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## True grit

**M**y decision to finish my undergraduate education at the University of Sheffield, UK, in 1991 was met with scepticism from my friends. But I handled it well, I thought, saying that Sheffield couldn't be any grungier than Milwaukee, the blue-collar city where I had started my degree before the opportunity to study abroad arose. So I packed my bags and traded one industrial city that had seen better days for another — steeling myself for the inevitable *Laverne and Shirley* references once I arrived in Yorkshire.

Although I had prepared myself for the worst, I experienced the best. The people were friendly and the countryside bleakly beautiful. And one memorable weekend of hitchhiking with a friend took me to Manchester and Liverpool, both of which I thought had a gritty charm — just like Milwaukee and Sheffield.

When I decided this year to revisit northern England, I wasn't sure how much things would have changed. Some of my work colleagues had the same preconceptions as my friends had in 1991. But returning to Manchester, Liverpool and Sheffield was like experiencing the moment in *The Wizard of Oz* when the film switches from black-and-white to colour. The changes went deeper than the removal of soot and the conversion of derelict warehouses into expensive apartments. It was evident in the spirit of investment in the scientific infrastructure and the willingness between the cities to collaborate rather than compete (see overleaf).

The experience, I think, extends beyond northern England. Attitudes of reverse provincialism (a polite phrase for snobbishness) are rife in the Western world. Scientific centres such as Oxford, Cambridge, Boston and San Francisco are justifiably worthy of note. But there are many other lower-profile areas where sound science is done and good jobs are available. Grit, rather than just reputation, can transform anywhere into a good place to do science.

**Paul Smaglik**  
Naturejobs editor



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