

Artefacts: Summer 2023

Changing Birmingham – its people and places:

Views and Vistas – ‘I can see clearly now the rain has gone’

By Jim Wells, Friends Trustee

With the weather warming up and as the days get longer and lighter it seems like an appropriate time to go into ‘flaneur’ mode and appreciate the views and vistas of our city. Using Birmingham’s collection, we can begin to see how the layout of the city has changed over the centuries and, in the inevitable Birmingham style, continues to rapidly evolve.



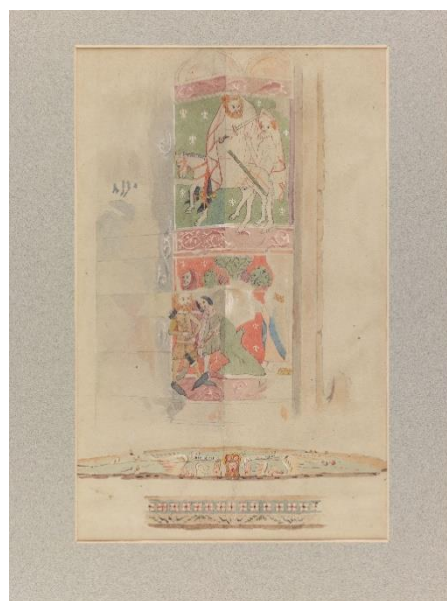
‘The High Street Market, Birmingham’ by David Cox, engraved by William Radclyffe, 1827; 1996 V146.52; Transferred from Birmingham Reference Library; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0

There is one vista with a long history, recently restored by the Bull Ring development of 2003, looking down from the top of the High Street to St Martin’s Parish church, now beautifully restored and taking centre stage. In the 1960s, with the priority for cars dominant, that historic view was buried under an urban motorway and, for those of us who were pedestrians, access to the markets was via a number of delightfully fragrant subways. The restoration of this classic Birmingham aspect in 2003 was not inevitable, but the result of a hard-fought campaign initiated by a ‘People’s Plan’ in the 1990s. The initial plan by developers was

for a huge shopping mall called The Galleries, covering the entire space, but the determination of campaigners and senior councillors for a more human scale and pedestrian-orientated built environment resulted in the historic perspective of the Bull Ring being restored but with the unavoidable compromise of the markets being pushed somewhat to the fringes.

This leads us to an interesting question: from where did the various elements of this urban space originate and why are they so important to understanding Birmingham’s history? The earliest aspect for which we have documentary evidence is from 1154, with the granting of the right to hold a market by Henry II to the Lord of the Manor, Peter de Birmingham. It is generally thought that the market, upper and lower, developed around the space occupied by St Martin’s. Most opinion views the market as a highly significant factor in Birmingham’s development as a trading and a manufacturing centre. Hence the importance of protecting the market in modern times, which is now located behind St Martin’s and serves a diverse community.

The earliest record for St Martin’s is 1263. As the town developed St Martin’s became the Parish Church, although some evidence points to St Thomas’s at the Priory in Bull Street as being the earlier Parish church. As a building it has gone through many changes from that



‘14th Century Wall Paintings St Martin’s Church, Birmingham’, Watercolour by Allen Edward Everitt; 1941V339-1; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.

original medieval church but the current layout and position still largely reflects that ancient setting. There are two major changes to note: the first in 1690 when, in their wisdom, the churchwardens decided to encase the original building in brick. This finish can be seen in some of the illustrations in Birmingham's collection. The Victorians regarded this major, possibly tasteless, alteration with horror but William Hutton, writing earlier in the latter half of the 18 Century, had this to say: *'the bricks are excellent and the workmanship are excellent'*.

The most significant and even more fundamental change was in 1873, which provides us with the building we now see at the centre of the new Bull Ring, when local architect J. A. Chatwin was commissioned to completely rebuild the church, excluding the tower. Despite the fact that the programme largely demolished the existing building, it was generally seen as a tactful approach, largely following the footprint of the medieval church and well presented, using hard wearing rockfaced Grinshill stone on the exterior.

There are still some remaining medieval elements inside the tower and effigies to the de Birmingham family c1325 to 1390 are still present. Now fully cleaned and restored to its commanding position, Chatwin's design can be fully appreciated, and it has stood the test of time.

That view, restored in 2003, had originally been created by some ruthless town planning in true Birmingham style in the early 1800s by the Street Commissioners who cleared the buildings surrounding St Martin's and the Shambles, a row of butcher's shops, creating the space for a large open market and building a market hall in 1835. The space quickly became a centre for religious and political speakers surrounded by market traders including ice cream sellers from the Italian community in the nearby St Bartholomew area. Whilst welcoming relatively new landmarks such as Selfridges and the Rotunda from the sixties, both now very much part of Birmingham's identity, it is important that we can still appreciate the historical landscape going back to medieval times. Interestingly, Historic England have recently asked the Developers of the Smithfield site, behind St Martin's, to revise their plans for precisely not respecting that history. Let's hope they are as successful in challenging the approach as the campaigners were in the 1990s.



'St Martin's Church Birmingham, By Night' by Elijah Walton, 1850-1888; 1920P448; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.

Sources and further reading

- 1) **'A History of the County of Warwick: Volume 7, the City of Birmingham', WB Stephens (ed), 1964, British History Online: <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/warks/vol7>**
A valuable resource now available online with free access via British History Online/Institute of History at London University. A good section on the history of St Martin's and its development over the years.
- 2) **'Birmingham: Pevsner Architectural Guides', Andy Foster, Yale University 2016 edition**
A good detailed section on the architecture and internal design and decoration of St Martin's by Andy Foster in this beautifully laid out reference book.
- 3) **'History of Old St. Martin's, Birmingham', John Thackery Bunce, illustrated by Allen Edward Everitt, Hall and English, 1875**
A remarkable publication produced at the time of the rebuilding of St Martin's by J.H. Chatwin. The drawings by Everitt provide a record of the building as it was before demolition and also a copy of medieval illustrations that were revealed during the re-building process.
- 4) **'An History of Birmingham (1783)', William Hutton**
Birmingham's first historian. Obviously much evidence has been produced since this was written by Hutton and opinions have changed, but it still provides us with a view of Birmingham from the eighteenth century.
- 5) **'The Bull Ring Remembered: Heart of Birmingham and its Market Areas', Victor J. Price, Brewin Books, 1989**
A good accessible oversight of the history of the area, specifically before the changes of the 1960s. Well illustrated with photographs and individual recollections of the markets and life in the surrounding streets.
- 6) **'Mediaeval Birmingham', Bassett and Holte in Chapter 3 of 'Birmingham: The Workshop of the World' Carl Chinn and Malcolm Dick (eds), Liverpool University Press, 2016**
An academic article, giving a real insight into medieval Birmingham and its topography, a period much neglected in traditional histories of Birmingham.
- 7) **'Towards a better Bull Ring: A People's Plan', c.1990s**
Produced by Birmingham for People to challenge the 'Galleries' plan for the Bull Ring and provide an alternative vision based on creating public space for pedestrians, street level access and human scale buildings.
- 8) **'Bullring: The heart of Birmingham', Michael Hallet and Peter James, 2003, Tempus Publishing**
A publication that captures in photographic form the construction of the new Bull Ring along with text from Chris Upton on the history of the area.

Illustrations:

<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=8743&index=14&total=17&view=viewSearchItem>

'Japanned Tray, View of St Martin's Church Birmingham, from the Bullring' by Thomas Hollins, 1815-1835; 1937F394; Presented by the Friends of Birmingham Museums & Art Gallery, 1937; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.



<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=6628&index=11&total=17&view=viewSearchItem>



'The High Street Market, Birmingham' by David Cox, engraved by William Radclyffe, 1827; 1996 V146.52; Transferred from Birmingham Reference Library; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.

<https://dams.birminghammuseums.org.uk/asset-bank/action/viewAsset?id=12281&index=4&total=17&view=viewSearchItem>

'The Bull Ring & Nelson Statue, Birmingham', 1845, attributed to Thomas Allom (Previously attributed to David Cox); 1940P901; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.



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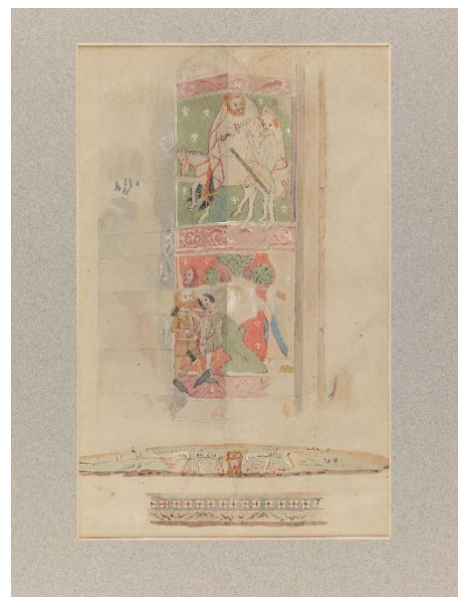
'Interior of St Martin's Church Bull Ring Birmingham', Watercolour by Allen Edward Everitt; 1976V697; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.



'St Martin's Church Birmingham, By Night' by Elijah Walton, 1850-1888; 1920P448; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.

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'14th Century Wall Paintings St Martin's Church, Birmingham', Watercolour by Allen Edward Everitt; 1941V339-1; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.



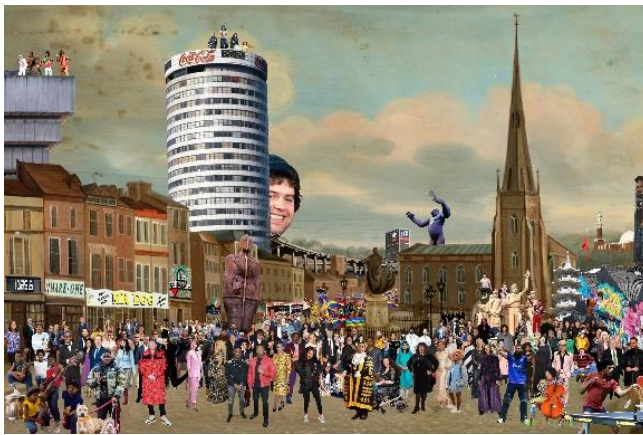
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'The Old Shambles, Bull Ring, Birmingham' by Samuel Lines; 1893V32; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.



In the centre of this drawing is the ring where bulls were tethered and which gives the area the name of the Bull Ring. The butchers' shops on the right are known as the Shambles. Samuel Lines (1778-1863) was Birmingham's first topographical artist and his drawings and paintings offer a unique glimpse of life in the town in the early 19th century.



'Benny's Babbies' by Cold War Steve (Christopher Spencer), 2020; 1937F394, Commissioned by Birmingham Museums Trust; © Cold War Steve/Christopher Spencer; Photo by Birmingham Museums Trust, licensed under CC0.

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