

ST HELENS - NOT JUST RUGBY LEAGUE

St Helens is not a town you would automatically think of visiting. Even when I was growing up there, I had to concede this. I had heard of changes for the better, so I went along to see for myself.

It looks different from my younger days, when in turn it looked different from my parents' days. Like any large town, particularly one with an industrial past, it has an interesting history and has changed a great deal over the years.

The town began, not unnaturally, as a small village which grew up near the chapel of St Helen situated near where the imposing parish church is today. Lying on a coalfield, St Helens developed after mining began in the 16th century and this became the major industry, employing 20,000 men at its height. The pits were finally exhausted thirty five years ago when, as a plaque in the town hall informs us, "The closing of the Ravenhead Pit on 18th October 1968 was the end of five centuries of hewing coal in this county borough". The discovery of coal led to the construction of Britain's first industrial canal, the Sankey Navigation, in 1754 and this in turn led to the growth of the chemical and glass industries, the latter of which had a workforce of 30,000 people. The name "Pilkington's" is synonymous with glass production and its headquarters are still in the town. St Helens became glass capital of the world and, as the television advertisement reminds us, "St Helens glass.. has the class."

In 1829 the Rainhill Trials, featuring George Stephenson's famous "Rocket", took place on the newly constructed railway near the town and, helped by the developing rail transport, St Helens' profile increased through the Industrial Revolution. In 1868 the town became a borough council and its population grew rapidly so that, at the turn of the century, it was one of the largest towns in Lancashire.

Industrial areas change, of course, as resources are exhausted and urban areas decline. Towns need to change with the times and perhaps reinvent themselves.

I set out to discover the extent of St Helens' change.

I began my stroll in front of the town hall in Victoria Square, much altered since its pedestrianisation. No longer do buses arrive and depart and, owing to its position slightly away from the shops, it had a relatively tranquil air that lovely Spring morning. The cenotaph is there and Queen Victoria's statue still dominates as it has since it was put there in 1906 although Her Majesty had to be moved when the square was redesigned. There is no record regarding whether she was amused or not.

The Gamble Institute, an attractive red brick building donated by Sir David Gamble in 1896, still overlooks the square and houses the well appointed central library and the Rainford Gallery. Here work from the region's artists can be viewed in changing exhibitions.

Although I am no expert in retail therapy, I next looked at the shopping centre. This is much changed as the town sheds its former image as a rather down market centre for shoppers. Once completely overshadowed by Liverpool and - dare I mention it? - Wigan, the centre now looks the part with Church Square, the Hardshaw Centre and the indoor St Mary's Market.

The town's shopping has been modernised and the changes have generally been for the better. It was, however, a cause of regret that the original outdoor market, covered market and old market hall were swept away to accommodate the new development.

Leaving St Mary's Market I arrived at St Helens' main tourist attraction, the World of Glass. The winner of the Excellence in England award for tourism in 2002, this features everything you need to know about glass. It has displays of glassblowing, a comprehensive history of the industry and, indeed, the town, and much more. A short walk over the bridge across the "Hotties" - the stretch of canal so named when the nearby glass works used to pump in waste hot water - brings the visitor to the world's first continuous glass making furnace and a labyrinth of tunnels, deserted and forgotten for decades.

Tucked away near the railway station is the oldest building in the town, the Friends' meeting house which dates from 1676. Unchanged for centuries, it stands at the end of Church Street in its neat and tidy garden. Sadly, when I was there it was locked.

A dominant landmark is the Beechams clock tower. Being loyal to my town I would take nothing other than Beechams Powders for a cold, but the medicines are made here no longer. The building is now a part of St Helens College, formerly the technical college, where all manner of studies can now be pursued. This is the town's "student quarter" being close to the "Westfield Quarter". Westfield Street, once a quiet shopping street, is now part of the town's developing nightlife, modern cafe bars being to the fore. There is also the multiplex cinema and nightclub complex which opened not far away in 2001.

I continued my tour with a look at the sculpture on the Landings, now the major road junction in the town centre. "Landings" is the local term for a junction of underground roads in a mine and when road redevelopment created this roundabout in 1990 the sculpture commemorating the mining industry was deemed appropriate.

My final port of call was the church of St Mary's, known to all as Lowe House. Standing just outside the town centre this is a magnificent building with a striking tower and conspicuous dome, and it is no less impressive inside. If St Helens were a city, this would surely be the cathedral.

To find live entertainment the visitor should seek out The Citadel Arts Centre, somewhat hidden behind Bridge Street. It reopened in 2000 and in 2002 was voted one of the top ten jazz and blues venues in the country. Live music, comedy and theatre feature here and among the many acts appearing this April - on the thirteenth, in fact - is Hugh Cornwell, guitarist and singer with the Stranglers. Meanwhile the Theatre Royal near the town hall also offers quality entertainment and has featured the likes of Ken Dodd and his marathon shows.

Other events to look out for in April are the Northern Newfoundland Club Dog Show on the fifth at Sutton Leisure Centre and the fifth St Helens Corporate Cup. This is held in Sherdley Park, one of the town's many attractive open spaces, on the 27th and is a five kilometre run/walk for teams of four people - clearly a good way to raise fitness levels.

Sherdley Park also comes alive every July at the St Helens Show, the largest outdoor free event in the country. The Show has its origins in the centenary celebrations of 1968 when, following a colourful parade through the streets, the party culminated in the park. So successful was this, it was decided to hold an annual show with dare devil stunts, vintage cars, side shows, crafts, live music and, of course, a fun fair. The climax of the show is a spectacular firework display on the last evening. This year the Show runs from July 25th to July 27th.

All year the town caters for sports fans. The Saints Rugby League team is one of the great names in the sport and has enjoyed more success than any other team in the Super League era which began in 1996. Friday night is rugby night on many occasions through the summer at the well appointed Knowsley Road stadium on the western edge of town. Amateur Rugby League and Rugby Union also thrive in the town. During the winter, St Helens Town represents the town at football.

Horse racing takes place at Haydock Park with a Family Fun Day scheduled for Easter Saturday while many other sports such as golf, cycling and athletics also feature. Carr Mill Dam is the headquarters of the Lancashire Powerboat Club.

There were no powerboats at Carr Mill when I went there after my town stroll to remind myself how attractive St Helens' countryside is. Particularly to the north of the town there are places such as Crank Caverns, Billinge Hill and, indeed, Carr Mill itself which are as attractive as any rural area anywhere. At the top end of the dam is nineteen arches, a bridge carrying the water pipe from the reservoirs at Rivington to Liverpool. It's a good place to sit and enjoy a break with the mallard, coot, moorhen and great crested grebe which have been happy to make the place their home.

What about the people who have made St Helens their home? I gained opinions on St Helens life from across the range of generations.

Senior citizens Ede and Ruth have lived in St Helens all their life, for much of the time round the corner from the Saints' ground. Times have changed since the trolley buses used to turn round at the top of the road.

They both consider the town to be "comfortable and homely" and "big enough, without being too big". Although some individuality has been lost in the range of shops, there now being fewer locally owned firms, the town centre - "not large, but pleasant" - is a good place to shop. The sculptures to remind people of the past and the magnificent Victorian buildings in Victoria Square are considered pleasing to look at. Neither lady would live anywhere else!

Phil and Gill, in their forties, also like living there - "everything is so close and convenient." There is a parochialism which doesn't suit everyone but the town's "pull" seems to prevent people from moving away. The cafe bars in the town centre have, in their view, given the town a more attractive air.

Their teenage daughter, Becky, focussed on the nightlife which, I am assured, is excellent at the weekend with very friendly people. She did feel, however, that the shops could perhaps offer trendier clothes but she, too, is pleased to live there.

The town has something to offer everyone, it seems, not least the visitor curious to see somewhere new.