In this ten-part series Melvyn Bragg brings all his passion and knowledge to a subject that has enthralled and fascinated him throughout his life - the pivotal role of England's North in the shaping of modern Britain. As he traces the ebb and flow of northern power he examines how this relatively small geographical area has had a profound effect of every part of the globe – its ideas and inventions, its sport and its music.

Programme One: The Fall of Rome and the Rise of Northumbria
Monday 29th August, 09:00-09:30

Melvyn Bragg begins the series atop Hadrian's Wall looking down onto the North of England. The series begins as the Roman Empire loses its grip on the area. Melvyn returns to the seaside town of Maryport in Cumbria – which he visited as a boy – and which contains the largest collection of military altar stones and inscriptions outside Rome. Melvyn speaks to archaeologist Professor Ian Haynes from Newcastle University about the beginnings of a northern identity as Rome receded.

Melvyn travels to Lindisfarne or Holy Island off the coast of Northumbria which became a crucial centre for the spread of Christianity coming from the west – and was to play no small part in shaping the fortunes of Northumbria and its Anglian royal family.

Melvyn goes to Whitby in North Yorkshire – home of the great Abbey and its remarkable Abbess St Hilda and discusses the power well-born women could wield in the early church with Katy Cubitt, Professor of Early Medieval History at York University.

He speaks to Professor Nick Higham about the Northumbrian King Ecgfrith, one of the most powerful men of his day, who laid the basis for what was to be one of the great Renaissance moments in western civilization. He was defeated and killed in a battle against the Picts in Scotland. Melvyn asks Nick what might have happened if Ecgfrith had won – the answer is that Scotland as we know it today may have never existed and the capital of Britain could well have been in the North, possibly in York.

Programme Two: The Glories of Northumbria
Tuesday 30th August, 09:00-09:30

Melvyn Bragg celebrates the achievements of the magnificent Northumbrian Renaissance, which produced three of the greatest works in British history. Melvyn begins with the Ruthwell Cross – now in Scotland – it is possible that it is inscribed with the world’s oldest surviving text of English poetry and has been described as one of the greatest art works of the Middle Ages. Melvyn travels to Jarrow to tell the story of Bede, known as the father of English History and author of The Ecclesiastical History of the English People, one of the most important books of the age. As well as writing history, Bede was also one of the first people to describe the relationship between the moon and the tides. Melvyn crosses the causeway to Holy Island where the Lindisfarne Gospels were created. The man who made them was an artist and a scientist, inventing the pencil 300 years before it was in common use. Melvyn ends in Durham Cathedral alongside the shrines of Bede and St Cuthbert – the latter occupying a special place in the hearts of local people who refer to him simply as Cuddy.
Programme Three: Vikings and Norsemen
Wednesday 31st August, 09:00-09:30

In the third programme, Melvyn Bragg tells the stories of two sets of Vikings who left a permanent mark on the North of England – the Scandinavians who came from the East and the Norsemen who had alchemised into Normans, and came from the South. The Vikings shaped the English language and it is suggested that the key to their linguistic imprint on the North is likely to have been down to Viking women, as well as men, settling in this region, passing the language onto their children.

Evidence of Viking presence persists today: scree, fell, gable, gill, tarns, rake, horse, house, husband, wife and egg. All Norse words.

Melvyn visits the Gosforth Cross, which blends Anglo Saxon Christianity with Pagan Norse mythology. The cross is unique. There’s no other like it anywhere in the world. The North then became victim to the Vikings distant cousins the Normans, who swept northwards with savage force, laying waste to much of it – the infamous harrying of the North. The increasing power of London and the south began to take real shape and the North looked to the Scottish Kings, in some cases preferring Scots rule to that of the distant southern monarchs.

Programme Four: Rebellious Tongues
Thursday 1st September, 09:00-09:30

This programme tells the story of rebellion and dissent in the North – and the way northern dialect is beginning to be marginalised and even mocked. Melvyn Bragg begins at Clifford’s Tower in York, the site of a Norman fortress built to keep the North under control. It was also the site centuries later, where Robert Aske - one of the leaders of The Pilgrimage of Grace (a great Catholic Rebellion) was executed. It’s in York that Saint Margaret Clitheroe was tortured to death.

Melvyn goes to Rievaulx Abbey in North Yorkshire and finds evidence that the monks were on the brink of producing high quality cast iron and even blast furnaces. If the Reformation hadn’t happened could the Industrial Revolution have begun here hundreds of years earlier?

Melvyn examines how the south is coming to view the North – and its dialect. There is an idea that northern kinds of English are less prestigious. An idea that persists. Melvyn discusses this with the broadcaster Joan Bakewell. The poet Simon Armitage celebrates the speech patterns of the medieval poetic masterpiece ‘Sir Gawain and the Green Knight’ and Melvyn meets Dame Judi Dench who remembers her time performing the York Mystery Plays.

Programme Five: The Romantic Landscape
Friday 2nd September, 09:00-09:30

Northern landscapes take centre stage as Melvyn Bragg celebrates the fells, lakes and moors that he loves. He meets mountaineer Chris Bonington in North Cumbria and goes on to see how, over the last 200 years the North has provided inspiration for great writers, some of the greatest in the language - Wordsworth, Coleridge, the Brontës - and painters, Ruskin and Turner. The landscape inspired Coleridge, he came up with the word mountaineering, and he’s believed to be the first man to climb every peak in the Lake District.

Melvyn visits the home of William and Dorothy Wordsworth at Dove Cottage in the Lake District. The area around Coniston water was home to John Ruskin. The poet Ted Hughes lived in Mytholmroyd in
West Yorkshire. Melvyn believes that it’s impossible to think of northern moorland without bringing to mind the way the Brontës have inscribed themselves on the landscape.

Programme Six: George Stephenson, Invention and the Industrial Revolution
Monday 5th September, 09:00-09:30

Melvyn Bragg believes the Industrial Revolution is the greatest Revolution the world has ever seen – and its heart lies in the North of England. In this programme he pays tribute to the men who nurtured that great revolution. The inventors and engineers – often from very humble beginnings – whose discoveries would shape the world to this day. One of the greatest was the North East’s George Stephenson, whose Rocket locomotive heralded the age of the railways. The programme starts with the writer Frank Cottrell Boyce – who (in collaboration with Danny Boyle) put the Industrial Revolution centre stage at the 2012 Olympic opening ceremony. Melvyn met him at Rainhill near Liverpool where Rocket took part in a famous trial.

Of course, Stephenson wasn’t the only great inventor of the period – the great machines of the cotton industry can also be claimed by the North – the genius of Samuel Crompton and his Spinning Mule is celebrated. The façade of Sheffield Town Hall is emblazoned with scenes of industry, but why wonders Melvyn are the achievements of these great men not celebrated more? Why aren’t they as much a part of our national mythology as Tudor Monarchs?

Programme 7: Manchester - The First Industrial City
Tuesday 6th September, 09:00-09:30

This programme is the second to mark what Melvyn Bragg calls the greatest revolution in history – the Industrial Revolution. Here Melvyn focuses on Manchester, the original northern powerhouse. Its emblem is the bee, a symbol of work, cooperation and industry. It was from here that huge scientific, social and commercial changes would sweep the globe. Melvyn visits Quarry Bank Mill in Styal outside Manchester which is one of the best preserved Victorian textile mills in the country.

Melvyn also visits the house of the novelist Elizabeth Gaskell, who chronicled the rapidly changing lives of the people who lived in or near Manchester, or Cottonopolis as it was known. Melvyn hears how a culture of dissent or non-conformity fed into the city’s spirit of invention. He discusses the great scientists that came out of the city – James Joule the father of thermo dynamics and John Dalton the father of atomic theory. Melvyn also hears about one of the country’s biggest and now largely forgotten art exhibitions, which was held in Manchester - The Art Treasures exhibition of 1857.

Programme 8: The Radical North
Wednesday 7th September, 09:00-09:30

This programme begins outside Manchester’s Midland Hotel where Mr Rolls met Mr Royce. It’s also near the site of the Peterloo Massacre – one of the defining moments in British social history. People had gathered here in their thousands from the city and surrounding towns and villages – protesting for parliamentary reform. Fifteen were slain and hundreds wounded by charging cavalry troops. Melvyn visits what one contributor, Dr Robert Poole describes as Democracy Wall – it runs alongside of the nearby Quaker Meeting House - many people were crushed against it at the time of the Massacre. The wall is the only structure left from the period. The massacre inspired the poet Shelley to write the Masque of Anarchy, part of which is read for us by the actor Maxine Peake. Melvyn goes on to describe the rich history of dissent nurtured in the North – the women’s suffrage movement,
the campaign to abolish slavery, chartism, and the founding of the Independent Labour Party. Why the North? Was it Methodism, the size of the population, the isolated landscapes, the topography of the cities or even the weather?

Programme 9: Radical Culture
Thursday 8th September, 09:00-09:30

Here Melvyn Bragg examines the contribution of the North to British culture throughout the 20th century – whereby it refreshed and transformed the arts of this country. Melvyn talks to the actors Maxine Peake and Dame Judi Dench, to the writers Lee Hall and Jimmy McGovern, to the broadcasters Joan Bakewell and Michael Parkinson and to the artist David Hockey.

From the Edwardian Manchester plays of Harold Brighouse and Stanley Horton through to the realist writing of Stan Barstow and Shelagh Delaney. From the transformative television drama of Coronation Street, through to the richness of northern comedy. Gracie Fields, Stan Laurel, Arthur Askey Ken Dodd, Sarah Millican, John Bishop, Peter Kay, Victoria Wood and Caroline Aherne – all northern. And of course the global impact of the Beatles.

Programme 10: Speaking from the North
Friday 9th September, 09:00-09:30

In this final programme Melvyn Bragg will be asking what being and sounding northern means now – in a year which has seen what might be a decisive shift in our politics, and in our sense of national identity. In the wake of the EU Referendum, new questions are being raised about the need for devolution in the North of England – the need for the North to have a stronger voice in our public life and politics. Melvyn examines how parts of the North were perceived following the Brexit vote.

Among the people Melvyn speaks to are Dame Judi Dench, the painter David Hockney, the writers Lee Hall, and Jimmy McGovern, the poet and broadcaster Ian McMillan and the cricketer Geoffrey Boycott.

Presenter / Melvyn Bragg, Producer/ Faith Lawrence, Editor/ Nicola Swords for BBC Radio 4