hillards' Cleckheaton headquarters at 9 am on Monday morning.

"We have a full plan and we know exactly what we want to do. We shall be carrying out a refit of the grocery section of the 40 stores over the next 16 weeks and the first Tesco fascia will go up in four weeks."

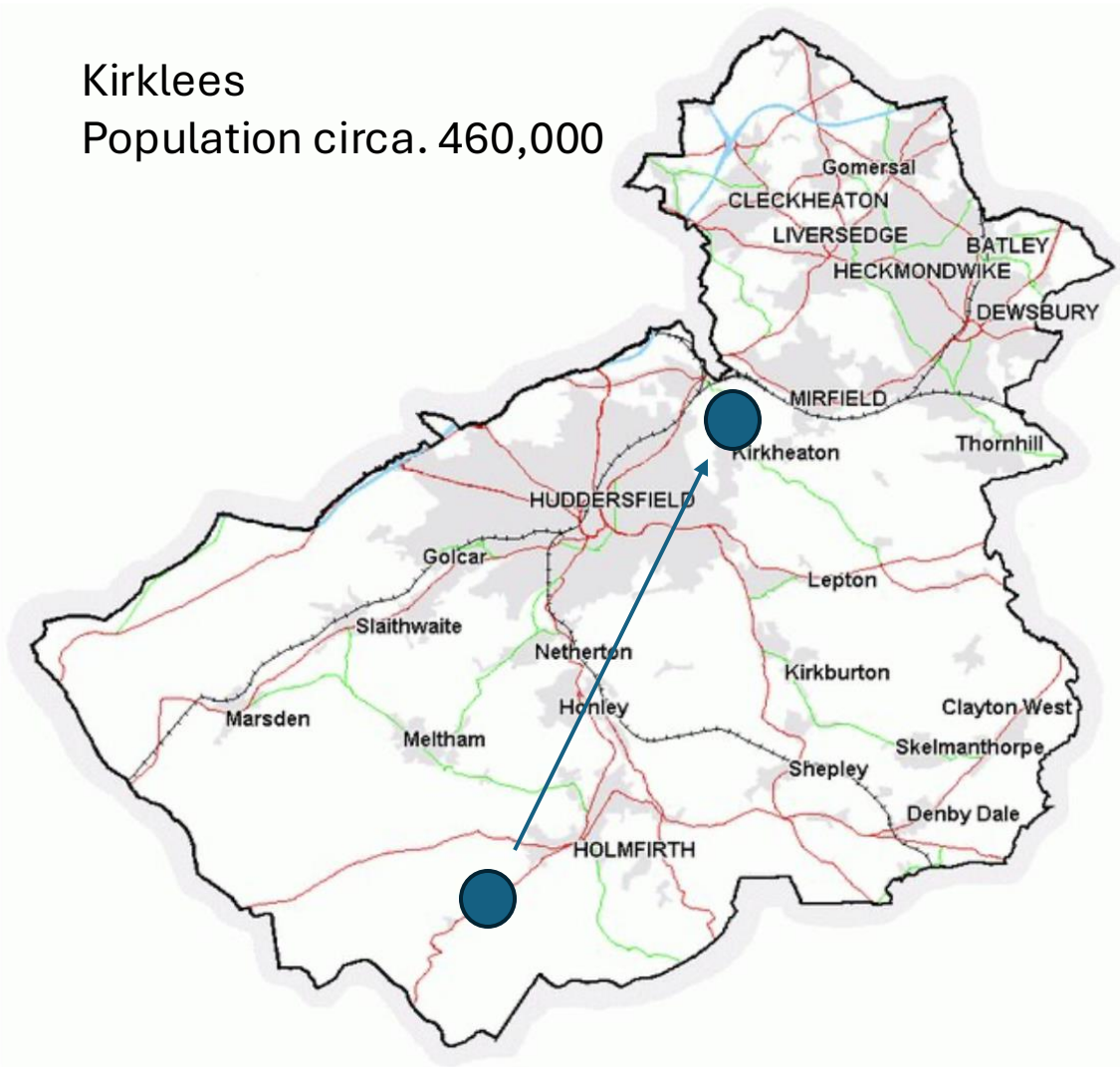
Mr Hartley ended his attack on the institutions by congratulating Tesco on acquiring the finest independent supermarket group in the country.

"I wish Tesco, Hillards employees and their customers a very prosperous future."

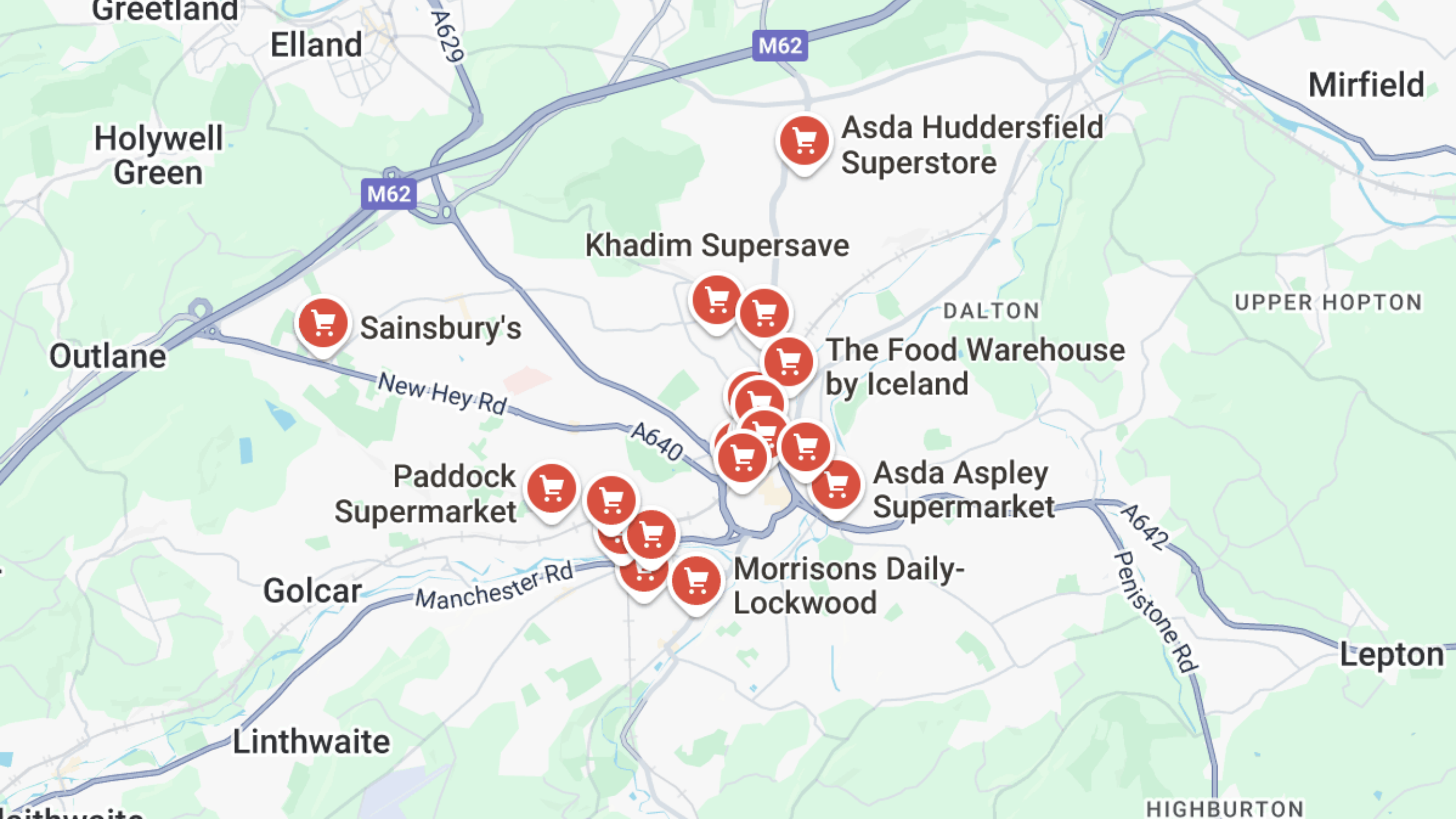
1. Victor Value;
2. Irwins;
3. William Low;
4. Adsega;
5. Hillards;
6. Cartier's Superfoods;
7. Quinnsworth;
8. Stewarts;
9. Crazy Prices;
10. Square Meals.

Kirklees

Population circa. 460,000



- New metropolitan areas were formed to encompass these changes politically, including Kirklees in 1974, which developed a new local governance framework with Huddersfield as its administrative center (Lever et al, 2019).
- One farmer explained to us how in the 1970s Kirklees Metropolitan Borough Council attempted to relocate his successful dairy from the Pennines valley where it is still located into the heart of urban Kirklees where it would be more accessible to the emerging regional transport and infrastructure network.



M62

Elland

Mirfield

Holywell Green



Asda Huddersfield Superstore

M62

Khadim Supersave

DALTON

UPPER HOPTON



Sainsbury's



The Food Warehouse by Iceland

Outlane

New Hey Rd

A640

Paddock Supermarket



Asda Aspley Supermarket

A642

Golcar

Manchester Rd

Penistone Rd

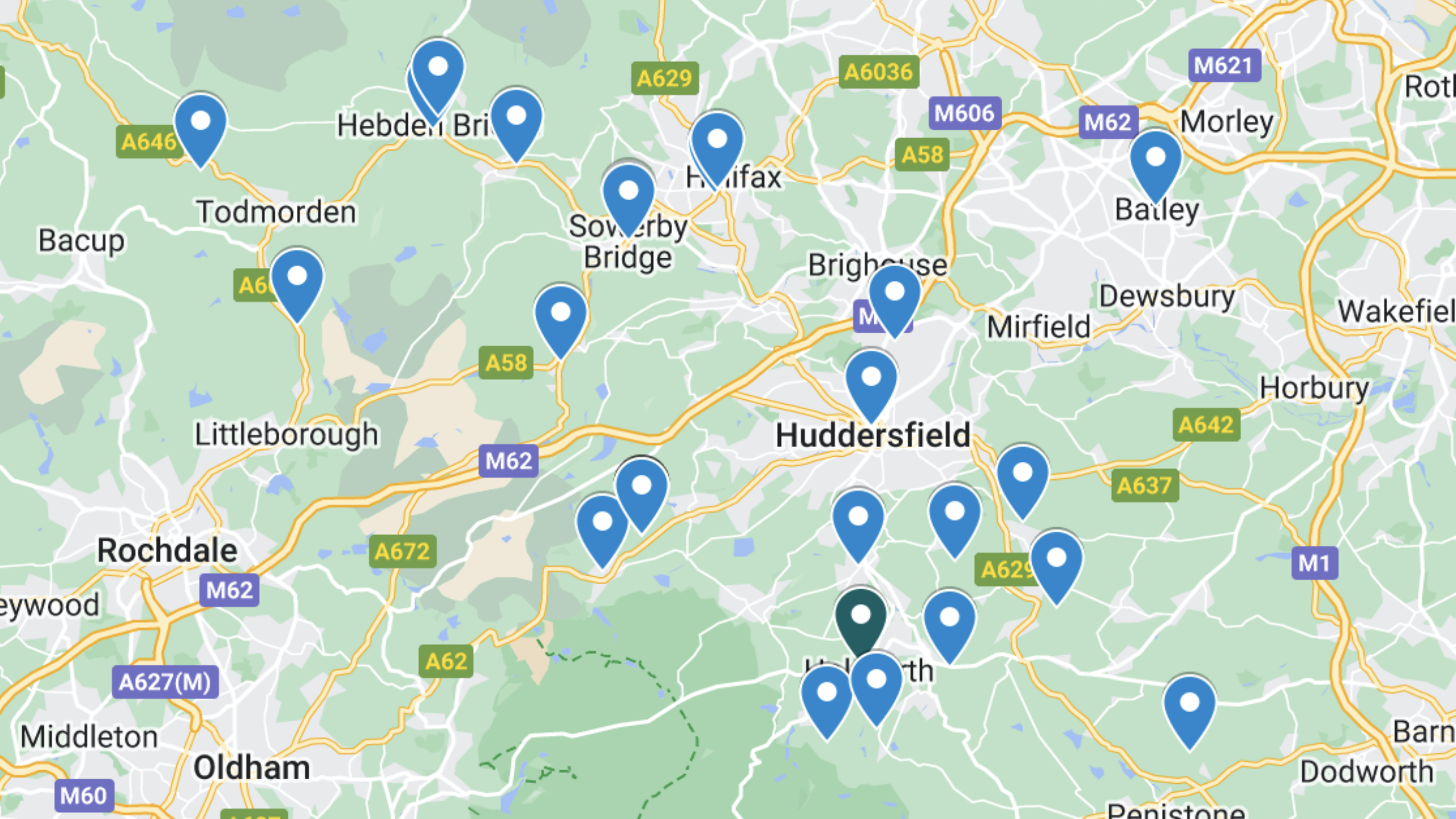


Morrisons Daily-Lockwood

Lepton

Linthwaite

HIGHBURTON



Hebden Bri

Halifax

Morley

Todmorden

Sowerby  
Bridge

Bailey

Bacup

Brighouse

Dewsbury

Littleborough

Huddersfield

Wakefield

Horbury

Rochdale

Utherton

Oldham

Penistone

Barnsley

Dodworth



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# Cities

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## Working across boundaries in regional place-based food systems Triggering transformation in a time of crisis<sup>☆</sup>

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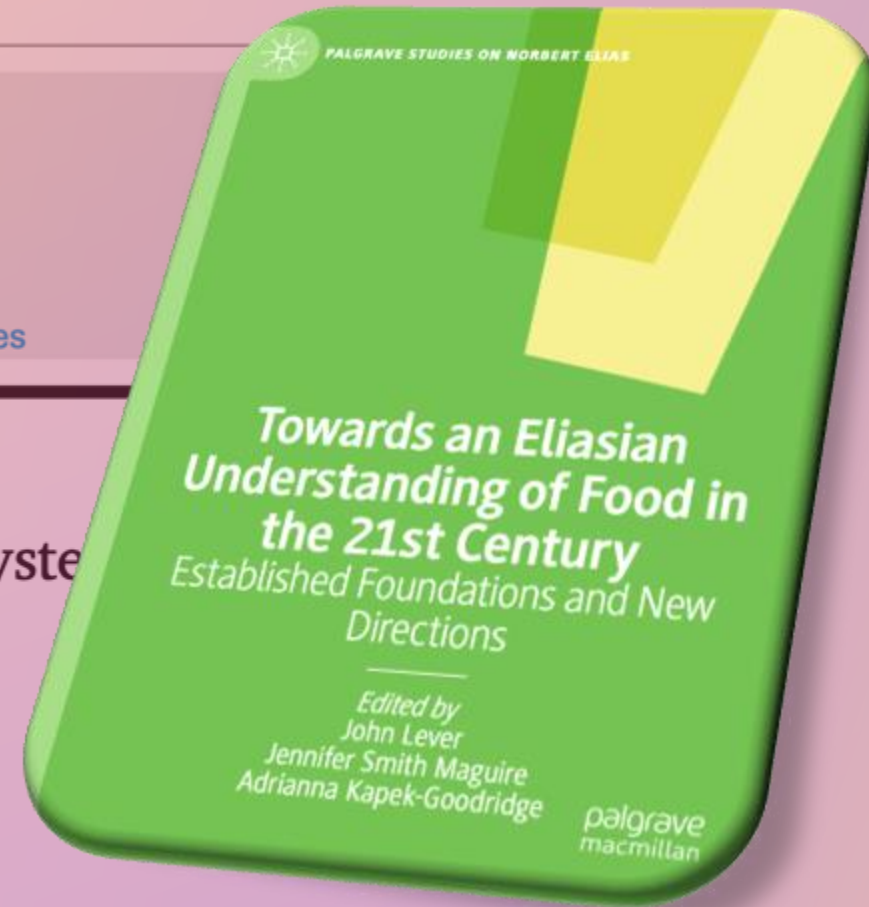
<sup>d</sup> Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics, HBS, University of Huddersfield, United Kingdom

If people can't park a car they don't stop anymore. People don't tend to walk into the village like they once did because they go to the supermarket driving home from work on the motorway. It might have come back a little bit because of what's happening, people aren't travelling, and life has slowed down...

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

**Keywords:** Crises  
Diverse economies  
...research exploring food system change in a region in the North of England during the Covid-19 health pandemic, in this paper we explore how a “managerial” approach to food system governance and provision could help stimulate food system resilience and business growth.



A map of the Huddersfield area in West Yorkshire, England, showing major roads like the M62 and A629. Several supermarket locations are marked with red shopping cart icons: Asda Huddersfield Superstore, Khadim Supersave, Sainsbury's, Asda Aspley Supermarket, and Morrisons Daily-Lockwood. Other labels on the map include Elland, Mirfield, Holywell Green, Dalton, Upper Hopton, Golcar, Manchester Rd, Penistone, and Lepton. Three horizontal lines (purple, blue, and green) are overlaid on the map, separating the text blocks.

## Some conclusions

As power balances in global food commodity chains evolved over centuries, Baur (2023, 112) argues that they became deeply embedded *'in material urban, transport, and production infrastructures'* that *'force individuals into an unsustainable lifestyle'*.

And it is only by understanding these complexities, she argues, that we can start to understand the difficulties of moving the wider food system figuration towards ecological sustainability.

# Spatial transformation & industrialisation

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Huddersfield's transition from an agrarian settlement to a market town demonstrates how early markets and infrastructure like canals and railways objectified the town's integration into regional and global trade networks.

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The construction of the ring road and other infrastructural changes in the 20<sup>th</sup> century redefined Huddersfield's spatial arrangements, prioritising motorised transport and linking it more strongly to global chains of interdependence.



A map of the Huddersfield area in the UK, showing major roads like the M62 and A629. Several supermarket locations are marked with red shopping cart icons and labeled: Asda Huddersfield Superstore, Khadim Supersave, Sainsbury's, Asda Aspley Supermarket, and Morrisons Daily Lockwood. Other locations like Elland, Mirfield, Holywell Green, Dalton, Upper Hopton, and Lepton are also visible.

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# Material objectifications & path dependent challenges

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The establishment of markets and later supermarkets reflects the materialisation of shifting consumer-producer dynamics, embedding social assumptions and supporting the transition from local trade to globalised commodity chains.

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Huddersfield's development stabilised specific modes of production and trade through spatial and material objectifications, echoing Baur's (2023) insights on the difficulty of breaking long-standing chains of interdependence for sustainable food system transformation.

# **Obstacles to a sustainable food system transformation: Insights from the north of England**

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Thank you...

