

Resurgent Town

The site of an ancient settlement, Bury is strategically located at a commanding vantage point on a promontory overlooking the mouth of the Irwell Valley. Built upon a plateau, against the picturesque silhouette of Holcombe Hill above the confluence of two substantial rivers, the town grew organically according to the local Pennine topology. Situated along an old Roman Road between Manchester and Ribchester It became an important junction linking Bolton and Rochdale. The original village initially grew around Market Place, the meeting point of the main artery highways. Early inhabitants lived in humble abodes amongst a cluster of coaching inns, merchant stores and workshops huddled around a Georgian Parish Church.

In the 19th Century, along with cheap labour, vast resources and energy were poured into the town. Construction boomed; the palatial mills, banks, civic buildings, schools, and hospitals, with infrastructure; the canals, railways, cobbled roads, and public sanitation were remarkable. The flow of investment and capital was considerable leading to architectural bravado in the form of grandiose edifices in Market Place and along the aptly named Silver Street. Most notably the neo-gothic Parish Church and the eccentric Bury Armoury, a romantic castellated Norman fortress led the way. The materials for this fantasy were recycled from the historic Tudor Bury Castle which once graced the site. Among the other gems in the town which adorn the opulent “Cultural Centre” are the Derby Hall, Bury Art Museum and Library, the former Bury and Manchester Union Banks and the Renaissance Style Technical School in Broad Street.

For the most part Bury was a typical Lancashire town of terrace houses, rows of shops, tearooms, local pubs and “chippies” gathered around giant cotton and paper mills. The town’s premier retail street The Rock ran from the old Market Place past Rochdale Road and the James Kenyon & Sons mills to Moorgate at the bottom of Walmersley Road. The considerable expansion during Victorian times was due to mass migration from the countryside and rural Ireland, but as the population multiplied so did the demand for more homes. By the 1880s these were regimentally arranged across the Mosses radiating eastwards along Spring Street from Union Square which became the focal point of the community. This expansion soon spread to Fernhill, St Pauls, Chesham and Elton across Bury Bridge to the west which made up the essential composition of the town.

Bury reached a peak during the Edwardian period prior to the calamitous First World War in which a generation of young men were lost or traumatised particularly from the devastating Gallipoli campaign. Those were the repressed days when ordinary folk were unduly deferential and subservient to the landed gentry and the militarism of the Imperial elite for whom the volunteers perished. Following the economic depression of the Twenties the community was just beginning to recover as can be seen from the aerial images in the Britain From Above website (Page 19). After the Second World War with the introduction of the Welfare State, the impact of poverty was reduced, and wellbeing improved. At the time of post-war austerity, the population of sixty thousand was largely concentrated in the central core keeping the market, pubs and cinemas busy. At the time it is claimed ten thousand workers would daily stride across Bury Bridge on their way to their shifts and home again. Nowadays 70,000 vehicles a day are estimated to cross the widened bridge (4*).

The OS map dated 1950 shows a mosaic of churches, assembly rooms and spinning mills and a densely packed grain of terraces serviced from the backstreets. Those with long memories will be able to identify some of the main shopping routes, such as Princess Street and the Haymarket converging on Union Square. This is where political rallies were once held and where the church congregations assembled for the Whitsun Walks before it was redeveloped in 1968 to make way for the new pedestrian precinct. At the time with a diversity of industries such as paper, engineering, shoes, paints, confectionary, furniture, and cotton there was full employment and the prospect for continuing economic growth brought an atmosphere of optimism and confidence. With increased prosperity during the sixties and the consumer boom underway the town centre gradually began to haemorrhage its populace who were either decanted to the council estates or bought their own dream homes in the outlying districts. As car ownership grew the civil engineers were already planning a bypass to the north along Paradise Street and across the Mosses to the south of the centre to accommodate the increased volume of traffic.

As the mills began to close so the smaller businesses shut up shop and the slum clearances which began across the Mosses in the 1930s intensified. By 1968 as Union Square and Princess Street was being bulldozed to make way for the new precinct and the bye-pass, the old market hall with its magnificent dome was gutted by fire. The seventies were a period of transition when paper

and cotton lost their pre-eminence. Then, when the oil crisis deepened and manufacturing was in terminal decline, further companies went under and more street names disappeared off the map. The old mixture of domestic residences and small businesses was destroyed and replaced by giant retail units resulting in a town centre, cut off from the surrounding neighbourhoods, losing much of its historic character and human scale. This in the 1970s was the “shatter zone” (4*) we knew when many of the photographs in this book were taken.

Following the decline of the textile industry “work-town” had to be radically reinvented and this transformation continues today. Gritty old Bury achieved density and compactness through its mansion blocks and street-based townscape giving it a distinct identity. After the mill closures and clearance of the many redundant properties, the town became suburbanised and was coalescing into the Greater Manchester conurbation. Considered dingy and grubby the configurations of modest row houses and squares were to be replaced by urban blocks surrounded by vast surface car parks. Apart from ethnic minorities gathered around Heywood Street far fewer people are now accommodated in the centre. Gone are the compact terrace dwellings, small corner shops, the local pubs and the landmark churches. Lost were; St Johns the Rock, the United Reform Church Rochdale Road, Union Street Wesleyan Methodist Church, Salvation Army at Moorgate, Brunswick Methodist Church in North Street and Pits o’ th’ Moor in Pine Street. Replacing the old terraces, spinning mills and chapels are the giant branded warehouses; the Millgate, The Rock Triangle, the Peel Way and George Street “retail parks.”

A commercial patchwork of retail sheds now dominates, while industrial compounds and builder’s yards occupy the fringes. The shopping malls, multi-storey car parks and motorway network allow customers from far afield to purchase their merchandise with as little inconvenience as possible. As modern urban design has privileged the motorist, the access roads are widened and the town is experienced more speedily from the isolation of passing vehicles. Consider for a moment the Ferngrove section of the M66 with its brutal retaining walls and an invisible cocktail of constant noise and the toxic exhaust fumes dispersing harmful diesel particles over the residents, all due to the worship of the automobile.

Successes include the Metro Intermodal exchange with its pedestrian access to the nearby Bury Market, which remains one of the nation’s favourite open

markets. Situated around Market Place and Silver Street, the Conservation Area featuring important Victorian stone villas has helped to retain the town's uniqueness. Protecting this "Cultural Quarter" as a central gateway has enabled Bury, unlike other neighbouring townships, to retain its distinctive character. While the town evolves it begs the question whether enough is done to preserve the collective heritage, but the archaeological dig of the castle foundations has resulted in an important new public square. Finally, there is the extraordinary extension to the Rock by leading architects BDP and renowned engineers Buro Happold. The Rock Triangle is a new £350m pedestrianised redevelopment for retail, recreation, and downtown cliff-face apartments. Located in the St John's Square not since its Edwardian heyday of civic splendour and the palatial James Kenyon & Sons cotton mills which once occupied the site has there been such a resurgence of economic confidence in Bury.

<http://www.grahamcooper.com/SenseofPlace.html>