

A BRUMMIE WELCOME

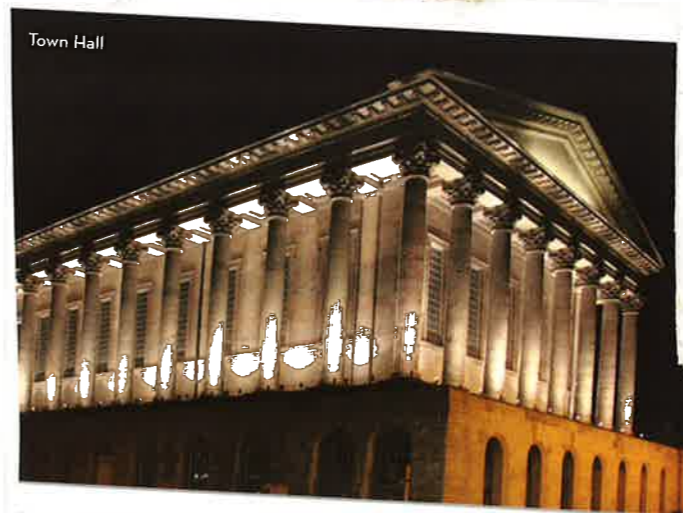
By Sharon Stephenson



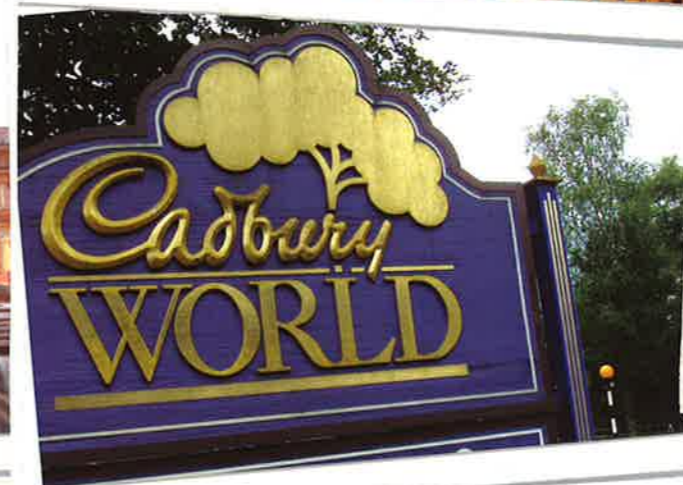
Council House



Victoria Square



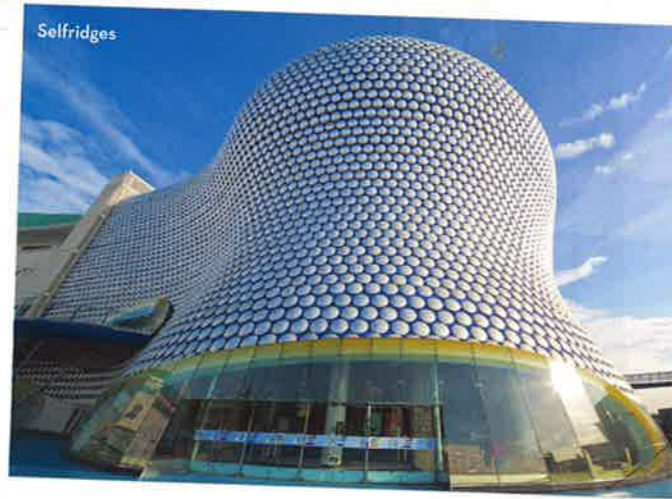
Town Hall



Canals



J.R.R. Tolkien's house



Selfridges

Be suspicious of a drug addict who tells you something is far away. I've arrived at Birmingham's New Street Station two hours later than expected, thanks to a woefully inept train service. Crossness exists on about eight different levels and to make matters worse, the map function on my phone is on the blink. I'm not really in the mood for directions from someone so familiar with Class A substances.

"You need to go left at the second round-about and take the third turn on your right, stay on that side of the road until you get to the overbridge and then keep going, but that's when you'll get into strife because you won't be able to cross the ring road. It's too far to find it yourself but if you give me a fiver, I'll take you there," he says in his sing-song Brummie accent. Unbidden, he also tells me his life story and tries to sell me cocaine.

It's probably not the welcome the city's tourism people had

in mind but, as I suspect, my destination is much closer than he let on. Nor is it too difficult to navigate the tangle of one-way streets at the core of England's second largest city; at each step, I'm surprised at how different it is from the grim, industrial basket-case of my imagination. Once the butt of numerous jokes,

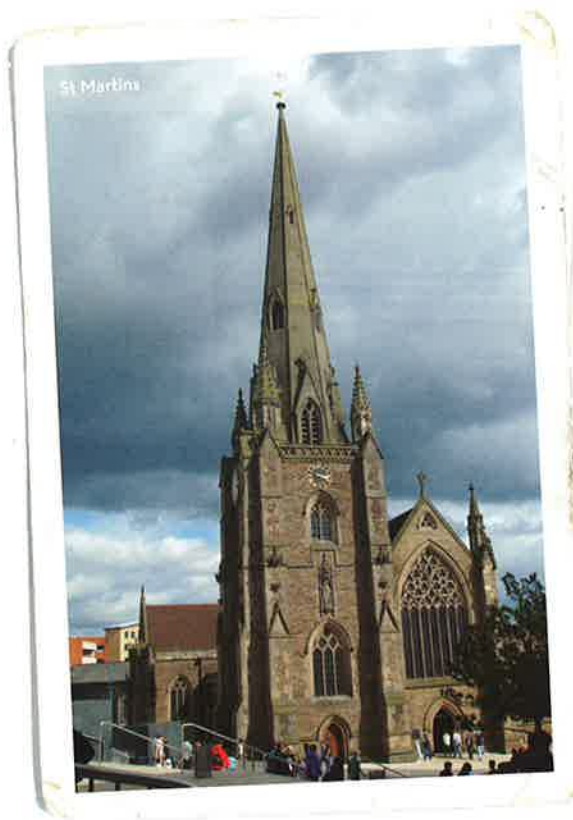
Brum, as it's affectionately known, has redefined itself as the centre of cool. Decades of regeneration projects have helped to overcome the blight of over-industrialisation and poor urban planning, resulting in a vibrant city that was rated No 19 on the *New York Times*' 'Top 45 places to visit in 2012' list.

It wasn't always like this: the Midlands capital was founded on industry, thanks largely to James Watt who patented the steam engine and kick-started the Industrial Revolution back in the mid 18th Century. Rebuilt from virtual ruins after WWII, Brum became if not the heart, then certainly the lungs, of Thatcher's Britain.

And while grimy buildings still ring the city, so much tarting up has gone on in the centre you'd never guess at the origins of the quaint cafe and boutique lined streets. A few minutes after leaving the station I'm standing in front of the Bullring, Birmingham's ultra-modern temple to consumerism. While I love shopping as much as the next person, it's not the whopping 26 football pitches worth of retail heaven I've come for. Rather,

I'm here to gawp at the spectacular Selfridges building which was styled on a 1960's Paco Rabanne dress and is clad in 15,000 shiny aluminium discs. It is, I imagine, what would happen if the Starship Enterprise was allowed to breed with a tin can. Snuggling up to it is the 13th Century St Martin's Church, which further adds to the strangely beautiful spectacle. Some sort of commercial enterprise has taken place on this spot since 1142, when the central market was held here. My Gap/Zara/Krispy Kreme shopping experience is vastly different to what it would have been back then, but it's still fascinating to think of those in whose steps I follow.

I wander back to Victoria Square, which is dominated by a giant fountain featuring a bathing woman (locals, apparently, refer to her as the 'floozy in a jacuzzi'). The city's most impressive Victorian building is the Council House, which is still the HQ of the City Council. Sadly it's closed at weekends, so I lug my shopping bags across the piazza to the Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, which is bursting with Pre-Raphaelite paintings and 18th century English watercolours. My attention, however, loiters longest in the museum section, with the 400,000 year old tools, artefacts and an Egyptian mummy.



The drug addict-turned-tour-guide told me I couldn't come to Brum and not visit the Jewellery Quarter, a statement that turns out to be true. A centre for jewellery production for around 200 years, it's like stepping into a tardis and emerging into the ancient world of bauble making and precious metals. I browse some of the 100 shops and marvel at the number of couples oohing and ahing over huge rocks and gold bands, before ducking into the adjacent Museum where I watch skilled craftspeople at work.

Here's a pub quiz question: which city boasts more miles of canals than Venice? Nod if you're as surprised as I was that the answer is Birmingham. Thanks to a series of canals created during the Industrial Revolution, Brum sits at the hub of England's canal network. I contemplate taking a boat tour but my tummy is rumbling and I'm keen to see if Birmingham's reputation as the Balti Capital of England is justified. Referring to the Kashmiri style of cooking food quickly over a flame, there are now more than 100 Balti houses in the city. I pick the first one I stumble upon in Broad Street, and spend the rest of the afternoon trying to feel my lips.

A trip to Bournville, where John Cadbury opened his shop in 1824, sweetens the deal. Abutting the factory is Cadbury World, a fun park devoted to chocolate and featuring a shop (selling all things Cadbury), a cafe (selling all things Cadbury) and a million children running around, hopped up on sugar and the prospect of even more free chocolate. Multi-media installations detail the history of chocolate, from the Mayan Indians who harvested cocoa beans and used them as currency, to the Spaniards who kept the recipe for chocolate a secret for 150 years and John Cadbury, who started producing the stuff at a time when it was

considered an aphrodisiac and therefore not suitable for women. No bean is left unturned as the Cadbury marketing machine goes into overdrive – but it's good fun and I leave with my pockets full of free chocolate, which is never a bad thing.

Kiwis might have brought JRR Tolkien's stories to the big screen, but Birmingham is where it all started so I ease the sugar high with a visit to the Tolkien Trail, which meanders past the former author's house. Cards on the table: I'm not really a fan of the *Rings/Hobbit* sagas, but it's still fascinating to see where the author lived, played and prayed. I'm particularly taken by Sarehole Mill (known in *The Hobbit* as the Great Mill) where, between the ages of four and eight, Tolkien and his younger brother Hilary spent hours exploring and being chased away by the bad-tempered miller (as do the young hobbits in the books). The best thing about the tour? It isn't saturated with nasty 'welcome to Tolkien country' type billboards or references to the films; instead, it's discreet and classic, a bit like the chap who put this corner of Birmingham on the map.

As I head back to the train station, I notice my friend from this morning is still in the same spot. "Enjoy my fair city?" he asks. "More than I ever thought possible," I reply, before giving him a chocolate bar and sprinting for my train. ■