

# Birmingham, busy city where old and new jostle for attention

Birmingham showcased its industrial past and rich cultural diversity during the colourful closing ceremony for the Commonwealth Games.

Walking around Britain's second city only underlines those elements in the city's history. Now, the city council, who invested millions in the multi-sports event, hope that there is a lasting legacy.

Their vision is to put Birmingham fully on the international map for major sports, and the Olympics has been mentioned, plus tourism as many from abroad seem to side-step Birmingham.

The city fathers also seem determined to sweep away misconceptions about their home, typically described as the United Kingdom's second city behind London.

The Games certainly focused global attention short-term on the West Midlands which retains many landmarks from the industrial revolution.

This was a period in which Birmingham was a powerhouse and, because of the smoke from the ironworks foundries and forges, plus the working of shallow coal seams, it earned the nickname of The Black Country.

Modern Birmingham is much removed from that and a stroll into the heart reveals huge office blocks, home to big players in corporate finance, a conference centre and multi-purpose arena, the home of the Symphony Orchestra and The Birmingham Rep, plus trendy cafes and bars.

Many are next to the canal which once fed the bustling city with raw materials and provided a convenient way of moving them on during the heady days of the 18th century.

Building continues, HS2, of course, is coming and construction work is under way only minutes from the city centre. Phase One of the complex and high-cost project will take passengers from London to a station not far from the current Victorian gem of Moor Street which currently provides commuter passengers with a link deeper into the West Midlands area.

Extensive demolition next to Moor Street work has created large gap sites, one next to the Jacobean-style gateway to the Birmingham Gun Barrel Proof House, established by law to guarantee the superior quality of the local gun trade.

It stands proudly on its own as workers with high-vis vests with HS2 displayed prominently on them dig up roads to make way for the new rail link to the capital.

Once complete, HS2 should lift an area which has undoubtedly seen better days. A short stroll away is Floodgate Street with the unmissable chimney from the former Custard Factory.

Remember, Bird's Custard, well this was their home. The company name still adorns the imposing red-brick structure which now houses small businesses. Changed days.

Across the road is the oldest secular structure in the city, The Old Crown Pub, dating back to 1368, a white, timber-framed building which has thankfully been saved on three occasions by the city planners.

Behind that is the railway arch taking trains from Moor Street and underneath it is Lower Trinity Street which is lit up at night and is home to night clubs and music venues housed in old industrial units from days gone by. Not pretty but effective use of what has come before.

It is claimed to be one of the most exciting streets in the district of Digbeth and the whole area is adorned by colourful street art.

Graffiti is commonplace. Two metal Victorian urinals we walked past have also been marked by graffiti. Such a shame, as the intricate metalwork seemed worth preserving for generations to come.

However, still with art, and thankfully still preserved not far away, behind The Anchor Pub off Bradford Street, is a huge, imposing, mural celebrating rock band Black Sabbath when they were at the height of their fame.

Of course, they rolled out legendary, Birmingham-born rocker Ozzy Osbourne, the band's lead singer, now 73 and wearing the scars of his well-documented life, during the closing ceremony of the recent Commonwealth Games.

There are other surprises nearby, like the Digbeth Community Garden, which regularly hosts events, and three, well-preserved, listed terraced houses dating back to the 1840s which look so out of place.

The Typhoo Basin is another legacy of the city's manufacturing past as it enabled the famous tea brand to prosper aided by marketing which apparently emphasised its medicinal qualities.

We wandered back into town passing the Romanesque St Basils, opened as a church in 1910 and now a charity combating youth homelessness.

The modern and really busy bus stadium was on our left and it houses a number of brand-recognised takeaways.

Yards away up the street, is J A Chatwin's most famous church, St Martin in The Bull Ring (pictured). There has been a church of the site since 1290 but most of the current building was

completed in 1873 and it is stunning at night when it is illuminated by coloured lights.

The church is in the shadow of modern bars and restaurants and marks one way into the busy Bull Ring shopping precinct, the biggest in the city, where big-name brand retailers fight for business and, of course, there is the bronze bull, a significant piece of art for this city.

Why? Because it stems from the Bull Ring, a market area of Birmingham in the Middle Ages onwards where bulls were held before slaughter.

Typically in Birmingham, old interfaces with new and the church is adjacent to the iconic Selfridges store has aluminium discs with glint in the sunlight. It stands out over the skyline.

So, there is much to see off-piste in Birmingham if you are prepared to follow a guidebook. We used AZ Birmingham Hidden Walks by Robert Ankorn and Ruby Compton-Davies (£6.99). We're glad we did.