

The cars that ate Bradford *

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High-performance cars seem high on the agenda of Bradford 2005. This is equally true of Leeds and Manchester, but in those cities it goes along with the show-off presence of cranes over building-sites. There is some of this in Bradford too, but largely just to replace worn-out postwar developments under-ambition prevented replacing twenty years ago. Cars n' malls, no direct prose-line, then, to J.B.Priestley's Margin released.

Might we be experiencing a definitive conceptual cut-off from Priestley and earlier writers about Bradford? The city has been nothing if not an accretion of people and projections, porously there for the latest conversation on the bus, in the market, in the pub. Make-do and mend, brushed aside at all costs by modern capitalism, is still on its first wind in many Bradford lives but, uncannily, alongside the cars.

Omissions on the Bradford Tourist Map 2005 are a plaque on Manningham Mills or thereabouts for the part-birth of the Labour movement following 10,000 people demonstrating in the streets in 1890. Or an invitation to see the angels in the ironwork roof-supports of Lilycroft School across the road, one of the first Board Schools in the country. Then back to the second plaque on the mill to celebrate Manningham Mills Community Association's work in helping to give it new life, an ongoing example of cross-cultural and cross-age effort (one amongst others in the city of course).

As in other towns and cities in the 'Heavy Woolen District', the rural has a kind of indiscriminate presence, close-up, as in the many becks, and in the immediate distance, the hills. At the weekend you went to Baildon Moor to breathe and relax, and look ambiguously back at the city where others were still working overtime. The hills feel very old. Cartwright Hall Museum used to have a model tableau of neolithic settlements, and Ilkley Moor has numerous remains of standing stones. I think you can see the planet's time** in the mineral glitter in the stones on the hills as well as in a city-centre wall. I still pick up a little of its sand blown from wherever to the bottom of Thornton Road on a dry spring day. By it used to be strands of unwashed wool escaped from bales. I made a pact with a friend some years ago to resist using the phrase 'that used to be' in relation to Bradford places and premises, because what had replaced them was of so little quality (the modern concept of the city came from the nineteenth century and must retain some of its feel and functions however it adds to and renews them). So let me break the pact. Some wet fields on Warren Lane in Gilstead are now a kind of cartoon housing development at the back of which rises Baildon Moor. The visual and emotional effect for me is of a sad collage, from which emerge more cars. The expansion of the city outwards in the decades after 1810 must have appeared shocking, as was the visual and sensory state of the river Thames in

London. I make the correspondance to raise this point: if we are in a new conceptual time, our environmental challenges are surely one of its framing motifs; our version of the gap between myth and reality.

*Thanks to the 1973 Australian film, The cars that ate Paris

**Thanks to the designer Ettore Sottsass' notion of 'the planet's planet'

(This essay was written for the Bradford Grid Project's inaugural exhibition at Gallery II, University of Bradford, April 2005.)