

“Oh bolton, bolton...”

“Oh Bolton, Bolton, there ain’t no place to park...” Thus sang a singer at a Sunday lunchtime jazz session at the Octagon Theatre some years ago before proceeding to sing the town’s praises.

Free parking isn’t easy in Bolton, but the situation is no worse than in any other big town. In other respects Bolton is, in my view, far superior to most other comparable places. It is full of interest today and, like anywhere really, has a history well worth close scrutiny.

Bolton began as a Saxon village but really started to develop when granted a charter in 1251 which enabled it to hold a regular market and an annual fair. In the 17th century Bolton grew further when its cotton weaving industry developed and around this time the town became involved in the English Civil War - the struggle between King and Parliament. Unlike most other Lancastrians the people of Bolton supported Parliament but eventually the town fell to the Royalists although, as Charles I lost his head at the end of the war in 1649, the Parliamentarians were ultimately victorious. After the war Bolton saw the execution of the Earl of Derby who had taken part in the Bolton Massacre of 1644 when the Royalists had stormed the town. It is said the Earl had his final drink in the Old Man and Scythe, an excellent old inn dating back to 1251, in Churchgate before he died on the scaffold erected outside.

Bolton, not surprisingly, owed its major development to the Industrial Revolution. Coal was mined in the area, but probably of greater significance was the growth of the cotton industry especially after one of the town’s famous sons, Samuel Crompton, invented his spinning mule, now displayed in the museum. Railway links were developed with neighbouring towns, the population expanded rapidly and Bolton grew as a industrial town with its dark satanic mills and, it must be said, associated problems common to all Lancashire mill towns.

Does this image remain today? Is the recently proposed name change to the more rural sounding Bolton le Moors, the town’s original name, necessary?

Not surprisingly for a town which expanded in the Industrial Revolution, Bolton’s centrepiece is probably its magnificent Victorian town hall, opened on the “New Market Place” in 1873 after the market stalls had been removed from the site. The square was renamed “Victoria Square” in 1897 in honour of the queen’s Diamond Jubilee. Bright and airy, the square is worthy of inspection. The war memorial was unveiled in 1928 by the Earl of Derby and there are two statues to admire. That of Dr Samuel Chadwick was unveiled in 1873 on the site of his surgery in 1800 while the other statue, unveiled in 1900, is of Sir Benjamin Dobson, engineer and former mayor of the town, known for his generosity. The presence of red roses on the information boards reminds us we are in the heart of our County Palatine and the charity canopy on the edge of the square is adorned with elephants.

Why elephants? Is it because you’re unlikely to forget a visit to Bolton? There is a link between the great beasts and Bolton and in the town elephants - or, at least, models of elephants - abound. A leaflet from the tourist office, now located in the library, will tell you why, and where throughout the town you can find elephants.

The library is at one end of a fine crescent shaped building which also contains the art gallery, museum, and aquarium. This is Le Mans Crescent, named after Bolton’s twin town in France. The museum and gallery boast frequently changing and interesting exhibitions and in April 2004 visitors can see “Water, Water”, an exhibition of paintings whose theme is obvious, and “The Painted Illusion” which shows how graining and marbling use paint to imitate rich materials.

Public Art has a big role to play as I discovered when I spoke to Brian Herald, Bolton's public art co-ordinator. He told me how artistic creativity will aid growth and investment and help remove less savoury images of the town's past. To discover probably the best example of public art it is necessary to go to Dunbar Drive in Great Lever to find the brick built "living room" completed in 2003 by Isabella Lockett supported by Bolton Housing % for Art - "a communal space where everyone can live". This piece of art is little known and hidden away, but worth going to find; the brick armchairs and sofas with names on them are striking.

What many people might regard as "public art" - the concrete elephants in Newport Street - are not, in fact, public art at all having been bought "off the peg", but in nearby Mawdsley Street, St Andrew's Court and Nelson Square it will be possible later this year to view some affixed and integrated pieces of art - 36 in all - which will reflect the history of retail commerce in that part of town.

By day, Bolton is a renowned shopping centre, while by night entertainment in various forms is to the fore. Bolton market is located next to Moor Lane bus station; whatever you need, it is probably available at this excellent traditional market while the market hall offers shopping with a more modern face at the other side of the town centre. Crompton Place and the Gates Centre provide weatherproof shopping and much of the centre is traffic free. The centre, it seems to me, has stood up well to the challenges posed by the Middlebrook Retail Park in nearby Horwich and to discover how I asked Sheila Carter, far more experienced in the art of shopping than I will ever be.

Sheila likes the large variety of good shops being a particular fan of the department store Whitakers, and she likes the layout of the shops round the imposing square with its open space. There is plenty of parking, too - so perhaps our jazz singer was wrong. I must bow to her superior judgement, although even I, as an amateur, can easily see how shopping in Bolton can be very pleasurable.

After dark the town comes alive with its two theatres, frequent entertainment at the Albert Halls in the town hall itself, night clubs and pubs although to my approaching middle aged eyes these seem to cater mainly for the youth. I think quieter pubs are found a little away from the centre - establishments like the Sweet Green Tavern near the station and the Howcroft to the north of the centre. The Albert Halls hosts a wide range of entertainment - in April alone is the raconteur Gervase Phinn, Colin Blunstone and Rod Argent, Dave Willetts (of "Phantom") fame, Humpty Dumpty, "Kiss me Kate" by the Farnworth Performing Arts company and, 30 years after their television heyday, The Comedians. In the same month the Octagon's main offering is Ben Elton's "Popcorn" while ever changing art displays are exhibited in the theatre's bar.

Bolton's parish church - the church of St Peter, Bolton le Moors - stands at the end of Churchgate, a little aloof from the hustle and bustle of the town. It was built in 1871 in Victorian Gothic style after its 15th century predecessor had fallen into disrepair and its 180 feet tall tower, said to be one of the tallest in Lancashire, gives striking views over Bolton and its countryside. Built of Longridge stone, the church cost £45,000 and it was paid for by Peter Ormrod, a wealthy cotton manufacturer and banker.

Bolton's countryside? Isn't Bolton a grimy, industrial town in Lancashire?

It's an industrial town with a proud past, a vibrant future, and countryside as fine as any countryside anywhere.

To the north of the town is moorland scenery punctuated with woodland and reservoirs such as Jumbles, Wayoh and Turton and Entwistle although Lever Park near Horwich is perhaps the most popular location. Bequeathed to Boltonians by Bolton born Lord Leverhulme, the soap magnate, generations of locals and visitors from further afield have enjoyed the reservoirs, heath lands, woods and the walk up through the Japanese Gardens to Rivington Pike from where, on a clear day, the view is exceptionally wide ranging, encompassing the Lancashire coast, the Cumbrian fells and Snowdonia.

The town's vibrant future is perhaps best represented by Middlebrook. Here, as well as a diverse range of shops, restaurants and bars, there is a multiplex cinema and very popular bowling alley. Everything is dominated by the 21st century Reebok stadium, home of Bolton Wanderers, who moved there from Burnden Park in 1997.

It's hard to talk about Bolton without mentioning its football team. Sometimes nicknamed "The Trotters" on account of locals' fondness for "trotting" (playing tricks on unsuspecting visitors) the Wanderers have had some glorious - and, it must be said, not so glorious - moments in the game. FA Cup winners four times in seven final appearances, the team featured in the "Stanley Matthews final" in 1953 and had a starring role in the first Wembley final in 1923 when West Ham were defeated. In 2003-2004, under the expert guidance of manager Sam Allardyce, the club has reached the Carling Cup final and attained its highest ever position in the Premiership.

Bolton, the town - Bolton, the team: onward and upward!