

THE BLACK COUNTRY

Stephen Witherford

Early evening and the two men, arm in arm and one with a cane, would make their way along the top of the patch of grass we called 'park' with the awkward rhythm of a three-legged dog. Past the dying elm tree and glassless bus stop they navigated their familiar route to the pub, mutual dependency making sense of the world around them, one being blind the other deaf and dumb. This was a place where you could smell what was going on. You knew where you were when inhaling the bitter smell of hops from Wolverhampton's brewery, the ferrous steam of Round Oak steelworks or the acrid smoke of metal smelting at Tipton. And yet walking through the tangle of works and houses you were almost certain to catch the sickly scent of buddleia or cow parsley which colonised the canals that bind the Black Country together.

Along Birmingham's western edge, extending from Walsall in the north down to Cradley Heath, landscape and industry conjoin in the kind of direct contact necessitated by mutual dependency. The geology provided poor nutrients for growing things, but the shallow coal seam broke the surface and mixed with pockets rich in raw materials for making. Forges and kilns were constructed to work the ground they stood on, iron, steel and glass their brittle harvest. Prominent ridges rupture the earth to create the watershed between the Severn and Trent, dolerite at Rowley Regis, limestone at Dudley and Sedgley. From these elevated ridges the full majesty of this territory can be grasped, the Black Country's pallid skin of industrial sheds and houses stretching across the entire floodplain.

In the early eighties the bus journey to Dudley Technical College's Tipton annexe was punctuated by visual treats. From the top deck, as you climbed over the ridge at Dudley, the office blocks ran out to reveal the broken figure of the medieval Castle atop its rocky outcrop. Woven into the castle's thinly wooded slopes was the zoo, where Lubetkin's delicate modernist pavilions felt as alien and exotic as the flamingos and parrots. Awkwardly abutting the zoo, the huge yellow cranes of the Freightliner terminal shuffled invisible cargo back and forth. Following the dual carriageway, just beyond the sidings, the Dudley Canal tunnel appeared as a gapping black mouth in the rock below Castle Hill. In this brief encounter you could sense the succession and redundancy of these infrastructures. The canal replaced by the railway for bringing in raw materials, the Freightliner moving less frequently as the dual

carriageways filled with more lorries.

These awkward physical relationships and the creeping sense of abandonment were powerfully echoed in the social mix at the Tipton annexe. Our arc-welding and brick laying classes were shared with grown men, the casualties of the Thatcher era's closure of Round Oak steelworks. In compensation for the loss of their jobs they were offered the opportunity to re-train. Even as a kid you felt their indignity at being back at 'school' and their fear of starting again.

This was no Arcadia, but in the tangle of factories, service yards, and houses there was to be found all manner of colonising nature, heath, copse and ponds. A seemingly endless patchwork of unloved spaces opened up our imagination and stimulated our curiosity. In this unsentimental landscape of brick, metal and chemicals there were soft places, places to make dens and explore. We were blind to the helplessness of it all but these settings were vivid places to play and learn.

On reflection, these experiences made me realise the extraordinary resilience of people and things in the Black Country. Throughout the industrial revolution the guilds and their laws were centred on Birmingham. Beyond their reach, industry was unregulated and work was piecemeal. This has resulted in a territory that is not dominated by a single industry, but co-locates thousands of small ones. The structures that connect multiple small scale transactions are loose and easily adjusted. People here are talented with their hands and methodical with their minds, resulting in a practical wisdom which serves adaptation and improvisation well. It is a slow metabolism which makes this region resilient to abrupt economic shifts.

The Black Country's lack of self-consciousness now feels refreshing. It has avoided the monotony of an over-planned suburb or the coherence of a new town. It was never planned this way: it was simply not planned. It has only as much coherence as necessity and opportunism establish. And perhaps there lies its beauty, the utterly surprising encounters between things. Out of this has grown a particular kind of quick-witted humour, and a mentality to be positive and 'get on with it', often when there's little to be optimistic about. This is a place which not only tolerates the accidents of incremental growth, of adaptation and improvisation at the scale of a territory: it is the culture of this region.

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