

# BIRMINGHAM

Ever-changing Birmingham may roll with the times at astonishing speed, but it has plenty of fascinating windows to the past, as **Helen Werin** discovers...



Gas Basin, at the heart of Birmingham's canal system



Cityscape of Birmingham showing the cathedral

Centuries ago the people of Birmingham used to bait bulls with dogs for fun. Apparently it made the animals' meat more tender. Now their main occupation on a Saturday seems to be shopping or sipping coffee in the Bull Ring, the swish new centre built around the spot where the bulls were once tethered.

Thus Birmingham's a curious city to behold. It's a bit like a kaleidoscope, constantly changing. At first glance it's dull and functional; a sea

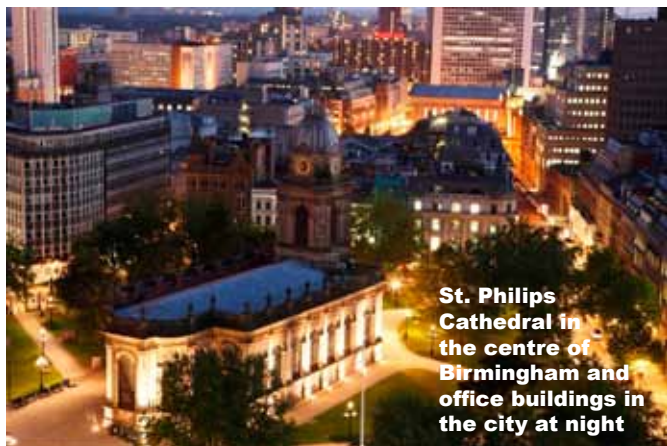
of cranes, building sites, derelict factories and some truly ugly 1960s concrete monstrosities. But a few twists and turns here and there show grand Victorian buildings and stunning modern architecture such as the International Convention Centre and Selfridges' landmark façade of 16,000 silver discs. It's all set amid a rich pattern of well-used canals and thriving quarters, each with a unique industrial history, as befitting a place once known as 'the city of 1,000 trades'.

This was not initially apparent however. It took a walking tour with Blue Badge guide Roger Bailey to truly appreciate the eclectic character of Birmingham. Roger whisked us along some of the towpaths of the city's 103 miles of canals, skirting vast malls packed with every type of restaurant imaginable and across impressive squares with fountains, statues and colonnaded halls.

My initial impression? This is a city that doesn't stand still for a minute. Locals must go away on holiday and have a few surprises when they get back. Indeed, while we were there, the new coach station had just opened, the main city centre rail station was being rebuilt and a new library was going up. And these were just the major developments.

## Pre-Raphaelites

Dominating the city centre, we found the neo-classical Town Hall; not a civic administration centre as one might suppose, but an acclaimed concert venue. That, too, had not long had £35m spent on renovating it to its former glory.



Roger was also showing us St Phillip's Cathedral, small by most cities' standards, but renowned for its four fabulous jewelled-effect windows by Edward Burne-Jones.

Then The Mailbox, still looking, from the outside at least, like Europe's largest sorting office. It was built to withstand a nuclear bomb, but now it's a posh and pristine mall of designer shops and eateries.

This may be a city where we had to scratch the surface a little to find some real gems, but they were extraordinary.

Right at the city's quirky heart is Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, with the largest collection of Pre-Raphaelites in the world.

And, in the Jewellery Quarter, where 400 specialists ply their craft, we visited an old bracelet factory frozen in time where the workers literally hung up their coats and shut the door on a fascinating time capsule. It's now the award-winning Museum of the Jewellery Quarter.

Ruth, our guide, was telling us about Olive, who made the tea here, when it was Smith and Pepper's factory. Olive used to keep a jar of potassium cyanide on her desk as part of her gilding and electroplating work. This horribly poisonous stuff looks just like sugar. Obviously Olive was not a lady to get on the wrong side of.

Then we heard about the ban on Brylcreem; potentially men could have got away with a few bobs' worth of gold dust in their slicked-back hair this way. Trouser turn-ups were banned for the same reason. Even the water from the workers' hand basins was filtered to retrieve the precious dust.

You can't blame the bosses for recycling every last speck of their gold dust. Especially when Ruth tells us that £10,000 worth of it was sold off when the factory's cellars were swept out.

Incredibly, the factory is exactly as it was left when the family who had owned it since 1899 literally locked up in 1981 and retired to Worcestershire. The factory was neglected for

nine years until city councillors discovered it and realised its value as a major tourist attraction.

## Bull Ring

In the Museum and Art Gallery, past the magnificent paintings, 2000-year-old Peruvian pottery and whistling kettles sculpted like seals and cats and displays of silver, sculpture and ceramics, we found the story of Birmingham. It's a place that shot up as a result of markets and the entrepreneurial spirit of one Peter de Birmingham who, 900 years ago, bought a market charter from the king.

It's fascinating to see a drawing from around 1800 showing the Bull Ring with a modest water pump, jumble of small shops and market stalls and, in the centre, the iron ring. The artist, Samuel Lines, described the area as being "choked with filth."

Nearby, I found a rather poignant ode about the relentless progression of development in Birmingham, albeit written in 1825. The author, William Dobbs, was reflecting on how the city used to look.

"There's hardly a single place I know and it fills my heart with grief and woe, for I can't find Brummagem," he lamented.

There must be plenty of people nowadays who share a similar sentiment, but this is also a city that is highly focussed on the future.

At Think Tank we found a children's paradise of experiments, buttons to press, problems to solve and thought-provoking creativity. There were working models of micro air vehicles, which could be used by emergency services to help them see what is hidden in dangerous environments. We could even have built our own 'alien' to withstand life on different planets. I loved the 'blood station', which likened the circulatory system to a train and all the things that blood carries to passengers. Children could consult the destination board to see where 'everyone' was going.

Scariest of all were the Jaguar robots, like something out of War Of The Worlds. They may have been demonstrating welding together different parts of a car, but I was thankful that they were contained within a metal cage.

## Novelty factor

Earlier Roger had shown us the latest Birmingham Wheel. Visitors on a previous wheel had been highly confused, but greatly amused, to hear a commentary inviting them to admire the River Seine and the Eiffel Tower while gazing over the rather less inspiring rooftops of an industrial heartland. The wheel had previously been installed in the Place de la Concorde in Paris and there had been a few technical problems after its removal to the Midlands. As Roger said, it was a "bit bizarre, but people were going on it for the novelty factor."

We certainly found plenty of novelty with a visit to BBC Open Space on the seventh floor of The Mailbox. Here we were free to wander round, watching the presenters of BBC WM at work and peeking in to the TV production studio with its bank of monitors, which one of our party described as "a bit like NASA."

Children love it here. We watched as budding newsreaders





**Museum of the Jewellery Quarter in Birmingham**

and weathermen recorded a bulletin which they could later download from the website to show their friends.

Sadly the blinds were drawn on the Archers' studio during our visit. If we'd booked a guided tour we could have taken part in an interactive Archers drama operating such sound effects as boots scrunching on gravel or glasses clinking.

Of course, there isn't a farm gate – it's that old yellow ironing board hanging on the wall. The sound of hay rustling is really a tangle of audio tape and the sink in the corner is used as a brook, river, trough and shower – as well as in kitchen scenes. The sound effects technicians, who do all this work, even have to don high heels to simulate the women characters walking. Funnily enough, most of the technicians are male.

One of the BBC guides, Lee, confided that die-hard Archers fans often refuse to go in to the studio for fear of it spoiling their picture of Ambridge.

This made me think about the image I'd always carried in my head of Birmingham, somewhat grey and grim, a concrete city centre surrounded by subways.

Now that illusion is well and truly shattered. The 'kaleidoscope' city has shown me far more enticing views.

### WHAT ELSE TO SEE AND DO

- Birmingham has the world's largest canal system, so exploring by water is a great way to see the city. [www.seconcityboats.co.uk](http://www.seconcityboats.co.uk)

- Ikon, in Brindleyplace (free), is one of Europe's leading contemporary art galleries. [www.ikon-gallery.co.uk](http://www.ikon-gallery.co.uk)

- Birmingham Hippodrome, in Hurst Street, is the UK's busiest theatre outside of London's West End. [www.birminghamhippodrome.com](http://www.birminghamhippodrome.com)

- Take an organised bus tour along the Tolkein trail. JRR Tolkien gained plenty of inspiration for The Hobbit and Lord of the Rings from his childhood haunts in Birmingham. [www.birmingham-tours.co.uk](http://www.birmingham-tours.co.uk)

- Birmingham Botanical Gardens and Glasshouses are a tranquil oasis of colour with tropical and sub-tropical houses and a Mediterranean House full of citrus fruits. [www.birminghambotanicalgardens.org.uk](http://www.birminghambotanicalgardens.org.uk)

- History is brought alive on a guided tour through the city's last remaining courtyard of 19th century Back to Back houses, near the Hippodrome. [www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

### WHERE TO EAT

- Poppy Red's chocolate and raspberry fondant is to die



**The Birmingham Wheel with the statue of Boulton, Watt and Murdoch, nicknamed 'The Golden Boys' or 'The Carpet Salesmen'**

for. The chef uses locally-sourced ingredients in the seasonal modern-British menu and it's just around the corner from the Hippodrome Theatre, Arcadian Centre, Birmingham. [www.poppy-red.com](http://www.poppy-red.com)

- Bank, overlooking the canal at Brindley Place, has all the atmosphere of a lively continental brasserie and is also renowned for its cocktails. [www.bankrestaurants.com](http://www.bankrestaurants.com)

### WHERE WE STAYED

Staying Cool serviced apartments at the landmark Rotunda beside the Bull Ring mix swinging 60s style with contemporary cool. Our Maxi apartment, which had everything we needed down to a Gaggia coffee maker, a dishwasher and washing machine, had floor to ceiling windows and quirky newsprint-covered polyprop chairs by Lou Rota. [www.stayingcool.com](http://www.stayingcool.com)

### FOR MORE INFORMATION

- \*[www.visitbirmingham.com](http://www.visitbirmingham.com)

- \*[www.marketingbirmingham.com](http://www.marketingbirmingham.com)

- \*[www.thinktank.ac](http://www.thinktank.ac)

- \*[www.bmag.org.uk](http://www.bmag.org.uk) (museums)

- \*[www.birminghamheritage.com](http://www.birminghamheritage.com)

- \*[bbc.co.uk/showsandtours](http://bbc.co.uk/showsandtours)

- \*[www.birminghambigcityculture.com](http://www.birminghambigcityculture.com)

### Selfridges' iconic façade

