

The Mancunian Candidate

Manchester Emerges as Northern England's Proudest City (Sorry, Liverpoolians).

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The reaction was universal. They leaned in closer, glanced to see if anyone was listening, and, as if describing a very private ailment to the doctor, whispered: "It all started with the bomb, actually."

On June 15, 1996, a car bomb planted by the IRA exploded in a downtown shopping quarter of Manchester, just as the Saturday crowds were reaching their peak. By incredible fortune, no one was killed, but 200 were injured and the surrounding area was destroyed.

Showing true British grit, Mancunians – as residents of Manchester call themselves – got on with the job at hand: repairing their damaged city. But they did more than that. The bomb became a catalyst for the complete regeneration of a city which had been regarded for generations as not much more than a grungy industrial town with a famous football team.

The city's facelift has been taking place for a decade and is now old news in the UK, but the revamped Manchester hasn't yet made its debut on the world stage. As recently as 1997, Lonely Planet wrote, "... to love [Manchester] requires a massive act of selective vision.... The question for the traveler is – why try?"

Fast forward to 2006, where the city's flashy new buildings and trendy cafes emanate an energy that was previously lacking. Upscale designer boutiques dot the shopping district, and a new football stadium and swimming complex are a permanent nod to the city's turn playing host to the 2002 Commonwealth Games. Manchester is virtually unrecognizable from the old days, until you stay long enough to see what has never changed: its residents remain as jovial and cheerfully stoic as always.

I sat in The Ox pub enjoying a pint with Sarah, a born-and-bred Mancunian who was showing me the ropes of a Manchester night out. "Manchester is like a city of villages," she explained. "I'll go out for a walk, and after five minutes, I stumble across someone I know."

For a city stuck in the epicenter of one of the most densely populated areas of Britain, that's impressive. While only 400,000 live in the city itself, the Greater Manchester area is home to over 2 million. But I believed what my new friend said – that Manchester had a decidedly more intimate feel than its size would suggest.

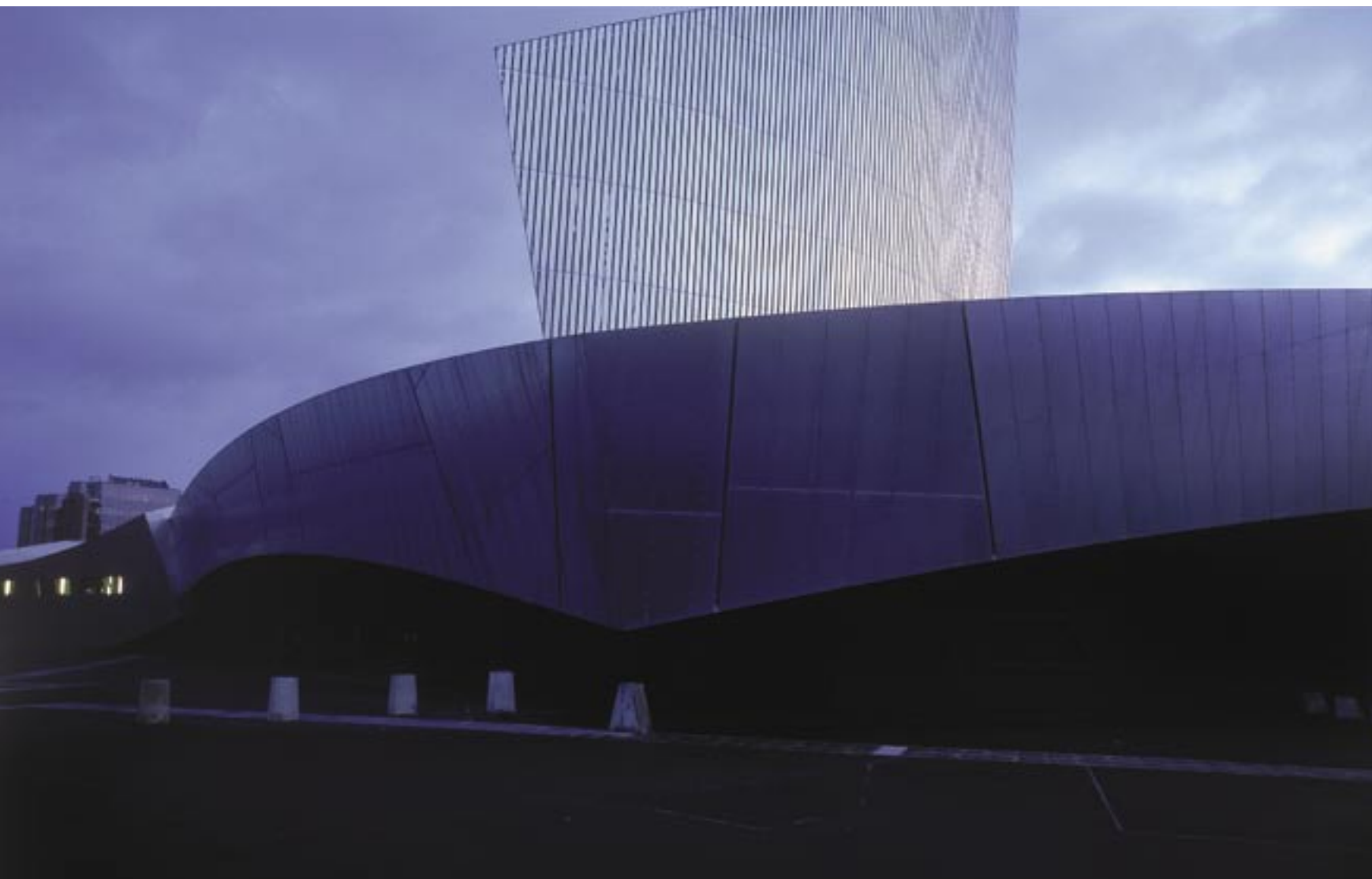
In the city center, grand old Victorian buildings like the City Hall mingle with new structures like the Urbis. Dedicated to "the celebration of urban living", this museum opened in 2002. A great glass elevator which could have sprung from Roald Dahl's imagination shuttled me to the top of the building and the start of an interactive trip through the fascinating history of urban living around the world. Like the majority of Manchester's museums, admission was free.

Derelict warehouses along Manchester's many canals have been replaced by trendy



Manchester of the 21st century: Red brick buildings and double-decker buses are still a dime a dozen, but next to that you'll find ambitious construction projects, sparkling office complexes, and some of the nation's friendliest folk.





Daniel Libeskind, one of the architects behind the Freedom Tower for the World Trade Center site, created the stark design for the impressive Imperial War Museum North.

apartment complexes and offices. The Docks area is now referred to as the Quays and boasts of such new architectural landmarks as the Lowry and the Daniel Libeskind-designed Imperial War Museum North, whose striking three main 'shards' of metal on the exterior represent land, sea and air conflicts.

Not all the architectural highlights are new, however. Dwarfed by the flashy glass buildings surrounding it, the 15th century Manchester Cathedral provided a calm respite from bustling lunchtime crowds on Deansgate and King Streets. I asked a cathedral volunteer about the effects of the IRA bomb on the building, which had already survived the Blitz during World War II.

"We were shaken but not stirred," smiled the chatty elderly woman.

ON THE LOOKOUT FOR FOOTBALLERS' WIVES

The 1996 bomb went off outside the Marks & Spencer's at the Arndale Centre, Manchester's main downtown shopping center. The M&S is back now, bigger and brighter than before, and the Arndale Centre is now the crux of a shopping district that rivals London's Oxford Street for high street labels and luxury goods – minus the heavy crowds.

Manchester's reputation as the birthplace of great musical talents, including Oasis, the Smiths, and the Bee Gees, extends to its streets; drummers, guitarists and vocalists competed for attention and loose change.

I ventured around nearby King Street to check out the new clothing stores and see if I could spot any of the famous footballer's wives who are reputed to frequent the boutiques. I didn't find any famous faces, but I did buy a pair of trousers at MaxMara for only £35 – all in the name of journalism, of course.

More deals were to be had away from the grand Victorian structures of the center. The Lowry Discount Mall – only a short walk from Old Trafford football stadium – offered luxury brand names at discount prices. After those two visits, I had no more energy – or money – to face Trafford Centre, Europe's largest shopping mall, but I did take a stroll around the funky boutiques and quirky craft gallery in the city's bohemian Northern Quarter.

FEEDING THE CITY

"Brew, Luv?" asked the woman behind the counter when I finally reached the front of a snaking queue.



Manchester's Beautiful Game



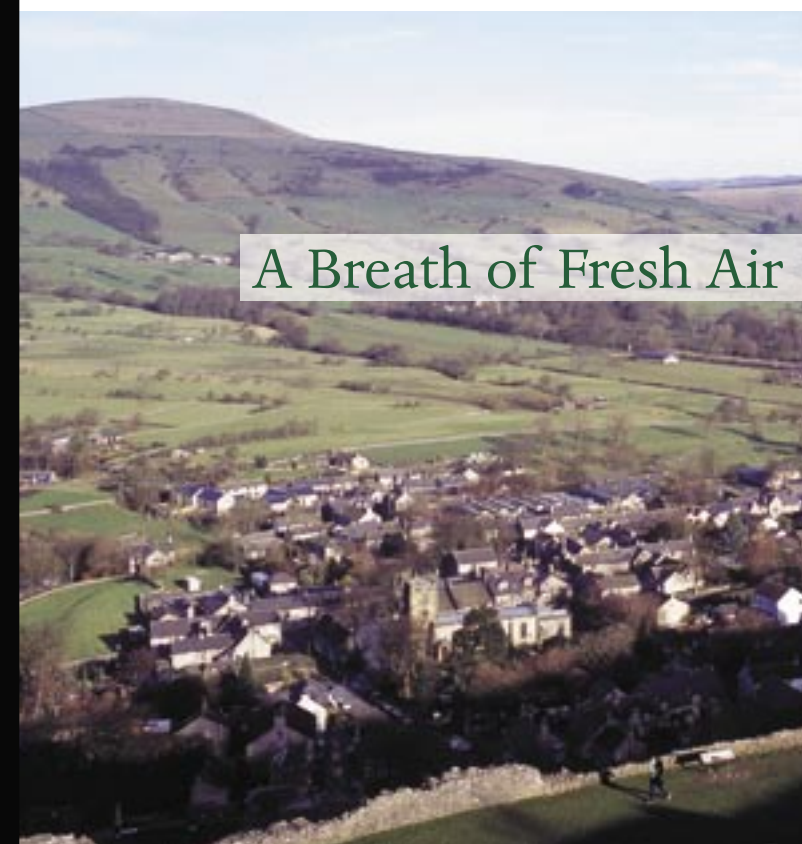
Manchester has more football teams per person than any other city in the world, but chances are there's one that springs to mind first: Manchester United. The world's most glamorous football team makes Old Trafford stadium its home. The award-winning walking tour of the Manchester United museum and stadium covers a lot. We visit the stands and dressing rooms while being fed obscure facts about the club, like the number of full-time staff (more than 2,000 on game days), the services paid to life-long fans (their ashes can be scattered on the pitch), and the bizarre superstitions of former Danish goalkeeper Peter Schmeichel (new gloves could only be hung a certain way on the dressing room hooks). As we are leaving, we are invited to make our own glorious way through the players' tunnel to the pitch, walking to the (recorded) sounds of throngs of cheering fans.

On game days, the excitement is more tangible. From inside the stadium, the dull roar of football chants like "GLORY GLORY MAN UNIIIIITED!" can be heard over an hour before kick-off. I walk towards Old Trafford as if following the Pied Piper, joining trickles of people dressed in bright red MUFC (Manchester United Football Club) scarves and other kit as they shuffle along the canal towards their football Mecca.

I'm one of a handful of women here. This is a tradition of fathers and sons, friends, families, and although the ritual occurs in many places around the world, this is the most famous. The wintry breeze carries the greasy aroma of chips and sausage butties. Touts sell fanzines as if they were fruits at a local farmer's market. The horns are blowing.

Still, given the crowd, the area is surprisingly orderly. The many police officers in fluorescent jerseys – several on horseback – don't seem to have much to do until the drunken yobs arrive only moments before the kick off.

As zero hour approaches, I stand outside the stadium and gaze down Sir Matt Busby Way at the phalanx of humanity in red that is approaching the gates. The people enter – lager-swilling hooligans last – and then the seagulls swoop in en masse to feed off our detritus. If only I had a ticket ...



A Breath of Fresh Air

While the urban sectors of England's northwest are experiencing a Renaissance, the pastoral scenes of the countryside are as quaint and steeped in refined beauty as they ever were. In my short weekend in Manchester, it was a requirement to spend some time out in the countryside.

The Peak District National Park is England's oldest, and situated between Manchester and Sheffield, Europe's busiest. The park gets its name from the Anglo-Saxon tribe Peacsetna that lived in the region in the 7th century. The Dark Peak of the northern section is so-named because of its gritstone cliffs, while the pastoral White Peak in the south is primarily limestone – or so local resident Jim Bintcliffe told me when he struck up a conversation while waiting in a queue for a soothing cup of tea.

There are many postcard-perfect villages in the park to use as a base for a short walking tour. My visit to the area, about an hour's drive from the city center, was to Castleton, an ancient village popular as a starting point for exploring the numerous caverns and paths around the nearby 517-meter Mam Tor. I wandered instead up the winding path to the ruins of 12th century Peveril Castle, one of England's earliest Norman fortresses. After surveying the majestic realm of the surrounding Hope Valley from the top of the castle's grassy hill, I joined the other day-trippers for the descent back to the visitor's center and the local tearoom. The more diligent walkers, easy to identify draped in waterproof clothing and with plastic covered maps dangling from their necks, passed me with a friendly nod and continued along the paths to the pass through the hills to the next village. I was satisfied with scones and clotted cream – the most English of snacks in the most English of countrysides.

★ “Well of course we are friendly and warm,” joked Rafa. “We have to be. It’s cold here.”



It took me a moment to realize that I was being offered a mug of tea. Mancunians enjoy a good brew, the perfect remedy for everything from a tiring day to boyfriend troubles. Served the English way – strong and with milk (and sugar on request) – it warms the cockles from the damp English winter. I enjoyed one near Chinatown in a small local café bustling with construction workers. They are a familiar sight since the building boom, queuing for their morning bacon butty, a popular kind of sandwich.

Although cheap and cheerful coffee shops, and of course pubs, have always abounded in Manchester, new culinary growth in the city has matched that of the buildings. I enjoyed a bit of a gastronomic tour, taking in some of the trendy new clubs in Castlefield and city center neighborhoods all open late now, thanks to England’s new late licensing laws. I savor a cocktail at the gold onyx bar Panacea and chat with Ross Forsyth, the manager of popular eatery the Restaurant Bar & Grill. “It’s moving at an astounding rate,” Ross told me. “The city is changing dramatically every day.”

Manchester also has the largest student population in the UK, with over 84,000 eager learners crowding the many Starbucks and gorging on take-aways. Rusholme, a neighborhood popular with students and a few kilometers from the city center, is better known as ‘Curry Mile.’ This stretch of the Oxford Road boasts one curry house after another, punctuated with the occasional kebab shop for good measure. The

shops’ garish neon signs create an unusual blend of Las Vegas brashness and red-brick English row houses, and also showcase the multi-cultural nature of Manchester, a city which has seen waves of immigrants from all nations since the mid-19th century.

My own culinary tour ended with a trip to El Rincón de Rafa – a rustic and popular Spanish tapas restaurant tucked away in a wee alley off Deansgate. The owner, Rafa himself, is a former footballer from Spain who has made good use of the demand for international cuisine in the city. We chatted about the friendliness of the local people. “Well of course we are friendly and warm,” he joked. “We have to be. It’s cold here.”

THE BELLY AND GUTS

Despite the ambitious plans of the Manchester Board of Tourism (who, believe it or not, use Barcelona as the city’s inspiration for development), it is difficult not to compare Manchester to the richer, larger, and more famous city in the south of England. London’s energy and dynamism are palpable; a walk around central Manchester on a Thursday evening, while pleasant enough, didn’t match this, although there were still clusters of students eating inexpensive Italian or Thai food and harried Mancunians heading home.

But the atmosphere was more relaxed and friendly. The shopkeepers wanted to have a little chat, and wouldn’t think about giving back change

for the newspaper without a ‘Luv’ or ‘Dahling.’ A bespectacled seller of the Big Issue magazine was pleased to talk about his city. Another man selling newspapers simply gave me one of his maps free when I asked for directions.

“The people make the city,” said one nightclub owner I talked to. It was a statement I heard often and it had nothing to do with Manchester’s aspiring status to be thought of as a world-class city. The hospitality of the north is well known.

“People are so stressed in the south,” said Rachel, a friend from southern England who has been lured north by the cheaper cost of living and the better pace of life. “In the north”, she says, “they have more time for each other.” Perhaps that is why so many northerners who had drifted south are now returning home.

Friendly it may be, but there is one thing that hasn’t changed – the infamous north-south divide. (“Divide? It’s not a divide; it’s a ravine,” joked another friend.) The English class structure, in which wealthier upper-class people lived in fine estates in the south of the country while the poorer working-class toiled in the factories and mines of the north, is alive and kicking, if less blatant than it used to be. The broad vowels and peculiar expressions of Mancunian speech can still set off some prejudice about a person’s education. “The southerners think we have coal dust on our faces,” complained Mark Rainey, a guide. And northern suspicions of southern prejudice keeps the problem running both ways.

In 1937, George Orwell declared Manchester to be “the belly and guts of the nation.” As the world’s great industrial metropolis, that was arguably true, but now the city has a more aesthetic side.

“The bomb was absolutely shocking and it hit the heart of everybody in Manchester, but that was the best thing that could ever have happened,” Sarah told me earnestly. “Everybody says that.”

But has the spirit of the city changed with its facelift? Stephen, yet another friendly chap I met on my travels, said Manchester’s vibe used to be more outwardly “rough and ready,” and while things may be different on the outside, he says the soul of the city is “fundamentally the same.”

On my first day in Manchester, I took a trip up a temporary Ferris wheel which was erected on Exchange Square to showcase the city to fearless visitors. As I swayed precariously 60 meters above ground, I found the recorded voice piped into my capsule gave the best summation of what I’d discovered here: “Welcome to Manchester,” it said. “The confident capital of the world.”

The new glossy exterior covers what was always there – a hearty, resilient population. It is this fact that makes the city so self-assured and comfortable about its new up-and-coming status. Mancunians are happy to wait for the rest of the world to catch on. [a](#)

ICELANDAIR flies directly from Keflavik to Manchester two times a week, starting 7 April 2006.