

Our dialect is just as moving and lyrical as any other

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■ A poem on the death of Dick Bagnall Oakeley shows the beauty of the Norfolk dialect, says our columnist.

When he was conducting his 2012 anti-Norfolk dialect campaign from the safety of the other side of the Suffolk border, one thing former EDP columnist Ken Hurst did was to contrast the Norfolk dialect with the dialect of North Yorkshire. He quoted the famous Lyke Wake Dirge: "When thoo frae hence away art passed, ivvery neet an'all...".

"There, Norfolk dialect lovers," he wrote gleefully, "is proper dialect for you!".

You can see what he means. The language is impressively different. But Ken was being provocative – and I'm provoked into saying that he was being unfair. The Lyke Wake Dirge dates from the 1500s, so it's bound to look very different from modern English. The word "lyke", by the way, means "body". We still have it in Norfolk in the form of "lych", as in the lychgate to churchyards, where the first part of funeral services used to be held.

Northern dialects do seem more "dialectal" than southern dialects like ours because Standard English originated in London, with some input from Oxford and Cambridge – and from Norfolk. Norwich was the second-largest city in the realm and there was a lot of immigration into

London from Norfolk. So it's not so much the case that Norfolk dialect is quite like Standard English as that Standard English is quite like the Norfolk dialect!

Today, dialects north of the River Humber are more conservative than English dialects anywhere else in the world. Linguistic changes in England normally begin in London and spread outwards from there. So the far-northern dialects still have medieval pronunciations like "hoose", "moose", "oot" rather than modern "house", "mouse", "out". The London-based change from the one vowel to the other, which reached Norfolk centuries ago, hasn't arrived there yet.

But you don't have to go to Yorkshire to

find dialect poetry which is moving and lyrical. You need look no further, I reckon, than the poem by our own dialect writer, the late John Kett, which was written in 1974 on the passing of his friend Dick Bagnall Oakeley.

Dick – a naturalist, teacher, writer, and all-round Norfolk Renaissance man – was a great speaker, friend and defender of our dialect.

John Kett's poem begins: "This arter-nune I see the swallers flyin by the pond; They'a come agin, a-glidin trew the air. An baads in thousans there mus' be, A-comin in acrost the sea. But he int watchin on the marshes there....".

That's proper dialect for you.