

RE: Bradford.

Through the eye of an image

Rephotography or “now and then” photographs generally stand as a record of how much the locality has evolved. Here lies Forster Square, a wide square that took its architectural references from the places, plazas, and Plätze of European cities. This is a site of many urban planning revamps to accommodate modern requirements. Instead of the disappeared statue of Richard Oastler, 1789-1861, you now stand there - briefly.

In case memory lapses, Oastler, concerned about working conditions in the textile mills, agitated for shorter working hours for children eventually resulting in the Ten-Hour Act in 1847. This represented a seventeen year campaign during which Oastler was sacked for his involvement with the Poor Law and incarcerated in Fleet Prison for non-payment of debts resulting from his redundancy.

Looking around you will see no sign of Oastler’s landmark statue – a stone figure of an upright and benevolent patriarch with, at his side, two children, a young girl clinging to her elder brother for support. It is now probably regarded as bad art because of its sentimental celebration of Victorian paternalism, its obvious function as model rendering visible the outmoded societal structure of the era. This is further shown through the indication that the boy, while being saved himself, could become the man, the figure of the female child representing the needy that he himself would aid. The heroic figure of Richard Oastler, demonstrating a pattern for being, towers above the paved setts of Forster Square only in old photographs.

If heroism is visible on the streets of old photographs what of the contemporary photograph? Perhaps the model of the hero can still be observed in the post-industrial cities of Europe. Regenerating areas have no shortage of latter day architectural heroes and these often appear in the form of astonishing landmark buildings. Buildings have names like Beacon, Capita and Spire. In post-industrial topographies this glossy image is supported by seductive advertising; beautiful models that exhort us to look better, work harder, earn more, buy more; heroic models of who we might aspire to become as a person, as a place. Desire is written into the changing landscape through images and texts on the street, rousing revival words such as “vibrant,” “buzz,” “new,” “becoming.” Alternative messages written on the screen that is the street often are redacted with black paint. In this way the redundant areas of urban Europe attempt to resurrect themselves via an image which appears to make promises of a very specific kind of future. If these images are then in turn re-imaged through photography what might be recorded of our society now?

And what of our photographic now to the then of the Richard Oastler landmark? If we can use the present to look into the images of then, how might now be evaluated through old photographs? If the invisible Richard Oastler was to return would he look around with a sense of achievement that children no longer work long hours in the factories, that all are entitled to

free schooling? Or might he feel the need to agitate again?

RE: Bradford Now. Forster Square Oct 2011. Look on; in all the places, plazas, and Plätze of European cities you will never see anywhere quite like it.

http://www.francisfrith.com/bradford,west-yorkshire/photos/statue-forster-square-1897_39506x/

http://www.flickr.com/photos/bradford_timeline/5230403625/

Kate Mellor. 4th September 2011.